



SAN DIEGO STATE
UNIVERSITY

Interwork Institute

San Diego State University
6367 Alvarado Court, Suite 350
San Diego CA 92120
VOICE: 619 · 594 · 0170
FAX: 619 · 594 · 0991
<http://interwork.sdsu.edu>

The Future Lies Within the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Program

(October 2021)

Authors¹: Dale Batten, Deputy Commissioner, VA
Rita Rhett, Director Field Operations, SC
Eric Roux, Field Services Director, UT
Nash Sisneros, Field Operations Director, NM
Rebecca Sunder, Metro Regional Director, MN
Michael Thomas, Assistant Deputy Director – Specialized Services, CA

Introduction

It was on June 2, 1920, that the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Services originated. President Woodrow Wilson signed into law what was then known as the Smith-Fess Act. This original act was more familiarly known as The National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act. For the first time in our country's history, vocational assistance and employment services could be provided to all individuals with disabilities.

One hundred years later, on June 2, 2020, many celebrated the 100-year anniversary of the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Services program. During these past 100 years, there is little doubt that many advancements and innovations have been made to this program. Probably the most significant legislative change to occur was the inception of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This federal legislation replaced the Smith-Fess Act of 1920. Specifically, it extended the reauthorization of grants to the states for services. The most important change however came with the priority to now provide vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with the most significant disabilities. For the first time this act tied disability to major life functions, rather than simply diagnostics as defined through the "medical model."

While the Public Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program has made many advancements and strides over these past 100 years, we now find ourselves facing mounting challenges. With the inception of WIOA in 2014, the Public Vocational Rehabilitation program was required to make major changes in service delivery. The Pre-

¹ The authors of this paper are participants in the *Executive Leadership Seminar in Rehabilitation Administration*, National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute, Interwork Institute, San Diego State University.

Employment Transition Services portion of this act included increasing the numbers of students receiving services. Additionally, Section 511 of the act encouraged additional individuals with the most significant disabilities to seek services. These unfunded mandates contributed to the financial stressors of the program.

Additionally, with the unprecedented impacts and challenges of COVID-19 as well as the disruptions and uncertainty that have ensued, the Public Vocational Rehabilitation program finds itself facing additional, unforeseen, challenges. A key element necessary to address and live into these changes, is a qualified and knowledgeable workforce. Presently, one of the biggest challenges, symptomatic to many organizations throughout our country, is that of recruiting, hiring, and retaining qualified staff to continue to provide the highest level of comprehensive services to the individuals that we serve.

Issue

The Public VR Program is faced with the ongoing challenges of recruiting, hiring, training, and developing qualified candidates. Previous strategies and practices have largely been unsuccessful thus new and innovative ideas should be identified, developed, and initiated.

Current Challenges

- ***Loss of Knowledgeable and Qualified Staff***

Many Public VR Agencies have and continue to experience the loss of key, strategic leaders, managers, and field staff due to retirements. These positions cannot simply be replaced through the hiring process. The wealth of knowledge, organizational history, and experience within the agency must be chronicled in such a manner that it can be integrated into the developmental process of each staff. Currently, it is unclear as to if and how this is being done at both the state and national levels.

- ***Development of Staff***

Most often when staffing vacancies arise within the Public VR Agencies, there is little opportunity for mentoring opportunities between existing and new staff. New staff may be onboarded after the previous individual has already left the agency, thwarting any opportunity for the transfer of knowledge. Additionally, development of existing staff regarding career advancement, upward mobility and stability within the agency has been done with a lack of intentionality and direction. Staff have become frustrated with the lack of mentoring, training, and career advancement opportunities available, resulting in further attrition.

- ***Recruitment***

Previously, recruitment of qualified candidates for positions within The Public VR program, has been mostly successful using traditional, hiring strategies. Most agencies have state operated sites where vacancies were posted. These postings

along with word-of-mouth as well as networking have been successful in attracting qualified candidates. In 2019, the impact of COVID-19 caused every organization, whether public or private to re-evaluate, innovate and dramatically change their business operations. Public VR programs were not immune from this impact or the changes that were necessary. The most dramatic impact however was felt by the individuals employed within these organizations. Unprecedented health concerns for self and others quickly spread throughout the workforce causing individuals to withdraw from the labor market causing labor shortages and the decrease in the pool of qualified candidates. Public VR programs will be challenged to innovate their recruitment strategies and processes to be competitive in this limited labor market.

- ***Health and Vitality of Agency Structure***

While the health and vitality of any organization is important to their overall longevity, the implementation of WIOA as well as the implications caused by COVID-19 have caused the Public VR program to re-evaluate how services are being provided to the individuals with disabilities in our programs. To successfully provide these services, our human resource asset must have the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to be successful. Our organizational structure must be sound. Do we have the right staff in the right positions? Is our departmental structure poised to address the needs of the individuals in our program, mandates of WIOA, as well as the challenges from COVID-19?

- ***Telework and Technology***

Prior to COVID-19, most employees reported to an office, a work site, a brick-and-mortar facility. With the advent of COVID-19, teleworking became the new normal, providing an environment that could ensure the safety of employees and others involved with the business operations. While the Public VR program has been able to continue to provide services to individuals with disabilities in this virtual world, we are seeing that many of these individuals require services to be provided in other ways, including in-person and face-to-face. How do we utilize a person-centered approach in providing services to these individuals? How does technology add to the options we offer to these individuals? Including staff in this process is vital to the success of these options. Additionally, new technologies and options may offer a more comprehensive method for onboarding and training of staff, mentorships as well as joint project development and implementation. How does the Public VR program take advantage of this opportunity and move forward with these options?

- ***Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion***

While the Public VR program has mainly relied on traditional methods for recruiting, hiring, and training candidates, we continue to struggle in the efforts to onboard individuals that best represent our cultural, racial, religious, gender, age, sexual orientation, and disability diversity.

The one size fits all approach is outdated at best. While strategies can be developed to attract candidates, the approach must be more comprehensive. The structure and culture of our agencies must be evaluated. Does it reflect the goals of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?

The approach should be measured in the sense that immediate, short, and long-term goals are considered and implemented.

Recommendations

1. Utilize Key Personnel for Historical Knowledge Transfer

The rich history of the Public VR Agency must be not only preserved but also imbedded and passed along to all of staff. To accomplish this, there needs to be an historical record of these accomplishments. This record should also include the missteps made as well. Learning from both accomplishments and failures is vital to health and integrity of any organization.

The Public VR program have mostly relied on staff to pass along this information in an informal or even storytelling approach. While this approach has prevailed up until now, there continue to be gaps and losses the longer this transpires. A more intentional approach is required to ensure this history. Furthermore, the organizational legacy of the Public VR program should be preserved. An organization's legacy -- defined as the lasting imprint left by a leader or individuals after their departure. This becomes an extension of organizational culture, and it shapes attitudes and behavior among individual employees as well as on a broader, organization-wide scale. Utilizing our current leaders to pass along the history as well as the legacy of the Public VR program is vital to the longevity of our organization.

2. Develop and Record Public VR Agency History

Most of the history regarding the Public VR program resides in college textbooks, professional publications, and other reports. To understand the depth and breadth of this history one would have to read a number of these books and documents. This could be an arduous task which may not be very appealing or beneficial to most staff in our organization. Documenting an historical record of the accomplishments as well as missteps within the Public VR program must be developed to better define our journey. How did we get to where we are today? How can we accomplish our goals as well as live into our mission, values and culture moving forward? Accomplishing this will require intentionality and focus. Through dedicated human resources devoted to this effort, a path to this goal could be identified. Currently, this has been done through existing staff, an added job duty, an afterthought in some cases. In moving forward, this should be done in a more intentional manner. Human resources should be leveraged to preserve and document previous history as well as capturing and documenting information moving forward. While the current strategy of posting positions on a state operated website has been utilized most recently, a more comprehensive approach must be considered and developed.

To better reach qualified candidates in the labor market, social media, networking through stakeholders, informational interviews, presentations at educational facilities, career fairs, and collaboration with post-secondary training programs should be developed and implemented. New and innovative ideas including hosting live events in our virtual environment would also expand the reach in the labor market. Having the opportunity for potential candidates to ask questions, meet with existing staff prior to considering or applying for vacancies will assist in creating a more welcoming and desirable view of the Public VR program. Finally, developing a culture and environment that our current employees' value will add to the perception that others have of our agencies. If our staff value the culture of our agencies, they can be strong ambassadors in recruitment.

3. Staff Development to Fulfill Needs of Attrition

The Public VR program continues to experience gaps in staffing primarily due to retirements.

The Baby Boomers, one of the largest segments of the labor force, continue to retire at record rates. COVID-19 and its implications have accelerated this process over the past several years. Recruitment and hiring remain important in stemming this tide however development of existing staff within our agency, providing career paths and opportunities for these individuals is essential. Utilizing a structured, mentorship process would be beneficial. Mentorships could align field staff with managers, directors, and senior leaders. An onboarding, prescribed structure for this could be developed with defined training modules, curriculum, and goals. These mentorships could also allow field staff to attend and experience administrative meetings and events that they may not typically have had the opportunity to do so in their current positions. Finally, collaboration on projects, with the mentor and the mentee, could provide the knowledge, skills and experience required for career advancement.

4. Technology, Telework and New Opportunities

While COVID-19 has negatively impacted the economic vitality of all organizations, it has provided an opportunity for the Public VR program to offer more options for service delivery to individuals in our programs. The WIOA initiative of serving more transition-aged youth through the Public VR program provides a natural platform for increased use of technology options. Individuals that are in the category of transition aged youth have more access to and knowledge of technology, both in schools as well as personally. Collaborating with our secondary schools to better understand and identify which technologies are being utilized by these students will be beneficial. Providing these technology options to our staff charged with providing services to these students will be vital. Additionally, and most important to the success of this option will be the training that our staff will receive in the use of this new technology. The biggest reason for failure in this area falls into this category. If individuals do not know how to use technology or are uncomfortable with the technology, they are most apt to not use it. In our recruitment of new staff as well as the development and training of current staff,

we should be communicating this expectation of the use of technology in service delivery.

5. Evaluation of Program Vitality and Efficacy

National as well as state labor market statistics show that employment rates are much lower among individuals with disabilities than the general population. In addition, these rates are lower still for those with an intellectual or developmental disability. This data further shows that while individuals receiving services from the Public VR program are more likely to obtain employment, less than a quarter are working competitively, frequently for minimum wage.

Factors which have been shown to impact this include poverty and economics, lack of affordable housing, limited transportation options, challenges with providing person-centered interventions and barriers to inclusion in integrated work settings, just to name a few. The implementation of WIOA, specifically Section 511 of the act which encouraged individuals with the most significant disabilities, mainly represented by individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities, has also impacted these outcomes.

Some of the recommendations that may address these issues include direct feedback from individuals being served by our agencies. Focus groups and customer service surveys have been used in the past. With new technology available, providing opportunities for individuals in our programs, to provide timely and immediate feedback would be beneficial. Real time opportunities to address issues, identify opportunities and solutions is critical in these ever-changing times. Devoting qualified staff within our agencies would be critical to the implementation and management of such an endeavor.

Additionally, utilizing internal processes to evaluate the vitality and efficacy of our agencies needs to become a priority. Imbedding this in the culture of our agencies is vital. Beginning with the onboarding process and continuing through out our staff development and training processes, this needs to become an integral part of our culture. Staff need to have the opportunity and freedom to communicate and provide ideas as to how to improve this moving forward.

6. Imbed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion into the Recruitment Process

Executive leaders committed to a culture of inclusion will support ongoing professional development so that managers, supervisors, and staff are consistently developing skills linked to inclusion. While many organizations focus on unconscious bias awareness training, research indicates that awareness has a limited lasting impact—between several hours to several days. Inclusive leadership takes a more grassroots approach, looking at work routines or processes to make inclusion an integral part of the daily work duties. Successful organizations take this approach and apply it in how they recruit, onboard, or promote new hires. This could include evaluating the hiring

process to identify language, processes, and systems which may not promote the inclusion values of the agency. Potential job candidates also take cues about inclusive behaviors by the way they are treated, the questions asked and the overall tone during the interview process. Setting the tone during an interview, engaging participants with different communication styles, awareness of cultural, sexual and gender identities promote a more inclusive, interview, experience. Additionally, evaluating retention rates, employee survey results, and diversity of staff provides further validation that the practices are successful and achieving the desired results.

Conclusion

Since its proud beginnings on June 2, 1920, the Public Vocational Rehabilitation program has experienced success, controversy, challenges, setbacks and at times, failure. With the inception of WIOA in 2014 as well as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, turbulent and unprecedented challenges were quickly and unexpectedly at our doorstep. WIOA introduced Pre- Employment Transition Services. Pre-ETS quickly became the laser focus of the program. Service delivery to an increased number transition-aged youth identified new and yet undeveloped opportunities for these individuals. Engagement at a younger age, as well as collaboration with our secondary education partners became a high priority. The reset had begun, and the Public VR program was immersed in the challenge. Additional, qualified staff would be necessary to meet the mandates identified in the act. Specialized training would need to be developed to ensure that staff were ready and able to provide these new services, fulfilling our new responsibilities. While WIOA presented new challenges, the Public VR program rose to meet these challenges, seeing the new opportunities that this could provide to many individuals with disabilities in their vocational journey.

While the Public VR program began to settle into the initiatives identified through WIOA, an unprecedented, unforeseen challenge, never seen before, was at our doorstep. The impact of COVID-19 was universal throughout our world. No country, organization, or individual could escape the impacts of this pandemic. Our economy literally ground to a halt at record speed due to shutdowns, quarantines, medical crisis, and the all-encompassing fear experienced by many in our society. The health care system was in crisis, feverishly seeking the supplies, qualified staff as well as space to provide the medical care necessary to address the medical implications caused by this pandemic. The Public VR program once again was faced with new and unprecedented challenges. Telework became the new normal for many of our staff. Service delivery was turned upside down with ZOOM, Google Meets and Microsoft Teams becoming our new methods of connection and communication.

One of the key elements necessary to meet these ongoing challenges is that of a qualified, competent workforce. Recruitment, hiring, training, and onboarding only begin to address these challenges. Retention, promotion, diversity, inclusivity, and equity move us closer.

Vision for the Future of the VR Program

The future of the Public VR program is bright. For the past 100 years since its founding, the Public VR program has risen to the all-encompassing challenges faced. At the core of this resiliency lies the foundation of this program, our staff. When organizations are asked what their most valuable asset is undoubtedly the overwhelming response is nearly universal. Employees make up the heart and soul of most organizations. There are many reasons for this. In the Public VR program, our employees provide service delivery, the essence and core of our mission. Employees also represent the first customer of our program. If they are unhappy and dissatisfied, they will not deliver services that can produce results. This impacts the individuals that we serve through our program, causing dissatisfaction and disillusion resulting in unfulfilled expectations and goals. Everyone loses.

The success of the Public VR Program is the result of and directly correlates to the happiness and satisfaction of our employees. Many of our employees have been with the program for many years, devoting a large portion of their adult, working life to this program and its mission. Employee happiness and satisfaction may look different for everyone thus developing, implementing, and sustaining a comprehensive approach is critical to the longevity of the program. While recruitment and hiring are the beginning of this approach, the importance of these decisions cannot be discounted. Providing a recruitment and application process that promotes inclusion is essential. Identifying and recruiting candidates from diverse backgrounds is one way of ensuring that the program is living into the model of inclusivity. While the Public VR program and its leadership continue to strive to live into this model, change must start at a grassroots level. Leadership must provide the example of what a productive and healthy work environment can be, imbedding diversity, and inclusivity into all aspects of the operation.

Opportunities for employee development and career advancement are also strong indicators of employee happiness and satisfaction. The benefits and value of training and development affect all aspects of an organization. Leadership operates with confidence when employees are provided with developmental and training opportunities. Leadership is better equipped to maintain a stable, qualified, and competent workforce. Employees that are skilled, engaged, feel valued and vital to the success of the organization tend to have a higher level of satisfaction and commitment, resulting in greater levels of retention. An unintended consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was that training opportunities could now be provided to more individuals in a greater variety of locations with the advent of virtual technology platforms. While many programs had only begun the scratch the surface of this technology, COVID-19 launched VR into this space at record speed. The door was flung wide open to the possibilities of mentorships, peer mentoring and project coordination to better enhance career advancement opportunities.

While providing training and development opportunities for employees in the Public VR program, measuring and evaluating the vitality and health of the program regarding employee satisfaction is essential. VR has been able to establish a number processes including exit interviews, employee satisfaction surveys, upward performance evaluations,

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion workgroups, just to name a few. Involving our employees in these processes increases the success rates that we are striving for in maintaining a qualified workforce. The Public VR program should continue to lean into these initiatives as the results will continue to fuel the success, health, and vitality of the program.