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**Realigning Vocational Rehabilitation with Its Core Mission**

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# Introduction: Advocating for Focus on Intended Purpose of Vocational Rehabilitation

In the landscape of American workforce development, the role of State Vocational Rehabilitation Service Agencies (SVRAs) under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) stands as a testament to our nation's commitment to inclusivity and empowerment. These agencies are the frontline in our collective effort to ensure that individuals with disabilities are not merely participants but active contributors to our economy and society. However, a critical challenge threatens to undermine this noble mission: the overwhelming burden of data collection requirements imposed on these agencies.

The extensive data collection mandates for SVRAs, surpassing those of other workforce partners under WIOA, have unintended but profound consequences. They create significant barriers for the very individuals they aim to serve, individuals with disabilities seeking meaningful employment. The current system, with its focus on over 400 distinct data points, shifts attention from personalized, effective vocational counseling to a tick-box exercise in data capture. This not only impedes the delivery of tailored services to clients but also places an unsustainable strain on Rehabilitation Counselors – professionals dedicated to guiding individuals with disabilities towards fulfilling careers.

Our Rehabilitation Counselors, a cornerstone of the vocational rehabilitation process, find themselves increasingly mired in administrative tasks. The job, once a fulfilling profession centered on empowering individuals, is now at risk of becoming a role dominated by paperwork and compliance. This shift has real consequences: demoralized staff, high turnover rates, and most critically, diminished service quality for those in need of specialized guidance and support.

While data plays a crucial role in measuring program effectiveness and accountability, the current extent of data collection goes far beyond these objectives, encroaching upon the very essence of the vocational rehabilitation process. This overemphasis on data collection has profound implications for both Rehabilitation Counselors and their clients. For counselors, it has transformed a role once focused on empowerment and guidance into one mired in administrative tasks, leading to high turnover and a decline in job satisfaction. More critically, for the clients – individuals with disabilities seeking gainful employment – this shift has detrimental effects on their experiences and outcomes.

Clients often find themselves overwhelmed by the barrage of questions posed to them in initial meetings, a time when establishing trust and building rapport should be paramount. Particularly for those with mental health challenges, which account for a significant portion of the clientele in many of our states, this can be an arduous and disheartening process. Questions that delve into deeply personal areas, such as marital status or past educational experiences, can trigger distressing emotional responses, further alienating them from the services meant to assist them. This invasive approach not only undermines the client-counselor relationship but also raises concerns for the client regarding the security of their personally identifiable information and the relevance of the information gathered. Participants at the CSAVR fall conference identified the collection of social security numbers as a red flag for clients who have been advised outside of VR to protect their social security number at all times. Social Security numbers are necessary for required reporting and meeting WIOA metrics.

As advocates for people with disabilities, it is imperative to recognize and address this growing crisis. The intent of the WIOA and the Rehabilitation Act is clear – to foster an inclusive workforce where every individual has the opportunity to thrive. However, the current trajectory of SVRAs, driven by overbearing data demands, diverges from this goal. It is time to realign our approach, to ensure that our systems and policies truly reflect the values of empowerment, equality, and opportunity for all. In doing so, we uphold our commitment to individuals with disabilities.

# Client Perspective: The Impact of Data Collection on Client Relationships

## Eroding Trust and Rapport

Research underscores that the cornerstone of any successful counseling relationship is the establishment of trust and mutual respect between the counselor and client. In vocational rehabilitation, however, this foundational aspect is being compromised. In Iowa, for instance, the top reasons for unsuccessful case closures — "unable to locate and contact" and "no longer interested in receiving services" — are telltale signs of a rapport breakdown. This disconnection is often accelerated by the requirement to ask numerous data collection questions in the initial meetings, a time when building a basic rapport should be the focus.

From the client's perspective, the high turnover of counselors in vocational rehabilitation services significantly erodes the foundation of trust and rapport that is essential for successful rehabilitation. Continually adapting to new counselors not only disrupts the consistency of their rehabilitation journey but also challenges their sense of security and understanding within the program. Each new counselor brings a different approach, necessitating a re-establishment of trust and communication styles, which can be both disorienting and disheartening for the client. This constant change can lead to a sense of instability and a lack of confidence in the system, ultimately impacting the client’s engagement and trust in the rehabilitation process, and potentially hindering their progress towards achieving their vocational aspirations.

## Mental Health Considerations

The impact is particularly pronounced among clients with mental health challenges. With over 60% of cases in Iowa involving a co-diagnosis of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, or schizophrenia, the barrage of questions can be overwhelming. For example, just querying about other state or federal program affiliations involves over 30 questions. This not only consumes entire meetings but can also exacerbate the communication challenges these individuals already face.

## Data Collection vs. Client Comfort

Repeatedly, clients question the necessity of certain data points, to which staff often have no concrete answers. This lack of transparency and understanding around data collection has led to clients withdrawing from services. Additionally, concerns about data security arise. If the collected information isn't directly relevant to rehabilitation, it raises the question of why such sensitive data is gathered, increasing the risk of identity theft in the event of a data breach.

## Triggering Questions and Emotional Responses

Moreover, certain questions, while seemingly innocuous, can trigger distressing memories or reactions. Inquiries about marital status, for instance, have led to emotional responses unrelated to employment goals. Even questions about education, which could be relevant, may evoke traumatic or embarrassing memories and are not necessarily crucial in initial meetings. In today's sensitive climate, queries about gender identity can also prompt negative reactions.

## Conclusion: Data Collection's Detrimental Effect

This overemphasis on data collection, coupled with a lack of transparency, is not only straining client relationships but also impeding their path to employment and self-sufficiency. While data is essential for guiding services, it's imperative that its collection be balanced with the fundamental goal of the rehabilitation process – empowering clients towards gainful employment.

# Counselor Perspective: The Burden of Data Collection on Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals

## High Turnover and Its Impact on Client

The high data collection burden directly contributes to high turnover among counselors, exacerbating retention issues faced by VR agencies nationwide. In exit interviews across the nation, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors cite one of their primary reasons for leaving the SVRA is to work in environments that focus on guidance and counseling not data collection. High turnover not only affects the counselors but also has a direct, detrimental impact on clients. In regions where counselor vacancies persist, it is not uncommon for clients to experience frequent changes in their assigned counselors, with some having to adapt to 3-5 different counselors over time. This instability erodes trust in the VR process, leading to decreased client engagement and negatively impacting overall outcomes. In the evolving landscape of Vocational Rehabilitation, a striking and increasingly pervasive concern is the transformation of counselors into mere data collectors, a shift driven by the demanding data collection systems at the core of the VR process. This transition not only undermines the essence of personalized, empathetic counseling but also poses a tangible threat to the financial sustainability of the program. Counselors, traditionally the linchpins of successful rehabilitation outcomes, find themselves ensnared in a web of data entry, relegating their pivotal role of providing tailored guidance and support to a secondary position. This shift significantly hampers the effectiveness of rehabilitation services, potentially leading to decreased success rates in client employment outcomes and client experience.

## Administrative Burden and Mixed Messages

The administrative load of gathering and reporting metrics imposes a significant strain on counselors, diverting their attention and resources away from their primary role in counseling. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are empowered to make pivotal decisions in the VR process, with the ultimate goal of aiding people with disabilities in achieving their employment aspirations. However, the overemphasis on process metrics sends conflicting signals to these professionals. The perceived 'importance' of data collection can leave counselors feeling that their expertise and counseling efforts are undervalued, leading to demoralization and a lack of fulfillment in their roles.

## Increasing Stress and Ethical Dilemmas

The escalation in data collection demands within State Vocational Rehabilitation Service Agencies (SVRAs) has had a multifaceted negative impact on counselors. These professionals, often licensed and/or nationally certified, are increasingly burdened with collecting and entering data that may not align with their clients' needs, wants, or interests. This shift toward a data-centric approach not only hampers the development of trust and rapport with clients, who may perceive the information requests as invasive, but also leads counselors away from a person-centric service model to a system-centric, transactional approach. Such a shift can create ethical dilemmas for counselors, forcing them to choose between actions that benefit their clients and actions that align with data-driven requirements.

## Conclusion: The Need for a Balanced Approach

The current trend in vocational rehabilitation, with its disproportionate focus on data collection, is leading to an unsustainable work environment for counselors. To truly support the mission of VR programs and ensure effective service delivery to clients, a balanced approach is essential – one that recognizes the importance of data but also values the expertise and well-being of counselors. Addressing these challenges is crucial, not just for the health of the profession, but for the success and trust of the individuals these programs aim to serve.

# Agency Focus on Data

The depth and breadth of data collection required by RSA and WIOA has shifted agency focus from program excellence and successful client outcomes to administrative overwhelm and counseling interventions that prioritize data gathering and performance metrics over focused attention on client needs. Some counselors work to keep certain individuals off their caseload because they will detrimentally impact the counselor’s performance metrics. SVRA’s must hire or train experts in data management in order to properly report the complex data elements required under WIOA such as Measurable Skills Gain (MSG), employment in the second quarter after completion, and employment in the 4th quarter after completion. Data and case management systems, such as AWARE, used by most SVRAs, are structured primarily for data capture for the RSA911, rather than following the VR process and focusing on the unique needs of vocational rehabilitation clients. System customization to better address workflow instead of data capture is cost prohibitive for most SVRAs. SVRA administrators must focus time and money on data collection and reporting to the detriment of a focus on client-centric services. In summary, the VR process is increasingly driven by data collection demands, detrimentally affecting staff's ability to provide the unique guidance and counseling required to move people with disabilities into successful employment outcomes.

While all workforce development programs under WIOA are required to report data, SVRAs face additional data collection mandates not required of other workforce partners. These include:

Medical and Disability-Related Information**:** Vocational Rehabilitation Services collect detailed medical and disability-related information, including diagnostic codes, functional limitations, and specific rehabilitation plans. This level of detail is not required by other WIOA partners.

Assistive Technology Needs**:** Information on the need for and use of assistive technologies, ranging from screen readers to mobility devices, is also collected.

Longitudinal Outcomes**:** SVRAs engage in longitudinal tracking to assess the effectiveness of rehabilitation interventions over time, measuring skills, earnings, and labor force engagement post-service.

Counseling and Guidance**:** Detailed logs of counseling sessions, individualized employment plans, and vocational adjustment training are meticulously recorded.

Cost of Services**:** Costs associated with rehabilitation services, including transportation and education-related expenses, are tracked.

Case Closure Reasons**:** Specific reasons for case closures, such as successful employment or unsuccessful closure, are recorded, going beyond the program completion or exit status tracked by other agencies.

Custom Outcome Metrics**:** Depending on state requirements and the nature of the disability, SVRAs might collect custom outcome metrics like life satisfaction scores and social participation scales.

RSA 911 reporting requires 407 data elements reported on each person served. Seventy-three pages of data element descriptions are provided to states to accurately report. In total, these additional requirements result in more than 400 unique data points being collected by SVRAs, far exceeding the data collection by other WIOA partners. While intended to reflect WIOA's objective of creating more individualized, needs-based services, this extensive data collection adds a layer of complexity that is administratively burdensome even without additional state requirements. This burden, while challenging and time-consuming for staff, most acutely impacts the customer experience and outcomes, creating additional employment barriers for people with disabilities.

# Recommendations: Moving Toward a More Effective Vocational Rehabilitation System

Streamline Data Collection: Simplify the data collection process by identifying and focusing on key data points that directly contribute to meaningful employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. This will alleviate some of the administrative burden on counselors and allow them to dedicate more time to client-centric services.

Enhance Counselor Training and Support**:** Invest in additional training and support for counselors to better equip them to navigate the current data requirements while maintaining a strong focus on client relationships and personalized service.

Develop Client-Centric Data Systems: Advocate for the development of case management systems that are more aligned with the vocational rehabilitation process, prioritizing client needs over mere data capture. Funding should be allocated to make these systems accessible and customizable for SVRAs.

Legislative Review and Policy Reform**:** Urge lawmakers to review the data collection mandates under WIOA and the Rehabilitation Act, with the aim of revising them to reduce unnecessary data collection. This review should involve input from SVRAs, counselors, and clients to ensure that any changes made are in the best interest of all stakeholders.

Urge lawmakers to fully fund the administrative costs of the SVRA and require match on direct client services. Administrative costs would encompass costs for case management systems, indirect costs, and the salaries of administrative personnel. Such a strategic realignment of funding would enable a more substantial drawdown of federal funds, thereby freeing up state resources to be more effectively directed towards direct client services. This reallocation is not only a matter of financial prudence but also a strategic move to preclude the necessity of implementing an order of selection (OOS). By channeling more resources into direct client engagement and support, SVRAs can significantly enhance their service delivery, directly benefiting those in need of vocational rehabilitation, and ensuring that the assistance provided is both timely and effectively targeted to those who require it most. The unfortunate implementation of OOS often results in waiting lists, potentially delaying or limiting access to VR services for many eligible individuals. This scenario underscores the importance of adequate funding and resource allocation within VR programs. By understanding and addressing the complexities surrounding OOS, stakeholders can work towards creating a more inclusive and efficient system that better serves the diverse needs of all individuals seeking vocational rehabilitation services.

Promote Transparency and Understanding**:** By elucidating the purpose and practical applications of data collection, aligning it transparently with the broader program objectives, a marked enhancement in cooperative engagement can be achieved. This approach not only clarifies the rationale behind data collection but also fosters a more collaborative environment among all participants. Such clarity also has the potential to mitigate feelings of intrusion often associated with the data collection process. In parallel, it is important to meticulously consider the implications of any alterations in data reporting, particularly regarding the administrative load and possible downstream effects. The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) plays a pivotal role in this regard, offering support and advocacy for State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs) in response to these changes. CSAVR should organize a workgroup of stakeholders from different states to respond to any opportunities reduce required data elements. This inclusive approach ensures a comprehensive perspective, taking into account the varied interests and insights of all parties involved in vocational rehabilitation, thereby enhancing the efficacy and relevance of policy development and implementation.

# Conclusion: Realigning Vocational Rehabilitation with Its Core Mission

As we advocate for change in the vocational rehabilitation system, it is imperative to remember the core mission of these services: to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve meaningful employment and integration into society. The current overemphasis on data collection detracts from this mission, placing undue stress on both counselors and clients. By implementing the recommended changes, we can realign the vocational rehabilitation process with its intended purpose. This realignment will not only enhance the efficacy of the services provided but also restore the dignity and centrality of the client-counselor relationship. As we move forward, let us ensure that our policies and practices in vocational rehabilitation are truly reflective of our commitment to inclusivity, empowerment, and the betterment of lives.