College of Education
Interwork
Institute

Interwork Institute
San Diego State University
6367 Alvarado Court, Suite 350
San Diego CA 92120

VOICE: 619.594.2462
FAX: 619.594.4208
http://interwork.sdsu.edu/

Career Pathways as a Recruitment and Retention Strategy

National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute (NRLI)

Cohort R – Group 2

Mario Lucero, M.A., CRC, Field Operations Director, New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

George Michna, Ph.D., Bureau Chief, Connecticut Aging and Disability Services

Sybil R Nash, MSW, LCSW, Bureau Chief – Planning & Strategic Management, Illinois Department of Human Services/DRS

Karen Jenkins, M.Ed., CRC, Deputy Commissioner of Vocational Rehabilitation Service, Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services

Noe Turcios, Ed.D., Statewide Coordinator for Deaf Services, Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS)

Tammie R. Dunn, MBA, Deputy Director of Finance, Nebraska Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Introduction

The vocational rehabilitation (VR) program is a Federally supported, state-administered program whose mission is to empower people with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment, independence, and economic self-sufficiency. According to the *ETA – 9169 WIOA Annual Report for the Title IV for Program Year (PY) 2023 (July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024)* published from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), 872,460 participants received VR services to prepare for, obtain, retain, or advance in competitive employment. In Program Years (PY) 2022 and 2023, the national VR program began to see an increase in the number of applicants, eligible individuals, and participants served.

National studies estimate annual VR counselor turnover between 15–20%, with vacancy rates in many states exceeding 10–15% of authorized counselor positions (Herbert et al., 2023). In practical terms, this

means one in five counselor positions may turn over each year, destabilizing caseload continuity and increasing supervisory burden. Research further shows that high counselor vacancy rates are associated with longer eligibility and IPE development timelines, larger average caseloads, and delayed service delivery. These are factors directly linked to weaker employment outcomes.

Because the role of a VR counselor is critical to the employment rates of participants in VR programs, a reduction in the number of VR counselors available to serve individuals with disabilities impacts rapid engagement between the counselor and the participant, the quality of services provided, and employment outcomes for individuals seeking services (Herbert et al., 2023).

Background & Context

Recent workforce challenges in state VR programs mirror key Federal policy shifts. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 relaxed the long-standing requirement that VR counselors hold a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling or a closely related field (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Although this change was intended to help agencies fill vacancies more quickly, it also increased bachelor's-level hiring and placed greater responsibility on state VR agencies for onboarding and skill development. *Closing the Gap* (Bowen et al., 2024) documents the resulting "sink-or-swim" experience for many new hires and the associated risks for retention.

At the same time, RSA's Section 302 Long-Term Training investment declined, shrinking graduate-level training pipelines that once supplied master's-prepared VR counselors with service-commitment incentives. Programs scaled back, leaving states more reliant on ad hoc recruitment and internal training (Han-Lam et al., 2022). Combined, lowered entry requirements and reduced Federal training pipelines increased onboarding burden, turnover risk, and uneven preparation. This history underscores why apprenticeships, residencies, and mentorship are central to rebuilding a stable, qualified VR workforce.

Key Barriers

Limited Visibility of VR as a Career

One of the most persistent barriers to recruitment in VR is the limited visibility of VR as a professional career path. Many counselors report they "stumbled into" VR rather than intentionally pursuing it, often discovering the field only through general job postings or word-of-mouth. This lack of career awareness weakens long-term workforce planning and contributes to the "sink-or-swim" onboarding practices highlighted in *Closing the Gap* (Bowen et al., 2024), where new hires enter with little exposure to disability employment models, or the specialized competencies required for effective counseling.

VR also lacks a strong presence in the educational pipeline compared to allied fields such as social work or school counseling, and even students in rehabilitation-related majors may not view VR as a viable or rewarding career. One factor possibly influencing VR's lack of presence of late is the 2017 merger between the Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and Council of Rehabilitation Education (CORE). Although it has been helpful to rehabilitation counseling programs accreditation, there is a concern regarding the impact to a strong professional identity. Specifically, the shift in VR focus is now more aligned with the training and development counselors in other disciplines receive.

These visibility gaps are particularly harmful in specialty areas like Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing services, assistive technology, and job development—roles already experiencing critical shortages. As turnover rises when professional identity is low and pathways are unclear, VR must become a field that individuals actively choose. Strengthened outreach to postsecondary institutions, early career pathways, and clearer professional branding are essential to building a sustainable workforce capable of delivering on VR's mission.

Compensation & Workload Pressures

A persistent challenge impacting workforce stability in VR is compensation disparity between seasoned and newly hired counselors. Salary compression, where new employees enter at salaries equal to or higher than long-tenured staff, has become increasingly common due to state personnel structures and competitive hiring demands. Experienced counselors manage the most complex caseloads, serve as informal mentors, and carry institutional knowledge, yet often receive no financial recognition for these contributions (Bowen et al., 2024; Han-Lam et al., 2022). This creates frustration and signals structural inequity, contributing to both turnover and weaker professional identity across VR programs.

Addressing compensation inequities is essential not only for retention but also for successful recruitment. When prospective applicants see high workload demands without clear opportunities for growth or pay progression, VR risks being viewed as a stagnant profession rather than a long-term career path (Closing the Gap Workgroup, 2024). Modernizing compensation structures tied to competency development, caseload complexity, and credential attainment can reverse this narrative. Strategies such as career ladders, salary equity adjustments for incumbents, and specialty pay incentives demonstrate a commitment to valuing expertise. As Bowen et al. (2024) and Han-Lam et al. (2022) emphasize, equity-oriented workforce investment strengthens retention and recruitment by affirming that VR supports both professional growth and long-term dedication to its mission.

Professional Support & Mentoring Gaps

A critical barrier to recruitment and retention in VR is the lack of structured professional support and mentorship for new counselors. As more bachelor's-level staff and career-changers enter VR without prior exposure to disability employment services (Bowen et al., 2024), the need for formal onboarding and competency development grows. Yet many agencies rely on informal "peer-as-trainer" models, where experienced counselors—already managing high caseloads—are expected to train new staff without protected time, compensation, or clear guidance (Han-Lam et al., 2022). This leaves new hires more vulnerable to stress, reduced confidence, and early burnout, while seasoned counselors experience added burden and decreased job satisfaction.

These mentorship and support gaps also weaken recruitment. Today's workforce expects meaningful development, a clear career path, and strong professional identity—conditions VR too often struggles to demonstrate compared to allied fields such as behavioral health or education. Agencies known for structured mentoring and growth opportunities become more attractive to mission-driven candidates and more successful at retaining emerging professionals. Strengthening onboarding systems and establishing intentional career pathways is therefore not just essential for staff readiness and retention—it is a competitive advantage in attracting the next generation of VR counselors.

Broader Implications

The VR system plays a critical role in employment outcomes for people with disabilities, yet current benchmarks highlight the strain on service capacity. In 2020, RSA reported that only 43.8% of eligible VR participants achieved employment, compared with 75% of people without disabilities (RSA, 2023). Workforce shortages are a major contributor—state VR programs continue to struggle with fewer qualified counselors and high turnover (Herbert et al., 2023). New hires often enter with a mental-health counseling orientation rather than a vocational rehabilitation identity that centers on employment and case management. Stress, burnout, compensation inequities, complex caseloads, and limited advancement opportunities further drive vacancies, making it increasingly difficult for VR agencies to maintain timely and high-quality services.

Strengthening recruitment and retention is therefore central to improving participant outcomes. Recommended strategies include clear career pathways, professional credential support, improved supervision, competitive pay, and flexible learning options (Herbert et al., 2023). A centralized credential platform could ensure consistent competence across diverse educational backgrounds while expanding opportunities for advancement and compensation growth. Master's-level rehabilitation counseling preparation is strongly associated with higher successful closure rates, especially among less-experienced counselors, underscoring that structured development directly improves participant outcomes. Investment in workforce preparation and professional identity development is not just a staffing strategy—it is essential to fulfilling VR's mission of employment and independence for people with disabilities.

Solution Set

Residency / Apprenticeship Pathways

A critical strategy for strengthening the VR workforce pipeline is the development of structured residency and apprenticeship pathways that replace the traditional "sink-or-swim" entry into the field. Research shows that unstructured onboarding contributes to early burnout and turnover among bachelor-level hires (*Closing the Gap*, 2024). New Mexico's Statewide Pre-Apprenticeship Program offers a scalable model, providing paid, competency-based learning, supervised field experience, and monthly skill evaluations tied to workplace readiness (New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions, 2025a, 2025b). A VR Talent Residency could similarly prepare new staff through rotations in eligibility, individualize plan for employment (IPE) development, employer engagement, and Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) collaboration—areas directly linked to faster service delivery and improved outcomes, such as higher success rates when eligibility and IPE timelines are met quickly (Bowen et al., 2024).

RSA can accelerate the adoption of the apprenticeship model by aligning Section 302 Long-Term Training with residency completion and funding VR–CRP–University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research, and Service (UCEDD)–Workforce Development partnerships to jointly develop future talent. By subsidizing the state VR agencies, it provides an opportunity for those already in rehabilitation to promote through job advancement and/or for new candidates to earn while they learn.

Mentorship Consortium

A structured mentorship consortium linking VR agencies and CRPs offers a sustainable, capacity-building solution to the workforce instability affecting the VR system nationwide. Staff shortages and turnover often follow a predictable pattern: new employees enter without sufficient guidance, face complex administrative systems, and leave before achieving full proficiency. A coordinated mentorship framework would ensure that professional development is intentional, consistent, and embedded within both VR and CRP organizational cultures (Mitchell et al., 2024; NRLI Staff Development Group, 2022). Under this model, new staff would be paired with experienced mentors who provide structured feedback on case management, employer engagement, and consumer support. Mentors would receive clear expectations for guiding professional growth, while peer learning groups or internal Communities of Practice (CoPs) would promote shared problem-solving and reduce professional isolation.

The consortium would function as a multi-year, tiered system that begins with intensive mentoring for new hires, progresses to collaborative peer support, and culminates in leadership development opportunities for seasoned staff. This approach builds professional competence, confidence, and retention across both VR and CRP systems, creating a continuous learning cycle that benefits the entire workforce. Its effectiveness could be measured through retention rates, mentorship quality surveys, and consumer outcomes such as service timeliness and employment stability. Ultimately, the mentorship consortium operates as a workforce capacity strategy, not merely a professional development initiative. By strengthening the shared VR–CRP workforce, the model enhances service continuity, improves employment outcomes for consumers, and reduces the systemic pressures, such as staffing shortages, that can lead to an Order of Selection (OOS).

RSA Long-Term Training (Section 302)

Section 302 authorizes RSA Long-Term Training programs that help expand the supply of qualified rehabilitation professionals through university-based scholarships linked to service commitments in state VR agencies. Funding reductions in recent years contributed to national workforce shortages, and although RSA has partially reinstated Long-Term Training support through current grantees (e.g., VCU), investment remains below prior levels and unevenly distributed across states (Rehabilitation Services Administration, n.d.). To rebuild a stable talent pipeline, Federal investment should return to pre-reduction capacity, ensure access for rural and underserved regions, streamline coordination with state VR agencies, and expand specializations such as Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Supported Employment, Autism, Behavioral Health, and pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS). Strengthening Section 302 funding directly supports recruitment and retention by developing a qualified, retention-ready workforce.

Compensation & Workload Solutions

To address salary compression and inequities, agencies should move beyond one-off adjustments and implement structured career pathways that link compensation to competencies, credentials (e.g., CRC), and caseload complexity (Bowen et al., 2024; Han-Lam et al., 2022). A clear tier system (e.g., VR Tech → Counselor-in-Training → VRC → Senior VRC) with transparent progression rewards growth and mitigates wage inversion. Integrating CRP-to-VR pathways (mentored transitions, competency-based training, joint supervision) expands the talent pool, honors existing expertise, and strengthens collaboration. When pay

and advancement are predictable and fair, VR becomes a career of choice, improving recruitment and retention while elevating service quality.

Conclusion

A stable, well-prepared VR workforce is foundational to achieving strong employment outcomes for people with disabilities. Persistent counselor turnover, vacancy rates, and uneven preparation undermine service timeliness, continuity, and Federal performance measures. The evidence is clear: agencies that invest in structured preparation, mentoring, and equitable compensation experience stronger retention and better consumer outcomes.

Residency and apprenticeship pathways, formal mentorship consortia, revitalized RSA Section 302 Long-Term Training, and transparent career ladders offer a coordinated strategy for rebuilding workforce capacity. By strengthening professional identity and preparation, VR agencies can reduce turnover, improve service delivery, and ensure sustained system capacity to meet growing demand. By doing so, it positions VR as a career of choice and reinforces its critical role in advancing competitive integrated employment.

References

Bowen, J., Conroy, S., & Desai, T. (2024). Rapid consumer engagement and modernization: Reducing administrative barriers to improve VR outcomes [Unpublished NRLI policy paper]. San Diego State University Interwork Institute.

Closing the Gap Workgroup. (2024). Closing the gap: Addressing training and support needs for incoming VR field staff [Unpublished NRLI policy paper]. San Diego State University Interwork Institute.

Compton, C. (n.d.). Rapid Engagement CoP | VRTAC-QM.

Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. (2024, December). Model State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Deaf People. Rockville, MD: CSAVR.

Han-Lam, H., Ortiz, L., & Smith, R. (2022). Staff development: The future lies within public VR programs [Unpublished NRLI policy paper]. San Diego State University Interwork Institute.

Han-Lam, M., Ortiz, L., & Smith, R. (2024). Exploring the benefits of a 32-hour workweek with no pay reduction in vocational rehabilitation [Unpublished NRLI policy paper]. San Diego State University Interwork Institute.

Herbert, J. T., Yoon, H. J., O'Shea, A., & Balushi, I. A. (2023). Recruitment and retention of state vocational rehabilitation counselors: A mixed methods analysis. Journal of Rehabilitation, 89(1), 61–71.

National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. (2019). 2019 Impact Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs.

New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions. (2025). Pre-Apprenticeship participation agreement [Internal program document].

New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions. (2025). Apprenticeship evaluation form [Internal program document].

Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 772 (Sec. 302).

RSA. (n.d.). RSA long-term training programs. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

RSA. (n.d.). RSA training and education grants—current grantees. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

RSA. (n.d.). WIOA statewide and performance report specifications [Webpage]. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. WIOA Annual Reports | Rehabilitation Services Administration

RSA. (2023). Rehabilitation Services Administration. RSA mission. Retrieved 07/23 from

U.S. Department of Education. (2024). 34 CFR Part 386—Scholarships for students with disabilities engaged in long-term training.

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014, Pub. L. No. 113–128, 128 Stat. 1425.

Wright, G. (Host). (2025, September 16). What's all the fuss about apprenticeships? (No. 35) [Audio podcast episode]. Hire Frequency. The Chicago Cook Workforce Partnership.

Appendix A: Vocational Rehabilitation Workforce & Outcomes Statistics

VR agencies nationwide are experiencing increased service demand alongside persistent workforce shortages. The statistics below summarize key national indicators demonstrating the relationship between VR counselor capacity, workforce stability, and employment outcomes for people with disabilities.

Indicator	National Statistic
Individuals Served by VR (PY 2023)	872,460 participants nationwide
Annual VR Counselor Turnover	15–20%
Estimated Counselor Vacancy Rates	10–15% of authorized positions in many states
Employment Rate – VR Participants	43.80%
Employment Rate – Individuals Without Disabilities	~75%
Counselor Preparation & Outcomes	Counselors with formal rehabilitation counseling preparation show higher successful closure rates, particularly within their first three years
Primary Drivers of Turnover	Burnout, workload inequity, salary compression, limited advancement pathways

Sources: Rehabilitation Services Administration (WIOA Annual Reports); Herbert et al. (2023); NRLI Workforce Development Policy Papers (Bowen et al., 2024; Han-Lam et al., 2022).