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Transforming Public Perception of Vocational Rehabilitation

National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI)

Cohort Q – Group 8

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Executive Summary

It is recommended that the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) conduct a nationwide survey to assess if the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) name and image accurately reflect its services in a positive, accessible way. Based on limited survey data and anecdotal evidence, VR may be hindered by negative associations with substance and correctional rehabilitation, which can obscure public understanding of VR's purpose and mission. Through stakeholder insights, VR can identify public perceptions, evaluate alignment with its mission, and gain valuable feedback for improvement. This paper advocates a rebranding effort to clarify VR's mission of empowering individuals with disabilities, enhance public understanding, and foster engagement.

Impact

The public's perception of VR has increasingly become a barrier due to the term "rehabilitation," which is widely associated with substance abuse or correctional programs. National survey data and focus groups reveal that this misperception has far-reaching effects, reducing engagement and participation among potential consumers and weakening employer partnerships and public

support. For instance, our limited survey conducted across multiple states found that 55% of respondents felt that "Vocational Rehabilitation" fails to resonate with the true purpose of the agency, often viewed as a service aimed at "fixing" people rather than empowering them. Many individuals with disabilities perceive "rehabilitation" as stigmatizing, implying that they are flawed or need correction, which deters them from seeking VR services.

A strategic rebranding initiative is critical to clarify VR's mission of promoting employment and independence for people with disabilities, making the agency more accessible and appealing to consumers, employers, and community partner nationwide. By addressing this misalignment between perception and mission, VR can more effectively connect with the public, strengthen partnerships, and fulfill its role as an essential workforce development resource.

Background

The term Vocational Rehabilitation emerged in the early 20th century, following World War I. In 1918, the Soldiers Rehabilitation Act was established to help injured soldiers reintegrate into civilian life, gain independence, and achieve economic stability through new skills. This concept was later expanded to include civilians, culminating in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. At the time, "rehabilitation" symbolized the Act's mission to support individuals with disabilities in obtaining employment, independence, and societal integration. It broadly referred to enhancing individuals' abilities, especially for those facing physical or mental barriers.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s, substance abuse rehabilitation gained prominence in the media, with the term "rehab" becoming synonymous with addiction recovery. This shift in popular culture began to reshape the public's perception, associating rehabilitation almost exclusively with substance abuse. Additionally, the term became increasingly tied to corrections programs, with media frequently depicting "corrections and rehabilitation" as part of inmate reform narratives. Over time, these cultural shifts diluted the original meaning of rehabilitation, associating it with criminal justice and addiction recovery rather than empowerment for individuals with disabilities. While these associations have reshaped the term's meaning in the public eye, VR remains committed to inclusivity and affirms the dedication to serving all individuals, including those with addiction or corrections histories.

This cultural misappropriation has contributed to widespread misconceptions about VR services. The phrase "best kept secret" used within VR circles highlights how the agency's name and branding often fail to resonate with the public. As a result, VR's purpose—supporting individuals with disabilities to achieve employment and independence—can be misunderstood, creating barriers to public engagement and alienating potential consumers, families, employers, and collaborators. A recent survey of 588 respondents revealed more than 55% believe "Vocational Rehabilitation" no longer aligns with its purpose, underscoring the need for a rebranding initiative to modernize VR's image and clearly communicate its mission.

Representatives from two states that have rebranded their VR agencies to better connect with those in need discussed their experience. Hibbard “Hib” Doe of HireAbility Vermont shared Vermont’s journey, supported by the state commissioner, agency secretary, and governor, who deemed it "about time for a facelift." Using reallocation funds, Vermont engaged marketing firms and held focus groups with staff, participants, and the state rehab council to align the new brand, "HireAbility Vermont," with its mission. By maintaining the legal name, Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, but introducing the "HireAbility" brand for public use, Vermont avoided legislative hurdles. This statewide PR campaign, featuring a revamped website and media ads with real participants, led to increased engagement and positive public feedback. Vermont’s success, achieved at approximately \$400,000, has sparked interest among other states.

Colleen Casey from MassAbility (formerly the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission) also shared insights from their rebranding, initiated to clarify the agency’s purpose. Extensive research revealed that the term “rehabilitation” led to confusion and stigma, especially among younger consumers and those with lifelong disabilities, who felt the term implied needing to be "fixed." Collaborating with a marketing agency and consulting with disability community stakeholders, MassAbility selected a new name through a legislative process. Their \$3.4 million media campaign, along with staff “Creating Connections” events, supported a successful brand launch, positioning MassAbility as an agency focused on workplace inclusion and empowerment.

Other states, such as Ohio, which rebranded as Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities in 2013, have undertaken similar efforts to modernize their image and better reflect their mission. California, North Carolina, Oregon, and Rhode Island are currently exploring rebranding to enhance accessibility and appeal.

Proposed Changes

Using Bolman and Deal’s Four Frames Model, this paper explores structural, human resource, political, and symbolic solutions to improve VR’s public image and engagement.

A strategic rebranding initiative is needed to shift public perception. This includes the following:

1. **Structural Frame:** Streamline communication across VR agencies to reinforce VR’s mission of empowering individuals with disabilities, distinguishing it clearly from other forms of rehabilitation.
2. **Human Resources Frame:** Enhance staff training on VR’s updated brand and mission, ensuring they can effectively convey VR’s purpose to the public and engage meaningfully with consumers.
3. **Political Frame:** Collaborate with legislators and policymakers to align VR policies with modern workforce development needs, strengthening support networks for individuals with disabilities.

4. **Symbolic Frame:** Develop and launch a nationwide campaign with inspiring, inclusive messaging. This campaign should build a positive public image, making VR services more visible and relatable.

Revitalizing the national VR program's image is crucial for aligning with the success measures outlined in the Director's Forum in CSAVR's 2024 strategic priorities, specifically, Priority Three: Increase Public Awareness of VR Services. This alignment will enhance visibility, improve stakeholder engagement, and ultimately strengthen the program's impact on the community. Prioritizing strategic communication and outreach can effectively reshape public perception and foster greater support for VR initiatives.

Impact

Conducting a nationwide survey and implementing the proposed changes based on respondent feedback will modernize the VR program, clarify its mission, and significantly enhance consumer engagement.

Vermont's rebranding effort, as explained by Hibbard Doe, demonstrates the significant impact of a well-executed public relations campaign. With a \$400,000 investment, Vermont's "HireAbility Vermont" initiative increased public awareness and engagement, modernizing VR's image with strong support from the governor and staff, while avoiding legislative challenges through dual branding. Similarly, Colleen Casey described MassAbility's transformation, which included updating language around disability, aligning hiring practices with employer needs, and addressing generational and cultural views on disability. Both efforts highlight how strategic rebranding can reshape public perception, streamline services, and improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities while increasing public awareness which will lead to higher application rates and enabling the agencies to spend their allocated funds. Results from both HireAbility Vermont and MassAbility are at present anecdotal. HireAbility Vermont has not conducted research yet after their name change and MassAbility is too new but will be conducting research.

By realigning VR's image, agencies nationwide can increase consumer access, reduce poverty, and enhance employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities, contributing to a stronger, more inclusive workforce.

Conclusion

Rebranding VR is crucial to accurately convey its mission and expand its impact for individuals with disabilities across the nation. Public misconceptions surrounding the term "rehabilitation" highlight the need to align VR's identity with its purpose, fostering better understanding, increased engagement, and broader support. A cohesive nationwide rebranding initiative can empower VR agencies to connect with diverse consumers, build strategic partnerships, and

fulfill the program's mission of promoting independence through employment.

As a foundational step, conducting a national survey led by CSAVR in collaboration with RSA is recommended. This survey would gather critical insights into public perceptions of the VR program and its branding. Following the survey, CSAVR and RSA should convene a meeting with Agency Directors to present the findings. If the results indicate widespread agreement on the need for a rebranding effort, stakeholders should collaborate to develop and implement a strategic plan for transforming the program's public name and brand.

This initiative would ensure the VR program's identity reflects its services and the communities it serves, fostering greater public awareness and engagement while reinforcing its mission of empowering individuals with disabilities through meaningful employment opportunities.

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Addendum - NRLI Group 8 - Blank Survey

What state or U.S. territory do you reside in?

- List of all states and US territories to choose from

How are you affiliated with Vocational Rehabilitation? (Select all that apply)

- Employee
- Consumer
- Family Member of Consumer
- Employer of Consumer
- Legislator
- School Employee
- Other (please specify)

Are you aware that your state offers a vocational rehabilitation program for individuals with disabilities?

- Yes
- No

How did you hear about the Vocational Rehabilitation program?

- Comment Box

How familiar are you with the services provided by Vocational Rehabilitation?

- Extremely familiar
- Very familiar
- Somewhat familiar
- Not familiar

How are you involved with Vocational Rehabilitation?

- Comment Box

How long have you been involved with Vocational Rehabilitation?

- Comment Box

Do you feel the name "vocational rehabilitation" accurately represents the services provided?

- Yes
- No

What is your initial reaction to the name "Vocational Rehabilitation"?

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative

In your opinion, does the name "Vocational Rehabilitation" appeal to the individuals who might need its services?

- Yes
- No

Is the name of the program, Vocational Rehabilitation, appealing?

- Yes
- No

If you could rename the "Vocational Rehabilitation" agency, what name would you suggest?

- Comment Box

How do you think the Vocational Rehabilitation program can improve?

- Comment Box

Any additional comments or feedback?

- Comment Box

Addendum 2 - NRLI Group 8 - Survey Data

Respondent Breakdown by State:

- **Kentucky:** 147 respondents (25.00%)
- **Maryland:** 149 respondents (25.34%)
- **New Mexico:** 125 respondents (21.26%)
- **South Carolina:** 124 respondents (21.09%)
- **Washington:** 27 respondents (4.59%)
- **Delaware:** 2 respondents (0.34%)
- **District of Columbia (DC):** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **Oregon:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **Pennsylvania:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **West Virginia:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **Tennessee:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **Georgia:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **Indiana:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **North Carolina:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **South Dakota:** 1 respondent (0.17%)
- **Did Not Respond (Skipped):** 3 respondents (0.51%)

This reflects a total of 588 respondents.

Awareness and Affiliation with VR Programs:

- **Awareness:** Nearly 100% of respondents were aware of VR programs in their state, with employees showing 99.7% awareness and non- employees at a similarly high rate (98.5%).
- **Affiliation:**
 - **Employees** constituted approximately 87.2% of the surveyed group, most of whom learned about VR services through direct employment or related academic experiences.
 - **Non-employees** primarily encountered VR through word-of-mouth (38%), social services referrals (25%), and educational institutions (18%).
- **Employee vs. Non-Employee Perspectives:**
 - **Employees:** Employees expressed a strong connection to VR services, often advocating for process improvements based on their internal experiences.

- **Non-employees:** Non-employee respondents valued VR but noted limited direct access or information on services, which they often heard about indirectly through community programs or family members.
- **State-Specific Insights:**
 - **New Mexico** emphasized the need for culturally-sensitive, accessible services, especially in rural areas, where respondents highlighted resource gaps and the challenges of accessing VR services.
 - **Kentucky** and **Maryland** displayed strong engagement with VR, suggesting that increased digital outreach, specifically via social media and mobile applications, could attract a younger demographic.
 - **Washington and South Carolina** stressed the importance of addressing staffing shortages in rural areas and expanding VR services to aid young adults transitioning from school to employment.
- **Rebranding and Desire for a Name Change:**
 - **Dissatisfaction with "Vocational Rehabilitation":**
 - Approximately 55.8% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the name "Vocational Rehabilitation," citing concerns that it carries a narrow focus on "rehabilitation," which some associate with substance or criminal rehabilitation.
 - **Suggested Names:**
 - The most popular alternatives focused on employment readiness and career development.
 - **Career Assistance**
 - **Employment Readiness**
 - **Workforce Integration and Resources**
 - **Ability Works**
 - **Vocational Services Administration**
 - **Career Readiness and Employment Services**
 - **Office of Disability Employment Services**
 - **Integrated Employment Services Program**
 - **Disability Employment and Support Services**
 - **Empowerment Through Employment**
 - **Reasoning Behind Name Change:**
 - More than 55% of respondents believed a name change would better communicate VR's purpose, shifting public perception from rehabilitation-focused to career-focused services.
 - Many respondents (50%) highlighted that "Vocational Rehabilitation"

does not appeal broadly, especially to young adults, due to its association with outdated vocational terminology and the emphasis on "rehabilitation," which may deter potential users.

- **Service Delivery and Resource Needs:**
 - **Resource Limitations:** Many respondents across states called for increased staffing, particularly in rural regions, to meet VR service demands. Limited availability in remote areas has hindered service access and follow-up support.
 - **Process Streamlining:** A large portion of respondents advocated for streamlined service delivery to minimize paperwork and improve the speed and responsiveness of VR services. Suggestions included simplified digital applications, remote counseling options, and quicker approval processes.
- **Public Awareness and Outreach:**
 - **Digital Campaigns:** Nearly 55% of respondents emphasized the need for social media and digital marketing campaigns to increase awareness, especially targeting younger audiences.
 - **Community Partnerships:** Over 30% suggested stronger partnerships with schools, healthcare providers, and community centers to build VR program visibility and integrate VR services into local support networks.