Organizational Change: Using Virtual Service Delivery – Electronic Signatures - in Vocational Rehabilitation[1]

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IDENTIFICATION of the ORGANIZATIONAL ISSUE:

As our nation is faced with an unprecedented pandemic related to COVID-19. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies across the nation are rapidly responding to the reality of COVID-19 and implementing necessary organizational changes and new business processes to remain relevant during this crisis. Typically, significant organizational change occurs over 3 to 5 years, however, VR agencies facilitated organizational changes within weeks, if not days in order to continue serving and assisting VR consumers and stakeholders during this challenging time. VR agencies utilized the challenge of COVID-19 to promote innovation, creativity, and the integration of systems to implement new business processes to promote the safety and wellbeing of team members, consumers, and community members during a time of social distancing, high unemployment, and a fast changing economic landscape. Our team identified electronic paperwork and signatures as our focus area. As staff are working remotely, VR agencies are concerned about how the US Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration will evaluate electronic signatures during compliance and program reviews[2]. Will these signatures be valid after COVID-19? How can VR agencies continue

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[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.

[2] The citation is correspondence dated May 14, 2020 issued by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, US Department of Education entitled 'continuity of operations for individuals with disabilities in the current COVID-19 environment'.

to utilize electronic signatures after the crisis? We identified the following documents and processes as areas that we are most concerned about:

- VR Application for services,
- Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE),
- IPE amendments,
- Release for medical records,
- Social Security releases,
- Financial application,
- Reimbursements to staff, vendors and clients, and
- What accessible technology will be needed and who will pay for it for both clients and staff?

Section 102(b)(4)(C) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 C.F.R. § 361.45(d)(3) require the IPE to be signed and agreed to by the individual, or his or her representative, and the VR counselor employed by the VR agency. Under Section 103(a) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 C.F.R. § 361.48(b), allowable VR services are those needed by eligible individuals to achieve an employment outcome, as described in an IPE, and the VR counselor and individual, or his or her representative as appropriate, must sign amendments to the IPE before they will take effect (Section 102(b)(4)(E)(iii) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 C.F.R. § 361.45(d)(7)). Amendments to the IPE are necessary when there are substantive changes to the employment outcome or services to be provided, or in the providers of those services.

We identified challenges with electronic paperwork within these 4 frames[3]:

- **Human Resources Frame** - Not all staff were equipped to work remotely due to lack of equipment. Staff may be going without reasonable work accommodations while working remotely. Organizational changes take time so not all staff buy into the new process or procedures. There are challenges in coordinating meetings with staff to discuss policy changes, training, and hiring new staff remotely. When clients do not have the ability to sign employment applications on-line staff members are signing the employment application with their permission on their behalf. Home and work life has been integrated while parents support the education of their children during these unprecedented times. Team members were asked to implement new business processes rapidly without much hands on training or visual demonstrations. There has been Team member resistance to using new processes or technologies. The more staff that are working remotely VR agencies are looking at physical office space to determine needs moving forward. States are reviewing service delivery options to create new payment structures/procedures for Community Rehabilitation Program services during COVID-19. Staff must learn acceptable methods for acquiring client signatures i.e., Adobe Reader, Email, Text, Photo of document, Wet Ink, etc. Team members may be asked to complete daily/weekly logs to document and demonstrate productivity.

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[3] The four frames are based on the work of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal in their text Reframing Organizations, 6th Edition, John Wiley and Sons, 2017.

The human resources frame is the heart and soul of the organization and getting the right people in the VR careers is more important than the locations of the position. Teleworking allows for hiring the right people.

● **Structural Frame** - There is a need for VR agencies that did not have telework policies Pre-COVID-19 to create new telework policies or update existing telework policies and procedures that are outdated. Some examples are: purchasing laptops vs desk top computers; purchasing cell phones vs desk phones; converting required forms to PDFs (allowing virtual accessibility); platforms were created to host new resources/tips for working remotely; email is encrypted to protect Personally Identifiable Information (PII) and Protected Health Information (PHI) as we work remotely; and virtual meetings have increased. The culture and leadership of public VR has allowed for agencies to quickly adjust to electronic paperwork and teleworking. The attitudes of staff have contributed to this adjustment.

● **Symbolic Frame** - VR agencies are showing flexibility to staff and clients' by putting the wellness and safety of people as a priority. Remote work has increased and face to face visits have been restricted. Obtaining signatures on all paperwork, approving transportation payments, printing and mailing checks for VR participants participating in services has been increasingly challenging.

● **Political Frame** - Will signatures signed electronically (using texts, emails, PDF) be considered valid after the crisis is over? VR agencies have implemented safety protocols and procedures to enhance the safety of clients and staff and incurred added expenses to purchase required and necessary PPE. There are fiscal concerns related to state funding which impacts federal funding.

EXPECTED OBSERVABLE/BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES:

Nationally, VR agencies have the autonomy to determine business processes to ensure the protection of Personally Identifiable Information (PII). This impacts the VR application, financial application, individualized plan for employment (IPE), amended IPEs', medical releases and social security releases.

As staff are working remotely the technological needs for consumers and staff have expanded. The technological expansion has created a challenge for VR agencies to meet the increasing demand for technology. VR agencies are offering a variety of options to consumers and employees to address their individual technological needs. We must consider reasonable accommodations (RA) and accessibility needs. We must establish acceptable standardized procedures that will hold up against audits. We acknowledge some VR agencies already have policies and procedures that allow telework. However, these policies may need to be updated to allow staff to take home computer equipment and any other IT equipment needed to support teleworking. RA may need to be provided and may include things like sit/stand workstations, special keyboards, and computer peripheral. States are addressing internet connectivity issues associated to Wi-Fi and internet bandwidth capabilities to ensure staff can effectively work from home.

Training consumers and staff members on how to effectively use technology is challenging in a remote environment. Services may be delayed due to consumers' or team members' access and or inability to utilize technology which increases wait times for services.

VR agencies across the nation are questioning RSA's interpretation of the word signature and therefore VR agencies have the flexibility to interpret their own definition of the word signature which may help reduce the burden to consumers and team members in acquiring signatures. Wikipedia states, "A signature is a handwritten depiction of someone's name, nickname or even a simple "X" or other mark that a person writes on a document as a proof of identity and intent."

INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHS supporting the ISSUE:

VR agencies that allowed teleworking prior to COVID-19 were ahead of agencies that had not started this practice. Now with teleworking, VR agencies are finding cost saving measures to support continuing with telework and are adapting processes to incorporate fillable PDF forms that support telework activities. Some VR agencies have created videos to serve as tutorials to help consumers' complete electronic paperwork.

VR agencies experience urgency in moving forward and are allowed flexibilities to do what works best. Examples include:
● Portals for staff, clients and vendors,
● Rehabilitation technician positions to enter 911 data so counselors can do counseling and guidance and not data entry, and
● Permanent telework policies allowing staff to work from home after COVID-19.

VR agencies had to adapt and create new business processes to align with the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA). This transition has made it easier implementing new changes associated to COVID-19. Being forced to work remotely created structural changes and forced us to rethink service delivery and assist VR agencies to meet the current demands. Staff are more flexible and tolerant of changes since they are working remotely. The strengths for organizations that serve individuals who are blind are that technology use for the provision of services was a priority prior to COVID-19. Strong organizational cultures of communication amongst staff allowed us to continue virtually.

INTERNAL ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES to resolve the ISSUE:

Internal organizational challenges relate to internet connectivity, technological needs, equipment, training, and policies to support remote work. We have staff who do not have web cams and cannot fully engage in WebEx or virtual meetings. We have team members and consumers who do not have access to Wi-Fi or internet. This presents its own set of issues. Virtual etiquette training is necessary to help team members and consumers work effectively. Attention spans on the virtual platform are shorter versus being in person and related to distractions that may occur in the virtual setting. Team

members are scheduling more and more virtual meetings. Team members and consumers have an increasing accountability for self-monitoring to ensure work tasks are getting completed. Most of the workday consists of checking emails, virtual meetings, and scheduling appointments. Individuals are going without accommodations in their homes which brings up funding issues to provide these resources.

Leadership is an important component in the overall success of VR programs. Leadership's inability to change or incorporate progressive policies could cause challenges. Leaders take direction from Governors, Mayors, and Commissioners to develop comprehensive plans for VR agencies. Due to protests and racial injustice occurring across our nation agencies are beginning to have discussions regarding inclusiveness and cultural competencies. When we have a particular group of individuals who may be disproportionately impacted by not having in-person services nor having the technology to sign documents electronically, this inadvertently causing an undue hardship on this group. We need to consider alternative methods to alleviate these challenges or we may be eliminating their access to VR by implicit bias.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT STRENGTHS supporting the ISSUE:

Consumer groups are loud and consistent advocates and are supportive of accessibility issues because it eliminates barriers for them to have to come into an office to sign papers. Signing electronically assists consumers with achieving their vocational goals. Electronic signatures eliminate trips to the office to sign documents as well as trips to the post office to mail the wet signature. The State Rehabilitation Council recognizes the ability to provide services despite COVID-19. Electronic signatures allow VR agencies to provide services to our consumers without placing them at risk associated to COVID-19. The RSA FAQ (The United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, May 14, 2020) addressed staff capacity and encouraged and clarified agencies to change policies to serve the consumers. The document reiterated the actual signature was not required on the VR application, which allowed VR agencies to continue to provide services. This clarification was helpful and encouraged the necessary flexibilities for VR agencies to make the change. The flexibility of host agencies and governors vary from state to state, but it appears the support is there nationally for telework, virtual meetings, and electronic signatures. CSAVR unites VR agencies and helps with advocacy, lobbying, and consistency across state agencies. Their mission is to maintain and enhance public VR. States could bring challenges to this organization obtain assistance to ensure nationwide change for increased consistency. Currently there are WINTAC trainings and resources nationally to improve consistency issues.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES to resolve the ISSUE:

National Inconsistency across community rehabilitation partners as well as workforce boards creates challenges with service delivery to customers. Even within one state, organizations have different requirements for signatures, which creates obstacles for providing services in a timely manner. Inconsistency from state to state creates challenges. Clarity and channels of communication vary from state to state.

Schools may provide parent choice as to send students back to school or stay home. This poses challenges for VR agencies to provide services. Each district is doing something different. Schools have different expectations of VR services and this provides challenges to obtaining electronic signatures. Schools must be equipped with the technology to do their work remotely, however, we only have a finite amount of resources to be able to do that.

Inequities are evident and include people with no ability to connect to Wi-Fi (access internet) to complete the signatures for services.

CONCLUSION:

Key lessons learned during the Covid-19 experience have and will continue shaping the future of how VR services will be provided to customers (clients, vendors and businesses). Electronic signatures are necessary not only during the Covid-19 crisis but as we continue providing services in the future. It is essential that electronic signatures be accepted by funding agencies now and in the future.