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## **Organizational Change: Increased need for Marketing and Outreach in Vocational Rehabilitation<sup>1</sup>**

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### **organizational issue<sup>2</sup>: an increased need for marketing and outreach**

Per the US Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), consumer applications nationally for VR services were significantly lower during fiscal year 2019. In fact, the applications for FY 2019 fiscal year are the lowest they have been in each of the previous 10 years (fiscal years 2010 – 2019). While RSA has not yet published FY 2020’s annual report, quite naturally leaders of many Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies “predict another devastating fiscal year due to the pandemic of COVID19” (per Scott Dennis, Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services). Many applicants have a fear of working during these times and therefore the rate of seeking assistance to gain employment has contributed to a decrease in applications. Consumers are more concerned about remaining safe and healthy rather than seeking employment. Additionally, during FY ‘20, consumers, had the opportunity to take advantage of stimulus checks, increased unemployment checks, and/or continued Social Security Administration benefits not to mention other state and county social services.

Unemployment rates were significantly higher this past fiscal year with the job market being scarcer. The unemployment rate reached a national high of 14.7% (<https://usafacts.org/>) during this past fiscal year, local schools, colleges and universities were closed and local news broadcasts across most States reported threats of state

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<sup>1</sup> This organizational study was designed and completed by participants in the 2019-20 Cohort of the Executive Leadership Seminar Series, National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute, Interwork Institute, San Diego State University.

<sup>2</sup> The four frames and framework used are based on the work of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their text Reframing Organizations, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2017

budget cuts. The aforementioned challenges are contributors to the organizational issue of **the need for increased marketing and outreach** to inform consumers and stakeholders that VR agencies continue to be viable and have the ability to authorize funding for vocational services for adults and youths.

The decrease in applications (adults and school-aged consumers) naturally causes concerns for a decrease in spending allocated to VR funds received by the state and federal governments, including the spending of 15% of the budget on Pre-Employment Transition Services as per the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). The concern is the lowered ability to spend funds and therefore having to return funds to the Federal government. Additionally, if monies are not spent as allocated, VR agencies cannot seek re-allotted funding. Lastly, when VR agencies have proven that they cannot spend their budgeted funds, the following fiscal year's budgeted funds may be decreased based on the previous year's spending. It is worth mentioning that some VR agencies determine applicant eligibility based on Order of Selection, where the consumers with the most significant disabilities are selected first for the provision of vocational services. This occurs when there are not enough resources to serve everyone who is potentially eligible for VR services.

Despite the challenges of COVID19, per the Rehabilitation Act, as amended (WIOA), *"states are required to help job seekers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and to match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy"*. The issue VR agencies are facing is how to market the service and reach out to potential applicants, not only for the concern of the consumers but to conform with federal regulations of providing VR services to people with disabilities and achieve spending requirements as determined by the budget, grants, and funding from the state and federal governments. The threats of not spending budgeted funds, per Maintenance of Effort, are as follows:

- Funding that has been provided by the federal government but not spent has to be returned.
- If VR agencies do not meet their matching requirements, there could be the penalty of having to return monies.
- State budgets are based on the previous year's spending. If it has been determined that VR agencies did not spend money during a given fiscal year, their state allotted budgets for the following year may be decreased.

## **Expected Outcomes to increase Marketing and Outreach**

While the fear of consumers is a legitimate concern and an emotion that VR agencies cannot control based on need and informed choice, VR agencies have the opportunity to reach out and assure consumers and other stakeholders that services are still being authorized both in person and virtually. Counselors must stay in ongoing communication with consumers who have been determined eligible for services but are not participating. This communication allows consumers to know that the VR agency is not only available to provide and authorize services but can share the options of virtual services such as virtual trainings and assessments through various remote formats such

as Zoom and Google Meets. Simultaneously, the staff responsible for Public Affairs and Community Outreach can creatively post advertisements or news releases such as newspaper ads and radio commercials. They can post on Facebook and other social mediums to reach potential consumer applicants while counselors and field service staff can call and send letters and/or emails to eligible consumers who have not yet finalized an application or IPE or are not working towards the goals on their IPE.

As important, counselors have the opportunity and responsibility to stay in constant communication with community and workforce partners. Workforce partners include (but are not limited to) public schools, universities, and American Job Centers. Such agencies can refer applicants to the VR agency and be a source of referrals for VR agencies. The public can be made aware that the VR agency has given latitude to Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) to create and provide virtual services as well as in-person services based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines with the use of personal protective equipment.

There are opportunities for development of VR staff. Staff is primarily concerned with the day-to-day business of serving their consumers and managing their caseloads. There are training opportunities for establishing relationships with community partners to increase outreach, and marketing. Just as counselors are reaching out to CRPs and consumers, Business Service Representatives (BSRs) can continue building relationships with employers not only to inform them of the VR services but also to get an understanding of the needs of businesses and potential “hot” jobs in demand and needed training especially for times like COVID19. BSRs’ mutual conversations with employers can enlighten the VR agency of needed training, current high demand jobs, and potential customized employment.

### **Internal Strengths to increase Marketing and Outreach**

First, the strength of VR agencies includes the educational quality and diversity of the staff. VR agency employees are required to have earned at least a Bachelor’s degree while many States require Master’s degrees. Many staff members have post graduate certifications including Certification in Rehabilitation Counseling. Per O\*NET Online, 56% of the respondents hold a Bachelor’s degree while 28% hold a Master’s degree from multiple disciplines ranging from Business Administration to Psychology and have the desire to continue to learn and grow as the VR agencies provide and promote continued learning . In addition to the quality of staff’s education, it has been discussed amongst people in the field that they have a “*passion for doing the work they do*”, helping people who are differently able gain and/or maintain employment which aligns with the Career Profile Interests listed on O\*NET Online. In addition to a well-educated staff, the staff is diverse representing various races, ethnicities, gender identity and age groups. Per [datausa.io](https://datausa.io) the average age of a VR counselor is 42.8 years old (data from Census Bureau) with 80% of the workforce being women.

Second, the national demographics are worth mentioning as an internal strength in terms of marketing and outreach. The diverse background of the staff have the ability

to reach different stakeholders, understand similarities and grow and /learn from differences.

Third, many state VR agencies have workers who have been with the agency for many years thus leading to the ability to maintain continuity, intellectual property, minimal mistakes and increased compliance. It has been observed that the more experienced workforce has “stronger face-to-face or over-the phone communication skills” with the comfort of reaching out and speaking to partners and consumers while the junior staff prefers texting, emailing, and posting to social media. Both methods can prove to be effective. However, building and maintaining business relationships are most profitable when actually building relationships. The more experienced workers have witnessed downturns in employment and thus understand the concept of cyclical peaks and valleys. They are vested in their agency’s success.

Fourth, VR. Agencies’ regional offices are strategically placed throughout the State. Regional administrators are typically approve strategies that will help their region succeed as they understand the needs and culture of their local communities.

### **Internal opportunities to increase Marketing and Outreach**

The internal challenge is a lack of assertive marketing and outreach at the level of field services. This is not a skill that is traditionally taught or expected. Traditionally taught at college levels are Rehabilitation, Ethics, Disability Awareness, and Psychology driven studies. CRCC defines the required body of knowledge areas as follows: Professional Orientation and Ethics in Rehabilitation Counseling, Medical and Psychosocial Aspects of Disabilities, Assessment, Career Development Theories and Job Development and Placement Techniques, Case Management and Community Partnerships, Theories and Techniques of Counseling and Research, Methodology, and Performance Management. Additionally, a recent survey of VR agencies (conducted by Erica Kneessi - Staff Specialist for Training at Maryland DORS) indicated that most of the trainings for new staff are agency and case management specific. There are opportunities for field service staff to learn how to network and promote their agency and services to other partner agencies as States have the autonomy to create their own training programs. There are opportunities for field service employees to attend WIOA partner meetings, meet with businesses and network throughout their communities.

Similarly, VR agencies’ job descriptions and internet profiles do not include marketing and outreach and therefore training efforts typically do not include marketing and outreach. Executive staff and Human Resources personnel have the opportunity to reevaluate business needs and realign job descriptions and training accordingly. However, with generalizing the position to meet business needs there could be a demand for a more competitive salary. Currently the average VR Counselor earns a median annual salary of \$35,950<sup>3</sup> which is not based on merit. Lastly, while a mature workforce

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<sup>3</sup> This median national salary is based on May 2019 data from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes211015.htm>

has its advantages including established community networks, it also has its disadvantages including the resistance to change while newer and younger employees can learn with a “clean slate”.

### **External opportunities to increase Marketing and Outreach**

Externally, there is a great need for VR agencies to remain fully funded especially during uncertain times. At the end of 2019 (prior to COVID19), only 19.3 percent of persons with a disability (working age) were employed according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics as compared to approximately 80% of working aged people . While it is undetermined of the total amount of the cost of the federal, state, and county benefits, it is to the advantage of the government to assist people with disabilities to gain and maintain employment for the purposes of self-sufficiency and contributions to the economy. WIOA promotes helping job seekers gain competitive employment. VR agencies have the backing of WIOA, the funding of the government, the partnership of multiple CRPs and a wealth of workforce development partners with common goals.

The success of VR agencies are partially due to the staff. Per O\*NET Online, Rehabilitation Counselor positions are expected to grow rapidly. The projected growth (2018-2028) is faster than average growth rate (7% to 10%). And, staff is being hired with varied experiences and disciplines giving agencies the edge of having a staff with diverse perspectives in a diverse environment.

### **External environment challenges to increase Marketing and Outreach**

Unfortunately, the VR agencies’ success relies partially on the motivation and success of its consumers, the assistance from community partners, and the job market. The budget’s formula is determined by many complex factors such as the previous year’s performance, the population, and, the poverty/wealth level of the State. Although VR agencies can influence such factors, these agencies seldom have final control. With that being said, there can be cyclical moments of downturns for VR agencies based on the economy of the state, and political influences, priorities and initiatives.

Finally, VR agency employees are not paid based on merit and there is no creativity in the perks that can be offered/negotiated. State employees are typically paid based on a fixed amount per a budget set by the State’s budget division and/or the umbrella department of VR such as the Department of Education, the Department of Social Services or the Workforce agency.

Adding the responsibilities of marketing and outreach to VR staff managing large caseloads at the annual salary of a little less than \$36,000 can potentially decrease employee passion and motivation and thus increase turnover. Additionally, VR staff are used to immediate results with definite deadlines. Marketing and outreach does not necessarily offer immediate results.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, during COVID19 many VR agencies were and/or are concerned about the decline in consumer applications and consumers not actively participating in their established vocational rehabilitation plan due to the fear of getting sick as a result of the pandemic; the lack of motivation due to the low employment rate; and, the negative publicity of state budget spending. COVID19 has taught VR agencies that there is an unprecedented opportunity for VR counselors to not only learn the skill of marketing and outreach but to also perform these needed services.

Primarily, VR counselors are concerned with managing the caseloads of job seekers and being cognizant of deadlines. However, the Executive Staff are concerned with the bigger picture of being fiscally responsible with requesting and receiving appropriate federal and state funding as well as spending the required, pre-determined money. The decrease in active consumers is in direct relation to a decrease in spending. The decrease in spending is in direct relation with the amount of funding received for the following budget year.

It is recommended that VR agencies train staff on how to provide marketing and outreach to the community (consumers, community partners, and other stakeholders) on the availability of VR and its services including virtual services, in-person services and other creative measures available. This recommended change is a duty that should be ongoing and moving forward to further the availability of state VR in the provision of vocational services.

## **RESOURCES**

United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov).  
O'Net on Line, [www.onetonline.org](http://www.onetonline.org)  
United States of America Facts, [www.usafacts.org](http://www.usafacts.org)  
Data USA, <https://datausa.io/>