Now is the Time: Advancing Services to Individuals with Disabilities by Reenvisioning VR Service Delivery
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Introduction

Public Vocational Rehabilitation agencies across the nation have undergone significant changes since the passage of WIOA in 2014, and again in the past 18 months as they've had to adjust to the disruptions caused by COVID-19. The Pre-Employment Transition Services requirements of WIOA required agencies to make a big shift in services to include increased numbers of students and WIOA Section 511 encouraged more individuals with the most significant disabilities to seek VR services. Many VR agencies were operating for the first time, or for the first time in many years, under Order of Selection (OOS). The unfunded mandates of WIOA coupled with the COVID-19 impacts contributed to significant financial struggles for public VR agencies. Decreasing enrollment over the past couple of years impacted outcomes and employer recruitment. Many agencies experienced significant difficulties in hiring and retaining qualified staff.

Issue

In this time of unprecedented change and pandemic-related disruptions, public VR agencies must rethink how services are provided. VR agencies must offer services in new

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and flexible ways to meet the evolving needs of individuals with disabilities and employers.

Current Challenges

- ***Technology Advancement***: Two years ago, most VR agencies did not have the technology, funding, or training to provide virtual/remote services. We had no choice but to adapt very quickly during the COVID-19 pandemic months to provide remote access to ongoing and essential VR services. Agencies purchased hardware and software to provide services. Staff learned to use new technologies and supervisors found ways to successfully manage their teams in a remote and virtual environment. Many customers appreciated being able to connect to VR services in this new and more efficient manner. After nearly two years of rapid technological improvisation and adaptation, VR agencies must now take stock of the experience and consider the lessons they've learned during the COVID-19 disruptions. They must continue to learn and make more progress forward – and not revert to old and obsolete ways.
- ***Equity & Integration***: VR agencies have traditionally occupied state-owned or leased facilities or One-Stop government office buildings. Individuals often had no other choice than to travel to those offices to receive services. This almost certainly discouraged some persons from seeking out services and impeded their ability to make progress toward attaining their goals. It's clear now that VR participants both need and deserve better choices. The questions we face are: How can VR agencies assure that our services are equitable and integrated into our communities? How do we best reach out to underserved populations? We know that some persons from minority or new American communities have a distrust for government; how can we overcome those barriers?
- ***Barriers to Services***: Persons with disabilities often experience barriers to accessing VR services in traditional ways. Perhaps they lack adequate transportation. Buildings often pose significant challenges to physical accessibility (for example, cold-weather states often have winters that are particularly challenging for people with mobility limitations). Mental health issues such as anxiety or depression can interfere with a person's ability to get to a government location. Low personal incomes or poverty often exacerbate these challenges. The cost of gasoline or auto repair may make travel unaffordable or impractical. Public transportation may be unaffordable, impractical, or, especially in some rural areas, completely unavailable. Clothing, cleanliness, and homelessness can raise significant barriers to obtaining services. Safety concerns caused by events such as the recent racial violence in many American cities, can lead to a politically charged environment and negative public perceptions about minority-targeted violence. And finally, time can be a major factor for full-time working parents or for potential participants who are attending school or working more than one low-paying job to make ends meet.

- ***Accessibility & Efficiency:*** We live in an age of readily available and extremely quick information on the worldwide web, through social media platforms, video calling and conferencing, and digital online meeting platforms. As never before we now have the virtual capacity to consume news and information, communicate personally and professionally, meet and attend conferences, receive formal training and instruction – and to provide services. In the past 18 months we've been compelled to learn and implement innovations such as electronic forms, web-based intakes and applications, electronic signatures, virtual meetings, and texts, among many other things. Yet VR agencies have been slow to change and adapt services. VR forms, services, and processes must be made accessible, available, and efficient. It is essential that we continue to focus on accessibility and efficiency for those whom we serve.

- ***Good Customer Service:*** All businesses, including health care and other service or government agencies, must continue with a focus on good customer service if they hope to remain viable and deliver the best possible services. Nearly all businesses and industries regularly employ customer service ratings to help them make continuous improvement. VR agencies should too. We must keep our focus on finding the best service delivery methods to meet the needs of every individual.

- ***Informed Choice:*** VR quite rightly is proud of our strong informed choice models and our success in meeting the federal informed choice mandates. Yet we've given relatively little thought to offering real choice to individuals about how and where and when they are served. VR organizations must offer choices about where an individual can best be served, what time of day works best, where they are most comfortable, and whether they prefer virtual or in-person meetings. Persons who have a job should be able to choose whether to meet at or near their worksite. We must ask whether in-home meetings are appropriate for persons where this might be best.

- ***Person-Centered Services:*** We know that many VR agencies are leaning into person-centered services rather than traditional process-centered services. Many are also beginning to align their services with the services offered by partner organizations, such as Human Services agencies. This is without question a positive development, but it is important to think about the impact on people who seek access to our services. What do our customers experience upon their first contact with our agency – when they make their first phone call or try to navigate a website, make an online or email inquiry, or even walk into an office? If we wish to be truly person-centered, individuals must be empowered to direct how and where services are delivered. Services must be built around the needs of individuals served rather than fitting the individual into limited long-time processes and procedures. Language also matters; we should say "participant" or "individual" with a disability rather than "consumer."

- ***Decreased Enrollments:*** COVID-19 accelerated declining enrollments in VR programs across the nation, continuing a trend of slow decline that had been apparent

for several years. It's not clear whether this is a long-term or even permanent trend, but it is clear that the viability of the VR program depends upon finding new ways to reach out and engage persons who could benefit from our services. We must connect with persons who need us most, engage those who may be unaware of our services, provide choices that empower persons with disabilities to earn family-sustaining wages rather than live in poverty, and prepare a talent pool of qualified workers who can contribute to the national economic recovery.

- ***Outcomes:*** It's obvious that without increased enrollments we cannot expect increased outcomes. We would expect that flexible and creative service delivery options that meet the needs of the individuals should result in better engagement with the VR program, higher levels of satisfaction, faster eligibility and IPE development and service provision, and ultimately, more successful outcomes.
- ***Flexible Work Environment:*** We believe that by offering multiple options for how, where, and when we meet with persons, we will also increase the flexibility of our work environment and staff. Our experience even before the pandemic – and especially during the 18 months of COVID-19 disruptions – has convinced us that it is no longer feasible for all VR staff to work only inside government buildings and during the conventional hours of 8-4:30, Monday through Friday. That model no longer meets the needs of the people we serve. VR adapted to telework and remote work environments during the pandemic. We should now build upon this flexibility and consider hybrid work environments, long-term telework and remote work opportunities, and decreased physical footprints with shared work spaces. Such flexibility would also likely attract qualified staff and encourage longer-term retention. It is essential that we keep pace in these flexible work environments to compete for high quality staff.
- ***Cost Savings:*** Decreased physical spaces, along with hybrid and shared work environments, will lead to overall cost savings for VR agencies. These costs can be shifted into new technologies to improve service delivery and into direct services to individuals.
- ***Parent & Family Engagement:*** The new flexibility of remote and virtual meetings seems to have increased both the quantity and quality of feedback and engagement that VR agencies receive from busy parents and families who wish to be engaged in their student's VR plan. In-home services, including in foster homes, are also an important service option for some families.
- ***Changing Service Population:*** As a direct result of the WIOA Pre-ETS requirement, VR agencies are now serving far more students than in the past. VR is also serving individuals with increased complexity and functional limitations. Persons with mental health issues continue to be in high need of services; and we are seeing increasing numbers persons with mental health and chemical dependency issues related to COVID-19 and the overall public environment. Partly because of WIOA restrictions on

subminimum wages, and as more states take steps to eliminate subminimum wage programs altogether, persons with intellectual cognitive disabilities are coming to VR in increased numbers. Long COVID-19 is a new disability that is beginning to emerge as the pandemic persists. VR services and service delivery must adapt to these new and changing needs.

- *Employer Needs:* The pandemic disruptions were a major factor in creating what has now become an acute labor shortage in certain industries and sectors. Employers struggle to find the talent they need to fill their jobs and are more open than ever to considering new sources of labor and new ways to meet their needs. This provides more options and opportunities to individuals with disabilities to succeed – a great opportunity for VR agencies to match our untapped labor pool to good jobs.

Vision of Future Services

We envision a VR program that is recognized for its culture of excellent customer service. It's a vision that reflects the high standards to which VR staff are held, and a mission that conveys an absolute respect for the individuals who use VR services to better their lives. Our vision includes a public VR program that is fully integrated into the community and accessible to all individuals with disabilities, regardless of location or circumstance. VR services are available in many ways, through multiple media, and in many places, whether by phone, online and digital platforms, or in any of several home or community settings. VR staff and providers partner with individuals to make informed choices regarding how and where and when they receive services. VR's strong relationships with schools, behavioral health clinics, Centers for Independent Living (CILs), employers, and many others mean that "warm" referrals between and among community partners are the standard way of doing business.

In this new environment, VR leadership consistently engages with staff, providers, individuals with disabilities, employers, and stakeholders to gather information and feedback for continuous improvement. All aspects of the agency (mission/vision, policy, contracts, hiring processes, training, case management system, supervision practices, and performance standards) support the new way of serving individuals. Agency leaders are role models of ideal behavior, while staff receive the tools and training that they need to provide efficient and effective services in any environment. Well-trained and knowledgeable supervisors provide active support to their teams. Individuals with disabilities have access to equipment, technology, and support services they need to access staff, services, and resources. Individuals feel connected and supported by a team of VR staff and partners.

Quantitative and qualitative data show the benefits of this new VR culture. Referrals increase and individuals from rural or underserved communities are able to access VR services at a higher rate. Community partnerships and employer relationships result in more individuals successfully co-enrolling with WIOA partner programs and completing education and training programs. VR exceeds timelines for processing applications, determining eligibility, and developing IPEs. Timely and efficient provision of VR services results in individuals maintaining a high level of participation in VR services and the number of unsuccessful closures due to lack of contact or participation declines. Common performance measures improve as participants stay engaged with VR, complete services, and utilize VR's community and employer relationships to secure employment consistent with their goals and priorities. Individuals in the program report high levels of satisfaction with staff, vendors, and service outcomes. Employee morale and retention increases and cost savings from remote work and the reduction of physical space is redirected into program improvements.

Recommendations

To achieve the future state VR program that we've described, we recommend that VR leadership:

1. **Assess the current environment and identify opportunities for growth.** The pandemic forced VR agencies to experiment with new technology, remote work environments, and virtual service provision. Established in-person practices and cumbersome processes had to be immediately overhauled to meet the need for remote services. For many individuals, staff, and providers these changes meant that signing forms, attending counseling appointments, and providing services became more efficient and cost-effective. While these practices are relatively new to VR, private businesses have been successfully employing them for years. We can learn from this experience. To stay relevant and useful to individuals with disabilities and employers, VR must adapt to the changing environment and use technology to streamline processes and increase access to services.
2. **Hire and retain staff that possess the autonomy and skills to operate in this new, flexible, person-centered work environment**. VR agencies must offer competitive salaries, remote work options, flexible schedules, ongoing training and professional development, and supportive leadership and supervision. All staff should receive training and coaching to operate in non-traditional or remote work environments.
3. **Ask individuals with disabilities how they want to engage with the VR program**. VR agencies must offer flexible service delivery options that meet the participant's needs and support informed choice. Information, services, and staff should be easy to access and available through various means (VR office, community location, or virtual platforms), just as we would expect from any business. Customer service must

be a priority if we want to retain participants, develop successful partnerships with community providers and employers, and obtain quality outcomes.

4. **Engage staff, providers, stakeholders, individuals with disabilities, and employers in a feedback loop**. VR agencies must explore what is working and what could be improved from multiple perspectives. Communication between all parties should be consistent and made available in multiple ways - through surveys, focus groups, CRP meetings, weekly emails, leadership blog, and other ways. VR must create a culture that invites and appreciates feedback and expects continuous improvement.

5. **Revisit the agency's vision and guiding principles and ensure that they incorporate values related to flexible and creative service delivery, informed choice, and community integration.** Define specific actions and goals that support the achievement of the vision and clearly communicate the expected behavior. Leadership should be role models of this behavior and identify champions that embrace the change and are willing to serve as examples and mentors for others.

6. **Align all agency communications with the mission and vision**. VR agencies should review policy, training, contracts, vendor and staff performance expectations, marketing materials, leadership emails and other communication, case management letters, and website content to ensure that consistent language and messaging is used. Consistency and repetition are key to getting everyone on the same page, speaking the same language, and working toward the same goal.

7. **Establish a schedule and method for consistent and accessible communication with staff, providers, employers, individuals with disabilities, and others**. Share updated vision, expectations, successes, and challenges. Support and encourage two-way communication.

8. **Invest in equipment, software and training that supports the new mission and vision and service delivery methods**. To successfully provide remote or community-based services, staff must have mobile equipment such as laptops or tablets and cell phones. Accessible software and consistently updated virtual platforms are necessary, as are case management systems that are accessible from home or community locations. Case management systems should have time- and money-saving features such as participant and vendor portals that allow uploading documents, electronic signatures, and record downloads.

9. **Invest in accessible and ongoing training**. Staff, providers, and participants must have continuous training and support to work successfully as a team in this new, more flexible environment. Training related to the utilization of equipment and technology, remote work and supervision, electronic tools, resources, and forms, virtual and community-based service provision and etiquette, clinical supervision, and time management would all be topics of interest. Participant-friendly training materials and support should be available in person, over the phone, and online.

10. **Assess the physical footprint of the agency**. Take action to support flexible work and service delivery options by reducing physical office space that encourages old ways of conducting business (such as the idea that a participant must come to a state VR office in order to access VR services). Talk with current and new community partners (CILs, libraries, schools, community centers, clinics, shelters, job centers) about sharing space or utilizing their locations to meet participants. Work with staff, providers, and participants across the state to identify potential public meeting spaces that are safe, accessible, and close to public transportation. Consider more flexible and hybrid office layouts in locations where it is important to remain – use of adjustable sit/stand desks for more shared spaces, use of lockers for personal and onsite work tools, shared partner conference rooms.

11. **Assess potential cost savings related to the new VR environment**. Immediate investment into equipment and technology and ongoing maintenance of those items is likely outweighed by the long-term savings from reducing the costs of rented VR office space, purchase and maintenance of office furniture and equipment, internet costs, staff travel to in-person trainings and meetings, and participant travel costs. Redirect these savings into ideas and items that support the new vision and environment, such as training, equipment, technology, support staff, communications, marketing, and shared spaces.

12. **Evaluate data & agency performance measures to assess effectiveness of new service models**: Consider customer engagement & satisfaction surveys; quality of employment outcomes; number of individuals dropping out of services prior to employment plan; length of services; changes in numbers of BIPOC served; changes in number of traditionally underserved; staff retention & promotions; shifting costs.

Conclusion

The public Vocational Rehabilitation program experienced massive upheaval and disruption in recent years. Any starting point is arbitrary, but for our purposes we begin in 2014, with the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). It was a jolt that set the VR program on a new and previously unexplored path. WIOA disrupted our world in ways that, seven years later, we are still trying to resolve. It forced rapid change and adaption in what perhaps could have been described as a complacent and tradition-bound system. WIOA reimagined what America's workforce development system, including the public VR system, could look like, and enforced that vision with a series of mandates on how, when, where, and to whom services must be provided. This was good, necessary, and healthy disruption – but it wasn't easy, and the effects and consequences still linger.

In early 2020 we, along with the rest of the world, experienced a second major jolt to the system: the global COVID-19 pandemic. This disruption was even more profound. For the public VR program, the pandemic shut-downs, closures, quarantines, fears, and isolation forced a near-total rethink of how we could even continue to provide services. The challenges at times seemed insurmountable to many of us; they forced rapid adaptation, creative problem solving, unaccustomed agility, technological creativity, and human resourcefulness.

We see these two extravagant jolts to the VR system as an opportunity. Taken together, the mandates of WIOA and the massive disruptions of COVID-19 could very easily have wrecked the system. Perhaps the public VR program was ill-prepared for much of what transpired over the past seven years, but we believe the system can and will emerge stronger, healthier, more relevant, and more effective than before – but only if we continue to rethink and change our approach. We now know, if we didn't before, that we can no longer be complacent and bound to tradition. We've been forced to adapt to unprecedented challenges and find creative new approaches to our work, compelled to learn how to use technology and become much more flexible in all that we do.

We live and work in a time like no other. It's time to change and adapt to it.