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Organizational Change: Using Virtual Service Delivery in Vocational Rehabilitation¹

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As COVID-19 continues to spread throughout the United States, State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies have been forced to respond to this pandemic by digitally transforming our places of work and service delivery with individuals with disabilities. Within VR agencies, the virus has been driving significant change in how employees operate with each other, as well as with VR participants, community rehabilitation providers, workforce partners, and vendors. Now that agencies' immediate response to the crisis has subsided, VR has entered into a "new normal," which could change the way VR agencies operate moving forward post pandemic. Technology has been a driving force at the forefront allowing VR agencies to operate during this time and is expected to have a long-lasting impact by changing the agencies' culture and service delivery beyond COVID-19.

Throughout its 100 years of existence, VR agencies have primarily operated face to face and have been lagging when it comes to implementing technology into our work and service delivery. However, when office doors closed across the United States in March 2020, along with schools, businesses, providers, etc., VR agencies were unsure how to best support VR participants. The US Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) published guidance and strongly encouraged VR agencies to use remote or virtual service delivery strategies to ensure the continuity of services

¹ 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.

with individuals with disabilities. “Telephone, online or other alternative means may be used in place of providing VR and supported employment services face-to-face, including ongoing support services, during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic”, reads the guidance from RSA (rsa.ed.gov, 2020). VR agencies quickly responded and switched from traditional service delivery to utilizing virtual platforms with VR participants, while also changing to distance learning environments for pre-employment transition services. This change may offer a glimpse into the future of service delivery with the VR participant. This paper will examine the use of virtual platforms in providing services with VR participants, the benefits and challenges this poses, and the effects of this change on the VR agencies.

A previous study that was published in the Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling titled “Utilizing Telerehabilitation to deliver Vocational Rehabilitation Services as an alternative to traditional counseling” (Embree, J.A. et.al., 2018) showed some similarities in what VR has seen during the current world of remote work. However, in this study only one online portal was used to provide “telerehabilitation” with participants. For the purpose of this paper, the focus is on the positives and negatives of utilizing these various platforms for virtual curriculum and service delivery for both the VR agency as well as for the service providers.

For VR staff, technology has made working from home enjoyable with no windshield time of traveling back and forth to meetings. Virtual platforms have allowed staff to stay connected to their managers, coworkers, VR participants, providers, and other workforce partners. For VR participants virtual platforms have reduced or eliminated travel time to meet with the vocational counselor, job coach, or attend an in-person training from a community rehabilitation provider. In turn, this has led to more frequency of contact (FOC) with the VR participant and the counselor. However, it is still too early to tell whether or not this leads to an increased rapport because there are no surveys or responses from staff and VR participants completed at this time. Virtual platforms have provided VR participants in the rural areas with more access to assistance, both in their local community and statewide, as public transportation can be sparse. This has reduced the financial burden of transportation to and from the VR offices and training in the community for both the agency and VR participants. While these are all benefits to virtual service delivery in VR, there are many challenges that VR must work to overcome.

There are some staff and participants who thrive in working, meeting, and/or learning in a digital world but there are some considerations when it comes to the use of virtual platforms and how VR agencies should move forward. Many VR professionals find working from home a challenge because of limited computer skills prior to the pandemic or lack of experience working in a virtual environment. Additionally, some professionals had not heard of the various platforms available. Similarly, VR participants may lack computer skills and experience with virtual platforms because of generational differences, disability challenges, and/or lack of internet and technology access. It is important with this emergence of virtual service delivery that all VR staff and service delivery professionals are equipped with the knowledge of the different platforms to provide appropriate services while taking into consideration the disabilities of the participants that

are served. It is expected that training on these various platforms from staff development professionals will be on the rise. Also, ongoing training with the virtual platforms is needed as updates and enhancements are made and new platforms are developed and made available. It is anticipated the virtual platforms will continue to expand with new technology. Training needs to be continuous to allow consistency for participants in the rehabilitation process.

VR participants need access to training or directions on how to utilize the platforms. The training needs to incorporate different styles of learning based on generational differences, disabilities, strengths, and weaknesses. To reduce the access barrier and generational barrier, participants need training to become familiar with computers/internet and quality internet connection. With the changing environment, it is anticipated that internet access may become more readily available for individuals post Covid-19. Additionally, government assistance for internet and computer access is needed for low socioeconomic and rural areas. Any local workforce partner, due to the shared resources, must be able to assist with internet access for VR participants. If this is not feasible, libraries or other local businesses that provide free internet is an option for VR participants. It is important that with technology expanding, VR agencies must prepare participants for work environments that will possibly utilize these technologies.

Virtual platforms come in all different shapes and sizes and there is no one size fits all. Each platform has its strengths and weaknesses and are designed with different customers in mind. It is difficult for VR agencies and the community rehabilitation providers to utilize just one platform as the participants also come with different software capabilities, limitations, and technology skills. There are virtual meeting room platforms, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, Skype, Cisco, and WebEx. All of these platforms are meant to meet 1:1 with individuals or in small to large groups. They each allow for video and audio, therefore enabling conversations while seeing the individuals. Although similar, each platform has different options that stand out during comparison. A key aspect in the design of these platforms is they must be accessible and usable by people with disabilities. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires federal agencies and private entities receiving federal funds to make electronic and information technology accessible to people with disabilities (www.hhs.gov, 2006). This includes webinars and other virtual training. Accessibility of the user interface and content are common challenges and it is important that all web-based meeting tools are developed with full accessibility in mind. Virtual meetings offer the possibility of access to information and interaction for people with disabilities, however barriers can make the platforms difficult to use for people with disabilities. It is vital that issues of accessibility and usability be addressed as technology continues to develop and as new technologies emerge. A VR provider must make good faith and reasonable efforts to comply with all other requirements set forth in Section 101(a)(6) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 C.F.R. § 361.51(rsa.ed.gov, 2020). Specifically, when providing VR services through virtual and other remote strategies, VR agencies must continue to ensure they comply with program accessibility requirements in Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (www.hhs.gov, 2006). This should not, however, limit or delay efforts to provide services with individuals with disabilities. In order to comply with this,

VR staff must be knowledgeable in the platforms including privacy guidelines that will allow for ethical considerations on confidentiality as outlined in the Certified Rehabilitation Commission (CRC) Code of Ethics (www.crccertification.com, 2016).

Due to Covid-19, VR agencies have realized there is a significant need to utilize virtual service delivery to meet with VR participants and to collaborate with other staff. However, there are still barriers to overcome by VR agencies to make virtual services work for the participants. If this is how VR participants would prefer accessing services in the future, it should be their informed choice. It is recommended that VR agencies work together as a program to implement strategies that can work across the states to create solutions and lessen the burden on the multiple agencies. In turn, this will allow financial assistance to expand and the burden of time reduced if sharing resources. The recommendations listed below will help to enhance service delivery for the future and assist all of VR to move through the pandemic the country is facing. This will allow for individuals with disabilities to have greater access to services in order to compete in today's work environment.

Summary of Recommendations

The recommendations outlined below allow for virtual services to continue post Covid-19. These recommendations will reduce limitations of access and increase the impact of remote services.

- Provide directions for staff in all the VR agencies that explain how to utilize the different platforms and resources. Explain the limitations of each software in order to appropriately choose the program that works best for the situation, the person, and the disability. Provide intensive training on platforms to current professionals and during new staff orientations. Training needs to be continuous, accessible to individuals with varying limitations and made available in different learning styles.
- Start training future Rehabilitation professionals during bachelor programs and masters programs.
- Provide directions for the VR participant on how to contact a VR staff member, thereby making it easier for anyone to connect. These directions should be available on each VR agency website and social media platforms.
- Provide financial assistance to reduce the burden of cost to implement virtual programming. Example: If one VR agency purchases cell phones for all staff the price is reduced as a result of a large order. If multiple VR agencies use the same purchasing agreement, the savings would increase allowing for the dollar to be spread further. Another example is the significant amount of time states spend to set up programs and curriculums for Transition Aged Youth. If these same curriculums are replicated and offered across the country, the staff time would be tremendously cut and thus reducing the burden of cost

- Stronger internet speed and updated technology is needed to handle these multiple platforms. This may require targeted grant resources for programs to be accessible. As VR agencies see budgets tightening it is difficult for programs to allocate the funds necessary, which could reduce service funds and increase waiting lists for individuals with disabilities.
- Cameras, microphones, and computer systems will need to be available for staff and participants. A possible idea is a lending library program that allows participants to receive the required hardware and software they need to connect virtually to VR staff.
- Urge partners, such as Community Rehabilitation Providers, to incorporate virtual services into their programs for ongoing support needs.
- VR agencies need to post guidance on their website about the various platforms available through the agency for VR services.

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