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New Message. Same Mission.

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Executive Summary

The term Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) no longer resonates with the broader public, and this disconnect is increasingly affecting the public awareness of the VR program, engagement and alignment between VR and workforce development partners, as well as overall success in serving and supporting partners, businesses, and individuals with disabilities. While the mission of VR to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment and economic self-sufficiency has never been more critical, language used to describe the mission of the VR program has not kept pace with this evolving scope and impact. The term "rehabilitation" carries implications that are inconsistent with the philosophy of the independent living movement, which emphasizes consumer involvement and ownership of employment outcomes. Additionally, from an employer's perspective, unfamiliarity with disability issues can lead to the mistaken assumption that "rehabilitation" refers primarily to drug or alcohol abuse/treatment.

The outdated terminology that currently identifies the VR program is limiting public understanding, reducing program visibility, and hindering stakeholder engagement. To better align with the comprehensive, person-centered services offered to individuals with disabilities, employers, and communities, it is essential that the term Vocational Rehabilitation be carefully and thoughtfully reviewed at a national and state level.

Modernizing this language and ensuring consistency across states will not only more accurately reflect the comprehensive scope and value of the services provided, but also promote greater integration, awareness, and collaboration across the workforce development ecosystem.

Background: The Evolution of the VR Program and Language

The name Vocational Rehabilitation can trace its roots to the Veterans Rehabilitation Act of 1918. This act was signed to specifically target U.S. military personnel who were injured during WWI that wanted to return to the workforce after the war. At the time, these veterans completed rehabilitation programs designed to support their reentrance to the workforce. However, these programs were focused on a medical model of rehabilitation and were focused on physical rehabilitation services related to employment. Over 100 years later, the VR program has evolved extensively. The VR program has transformed from a medical model of rehabilitation for WWI veterans into a critical component of the workforce development system that seeks to promote people with disabilities as essential for a successful and thriving workforce. As the services and impact of VR has evolved, so has the perception of the VR program and the needs of people with disabilities who access VR services.

Culturally, people with disabilities no longer see themselves as people who need to be rehabilitated. Instead, disability is seen as a part of the human condition and that having a disability is a key part of the strength that people bring to their work and life. Language that focuses on deficits no longer reflects the self-determination or empowerment embedded in today's disability rights and independent living movements.

Across the country, several states and programs have already recognized the evolution of language and the necessity for having a name for the VR program that reflects the modern philosophy and value of the VR program. Examples include the following:

- After completing research, having focus groups, conducting surveys and having conversations with the disability community, businesses, providers, and advocacy organizations; Massachusetts rebranded their VR program to MassAbility. This rebrand was the direct result of feedback from the disability community and led their agency's expansion to a more inclusive model for disability career services and independent living. The legislation used to enact their new brand went further than just a public brand name change. The legislation also removed outdated terms from general laws that did not support the beliefs and values of their new brand (e.g., handicapped, handicap). These terms were replaced with terms such as "barrier," "person with a disability," and person with an "intellectual disability."
- When Ohio conducted a telephone survey of over 800 random people, only 12% said they knew what the VR program was. On June 10, 2024, Ohio changed their name to Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities (OOD). This change for Ohio marked a new era of focus for OOD, highlighting disability inclusion and their commitment to the individuals they serve.
- The Veterans Administration conducted a comprehensive study with Veterans, service members, Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) program staff, and Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) to better understand the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for

improvement of their program. The result of this study indicated participants felt confusion and stigma with the program's name and that it deterred some potential program participants from seeking services. On June 22, 2020, the Vocational Rehabilitation & Employment (VR&E) program rebranded to the Veteran Readiness and Employment program to better reflect the purpose, goals, and values of the program.

- After a long-term collaboration with clients, staff, and partners throughout North Carolina, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services to Employment rebranded as the Division of Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities (EIPD) in May 2024. The goal of this rebranding was to choose a name that reflects progress, potential, and the journey toward independence. This concept goes beyond the traditional idea of "rehabilitation" to encompass broader themes of employment and independent living. They utilized an official press release, organized in-person events, and engaged in digital outreach to promote the new identity.
- In the state of Vermont, The name Vocational Rehabilitation was deemed outdated and stigmatizing, leading to the development of a new identity, HireAbility Vermont. This name was chosen after consulting with consumers, staff, and partners in collaboration with a branding agency. The new name better reflects the agency's expanded focus on career pathways, training, education, and higher-wage opportunities. A marketing campaign was launched in Spring 2022 to promote the new identity, while assuring clients and partners that core services for individuals with disabilities would remain unchanged.

These examples demonstrate that modernizing the name of the VR program is not just symbolic, it is critical to convey the respect and empowerment that is integral to quality employment and an inherent part of independent living.

Why Modernizing the Name of the VR Program Matters

Language holds significant power. Language can both uplift and offend. Language actively shapes the public perception of the VR program, contributes to how customers and partners engage with the VR program, as well as conveys the values for which the VR program stands.

The term rehabilitation is associated with the outdated medical model of rehabilitation which conflicts with the modern social model of disability that emphasizes empowerment, capability, and self-determination. For the program to have a powerful identity, the name must align with the current values of the program. Adopting modern, empowering language emphasizes the empowerment and collaboration the VR program engages in to support individuals in achieving employment through the strengths, abilities, capabilities, and skills they possess; and not by fixing the aspects of their disability.

Studies and feedback from the community, including businesses and individuals that VR serves, have shown consistent confusion around the name Vocational Rehabilitation. The VR program is often confused with other rehabilitation services such as physical rehabilitation or substance abuse treatment, due to overlapping goals and approaches with challenges in differentiating between different types of rehabilitation, which serves to further impede the program from fulfilling its true purpose of promoting employment and independent living.

Just as culture and language have evolved within the VR program, so, too, has the modern workforce system. This modernization was especially accelerated with the passing of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) in 2014. Under WIOA, Vocational Rehabilitation is identified as an integral part of the workforce development system. Just as the modern workforce system has and continues to evolve, VR must evolve as well. The outdated language of the VR program serves as a clear mark of separation from our workforce and education partners, which, in turn, limits the potential for continued collaboration and system integration.

Although nationally, the VR program is recognized as State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs), at the state level, there is broad inconsistency with the name of VR program from state to state. These names are influenced by many factors. While several states have engaged in developing a new name for their VR program that they feel reflects the modern image and values of the program, these names represent a further inconsistency in having a national, cohesive brand for the VR program. Having a unified national brand for the VR program will create stronger program recognition for customers, businesses, and stakeholders as well as foster greater national alignment with workforce and education partners at the Federal, state, and local levels.

Modernizing the brand of the VR program is not limited to the changing of the name. It is about bringing the brand of the VR program in alignment with the current mission, vision, and values of the modern VR program that embodies every interaction that VR professionals have with customers, businesses, partners, and stakeholders.

How to Modernize the Name of the VR Program

Now is the time for SVRAs to engage in a national rebranding and renaming effort to better align with the modern workforce system and more clearly convey the current purpose and goals of the program. To accomplish this goal, the naming modernization effort should be a highly coordinated, evidence-based, and stakeholder-driven project.

In order to engage in this rebranding process, it is vital to secure support from RSA and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) within the U.S. Department of Education. The most effective means of securing that support would be to ensure Federal partner understanding of the challenges that arise from the current brand of the VR program as well as align the need for a program rebrand with the priorities of the U.S. Secretary of Education.

The U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon advanced the following priorities for the Department that allow for the opportunity to create support for the rebranding effort. These priorities include the following:

- Alignment of workforce development systems with the economic priorities and labor market needs;
- Stronger partnerships between education and workforce programs to ensure training programs are aligned and effective for workforce needs; and
- Developing talent marketplaces to align job seekers with the needs of business based on skills.

In addition, in reviewing U.S. Department of Education Secretary workforce priorities dating back to the development and signing of WIOA, which included Secretary Duncan (2009-2015), Secretary King Jr. (2016-2017), Secretary DeVos (2017-2021), and Secretary Cardona (2021-2025), a key theme of system alignment among education and workforce to meet the needs of both talent and industry emerge. These themes would allow for a compelling case to highlight how the rebranding of the VR program is in alignment with bipartisan priorities for greater alignment dating back pre-WIOA.

Once support is secured by RSA and OSERS, the proposed next step would be to develop a national taskforce that includes additional stakeholders to help inform the process of rebranding. These stakeholders should represent a cross-section of stakeholders that represent VR programs partners, individuals with disabilities, and industry.

Representatives can include, but may not be limited to, the following:

- RSA
- CSAVR
- National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB)
- National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC)
- U.S. Department of Labor
- SVRAs
- Disability advocacy organizations
- Business leadership representatives

This national taskforce would be responsible for leading the process of gathering stakeholder feedback and conducting evidence-based research regarding the factors and language that resonate with those impacted by the VR program while also ensuring alignment with the goals and priorities of the program. The group would also be responsible for determining what actions would need to be taken in order to complete the rebrand such as legislative action through Congress and identifying key political allies who could support such action through the congressional process. As the rebranding process is completed, the taskforce, in collaboration with key Federal partners and stakeholders, will need to create a structured marketing and communications plan to support states with the implementation of the new program name and educating their state and local customers, businesses, partners, and stakeholders about the change and how it aligns with the modern values of the VR program.

Modern Names that Align with the Current Mission of the VR Program

Based on the modern mission, vision, purpose, and values of the VR program, it is proposed that the following new naming options be considered. The following names clearly communicate the modern values of the VR program of empowerment, independence, partnership, and employment:

- AbilityWorks: Highlights **ability** as the initial word before **works**, demonstrating that ability is the central factor that leads to employment success; in addition, by using ability, the name conveys a positive, strengths-based message to customers, businesses, partners, and stakeholders.

- WorkAbility: Highlights **work** as the core purpose of the VR program; in addition, this name combines work and ability as a means of communicating that employment is possible for individuals of all abilities. With work being the initial component of the name, this name highlights an intentional integration of the VR program into the broader workforce system.
- EmpowerWorks: Highlights the empowerment of individuals with disabilities is directly connected to employment success; in addition, this name promotes shared ownership and impact of the VR program along with customers, businesses, partners, and stakeholders in promoting people with disabilities as essential to workforce system success. and collaboration between professionals and individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion

The time has come for the VR program to evolve in both language and identity to reflect the modern realities of its mission and impact. After more than a century, VR has transformed from a medical rehabilitation initiative for veterans returning from WWI into a cornerstone of the nation's workforce development system with the goal of ensuring that people with disabilities have access and opportunity to be successful in the workplace. Yet, the term Vocational Rehabilitation no longer conveys this mission to communities, businesses, or those that the program is committed to serving. Modernizing the name of the VR program during this period of change presents critical opportunities for RSA, OSERS, and VR programs to strengthen VR's position within the workforce development system. By adopting language that reflects empowerment, partnership, and opportunity, the VR program can ensure that its name matches its true purpose: advancing the inclusion and success of people with disabilities as vital contributors to a strong, diverse, and competitive national workforce.

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