



College of Education
**Interwork
Institute**

Interwork Institute

San Diego State University
6367 Alvarado Court, Suite 350
San Diego CA 92120

VOICE: 619.594.2462

FAX: 619.594.4208

<http://interwork.sdsu.edu/>

Closing the Gap: Addressing Training and Support Needs for Incoming VR Field Staff

National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI)

Cohort Q – Group 7

Natalie Mitchell: Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) Maryland, Regional Director

Kara Sittig: Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB), Northeast Regional Director

Anthony Harkness: New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Program Manager-Area 7

Kellie Rushing: MS Dept of Rehabilitation Services, Director, Program Integrity

Patty Halter: Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation, Director, Quality Assurance

David Herbstman: Colorado DVR, Competitive Integrated Employment Unit Manager

Executive Summary

The core of vocational rehabilitation (VR) is to help individuals with disabilities achieve their employment goals and become self-sufficient. With such a strong core mission, there must be qualified, passionate staff who are fully equipped to handle such tasks.

Over the past decade, there has been a shift in hiring and retention trends. With schools shutting down VR programs, fewer states requiring a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) certification, there has been a growing gap in VR knowledge and goals. If employees do not have a VR background, passion for the job, and specific goals in mind, it could lead to lack of engaged staff and thereby an impact on culture and service delivery to VR consumers. When the primary point of contact for a person with a disability is someone without the proper knowledge, passion, and background, it impacts every step of the process.

This paper will address both local and national level proposed solutions to fill identified gaps— at the national level, focus on developing a consistent and accessible training curriculum for

new staff and supervisors, while at the local level, establish mentorship programs to support incoming staff and foster early engagement with potential VR employees.

Impact

Appropriately and thoroughly trained VR counselors are needed for quality employment outcomes for VR clients. Many State VR programs employ individuals with varying related degrees for counselor positions. Data from 2022 shows that 34 out of 78 state agencies require only a Bachelor's Degree as a minimum qualification. Only four of 78 state agencies require a CRC. While incoming individuals meet employment requirements, their formal training does not reflect the curricula from a traditional rehabilitation counseling program. As referenced by Schiro-Geist, et. al (2024), quality training content predicts quality outcomes for clients. The reliance on VR collegiate programs to cover the conceptual aspects of the field for prospective staff is no longer an effective training solution. The need for further, targeted training for VR counselors continues to grow. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) currently mandates states reserve a minimum of 15% of the VR grant for pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) while continuing to serve the adult population.

A key focus area is the decline in programs for Rehabilitation Counseling. There are several factors for this, summarized as follows:

- **Legislative changes:** WIOA allowed states to lower the requirement for VR counselors, allowing individuals with only a bachelor's degree to practice, which decreased the demand for master's level programs.
- **Funding fluctuations:** State VR agencies often face budget constraints, impacting their ability to support graduate education for counselors, leading to fewer available positions and potentially reducing program enrollment.
- **Shifting focus to online programs:** Some universities are moving towards online VR programs, which may not offer the same level of hands-on training and could impact program quality and student interest.
- **Perceptions of job market instability:** Concerns about inconsistent funding and staffing levels within state agencies can deter potential students from pursuing a career in VR counseling.

As a result of the decline, states are tasked with having to carry the lift of further training. This demand has potential consequences, such as burnout, turnover, decline in performance, and low outcomes. Specific rehabilitation training and ongoing development occurs concurrently with serving clients. Counselors from outside rehabilitation training disciplines are not entering the field with the knowledge and tools. National support for training is needed to focus the counselors' efforts and dedicate their time to serving clients.

Proposed Changes

Solution 1: Employ mentorship programs as an essential piece of onboarding. According to a recent Gallup poll, employees with a better onboarding experience are 2.6 times more likely to feel satisfied at work. Additionally, about seven in 10 employees are more likely to stay three-plus years after a positive onboarding experience. Providing employees with interactive sessions, the right information, and ample mentorship improves the overall onboarding experience (SHRM).

The four C's of employee onboarding are Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection. The Connection component of onboarding strengthens the employee's belongingness to the agency. New hires are given opportunities to build their network and find supportive colleagues in the workplace (Devlin Peck). According to BambooHR, along with frequent interactions from managers, fresh employees also want an "onboarding buddy." This is a stand-in friend, or mentor, to make their onboarding process more enjoyable and seamless. Approximately 56% of new hires said an onboarding buddy or mentor helps tremendously. This person is someone with whom to consult for simple questions which might make a new hire feel uncomfortable to ask a manager.

Mentorship is a dynamic relationship where a more experienced employee provides guidance, support, and knowledge to a less experienced employee. The relationship is built on mutual respect, trust, and open communication. According to a 2023 Forbes article, 76% of employees think mentorship is important; however, only 37% have a mentor. Benefits to mentoring include boosting employee engagement and productivity, improving employee retention, building a culture of knowledge sharing and collaboration, developing high-performing employees and a leadership pipeline, and building a healthy work environment. An agency can improve their mentoring initiatives by clearly outlining their mission and goal, getting buy-in from leaders, and, if possible, utilizing technology to implement a mentoring program, such as an automated matching system.

Shared experiences have the potential to provide insight not otherwise learned about the ins and outs of working in VR, especially for incoming staff who do not have prior exposure. Mentors who have played a pivotal role in VR can guide the direction of a new staff member's learning and development.

Solution #2: Develop a national collaborative training program that covers the non process portions of VR. A national training program for VR counselors has the potential to significantly enhance service delivery by standardizing best practices and improving counselor competency. A national VR training program would ensure that new counselors, regardless of their education and background in VR, would have the same foundational knowledge about the program, its

history, and current trends. This would ensure that individuals with disabilities would receive a certain level of career guidance and counseling, regardless of their location. However, it is essential to understand the different challenges that each state faces, such as local economies, disability census numbers, and available resources. Specialized training in various assessments, assistive technology, the labor market, and job development and placement could improve service delivery and outcomes.

In order to determine what services and training are needed, a comprehensive needs assessment of each state would help to identify challenges in service delivery for VR counselors. The assessment would involve surveys and direct communication with VR counselors as well as with service providers, employers, and consumers. Common themes may emerge that would highlight nationwide training needs, and the information obtained about local challenges could determine what training is needed locally to improve service delivery.

Solution #3: Engage earlier about VR to prospective applicants. As the hiring requirements have shifted, it requires a pivot in education and exposure to VR for prospective employees. If the entry level requirements continue on the trend of bachelor's degree, there is a need to introduce the field of VR in those undergraduate classes and programs. This is a departure from the focus on partnerships with graduate programs, which still are important but are now not the only pathway. Speaking with undergraduate students might be more effective than the traditional grad school connections. If undergraduates know what VR is and what it can do for individuals with disabilities while they are still determining their career pathway, it carries the potential for students to confidently choose VR as their field rather than stumble into it. Benefits of this can also lead to such things as bachelor prospective interns (with less requirements to complete internship), apprenticeship opportunities, and more interest in entry level positions in VR.

Another strategy is to provide information about VR as a career to students with disabilities who are receiving Pre-ETS. WIOA requires VR agencies to expend at least 15% of funding to students with disabilities through Pre-ETS. With increasing numbers of students being served, it provides an opportunity for VR staff to educate students about a potential career in the field. Introducing this option in the career planning stage for students could lead to more in-depth opportunities like informational interviews, job shadows, and eventual apprenticeship opportunities.

Conclusion

Looking to previously utilized strategies will not be effective in today's workforce in relation to VR. The element of mentorship a compelling draw for the field of VR. Additionally, mentorship

can provide seasoned counselors with further purpose and reignition of passion for their roles. Training on VR core concepts, history, and purpose will also ignite that spark.

The sustainability of the program relies on the dedication of the people who make it possible. Adapting recruitment strategies and on-the-job training to current trends will help VR keep pace with workforce demands. A strong combination of training, support, and mentorship will help build a stable VR staff, reducing turnover from the high levels seen in recent years.

References

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