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Getting the Most from the Public Vocational Rehabilitation System

Abstract

[Excerpt] Every state has a vocational rehabilitation agency that is designed to help individuals with disabilities meet their employment goals. Vocational rehabilitation agencies assist individuals with disabilities to prepare for, get, keep, or regain employment. Many individuals and their families, teachers, employers, and advocates have found that these agencies provide flexible services that help people reach their employment goals. This publication describes the vocational rehabilitation system by responding to questions frequently asked by individuals with disabilities. Our goal is to give you information that will help you get the services you need to reach your employment goals.

Keywords

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Getting the Most from the Public Vocational Rehabilitation System

By Colleen Condon, Cecilia Gandolfo, Lora Brugnaro, Cindy Thomas, and Pauline Donnelly

Introduction

Every state has a vocational rehabilitation agency that is designed to help individuals with disabilities meet their employment goals. Vocational rehabilitation agencies assist individuals with disabilities to prepare for, get, keep, or regain employment. Many individuals and their families, teachers, employers, and advocates have found that these agencies provide flexible services that help people reach their employment goals.

This publication describes the vocational rehabilitation system by responding to questions frequently asked by individuals with disabilities. Our goal is to give you information that will help you get the services you need to reach your employment goals.

1. What kinds of services are available through Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)?

Helping you to get and keep a job is VR's ultimate goal. There are many different services available to help you in reaching this goal. The services offered during each step in the process vary and depend upon your employment needs and interests. Your services may include:

1. **Eligibility determination** to figure out if you qualify for services
2. **Assessment of vocational needs** to learn more about your interests, skills, and the services and support you might need
3. **Development of an Individualized Plan for Employment** that outlines your goals and the services you will receive
4. **Coordination of services** to reach your goal of employment
5. **Post-employment services** to help you keep your job once you get it

2. Who is eligible for services from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)?

In order to be eligible for VR services, the federal regulations say you must:

- ▶ Be an "individual with a disability," meaning a person who
 - Has a physical or mental impairment that constitutes or results in a substantial barrier to employment and
 - Can benefit from VR services to achieve an employment outcome
- ▶ Require VR services to prepare for, secure, retain, or regain employment.

If you receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits, you are presumed to be eligible for VR services, unless there is strong evidence that you are too significantly disabled to benefit from these services.

When a state does not have the funds to serve everyone who would normally be eligible for services, they are required to first serve people with the most significant disabilities. This is called "order of selection." Each state decides for itself what "most significant disability" means. You should check with the agency in your state to find out if you will be eligible for services.

It is important to remember that the government uses terms differently than they may be used in our daily lives. While you may not consider yourself to have a disability, let alone a significant disability, you may, in fact, qualify for services. Because the regulations are complex, you should not try to guess or determine for yourself if you will be eligible. Instead, if you think you could benefit from services, contact your local VR office and a counselor will meet with you to determine your eligibility. Remember, if you receive SSI or SSDI you are presumed to be eligible for VR services unless there is strong evidence that you will not benefit from them.

It is important to note that in some states people who are blind receive VR services through their state division for the blind.

3. Will I have to **PAY** for VR services?

There is **no cost to apply** for VR services and to find out if you are eligible. While most people do not pay for their services, some states may require you to complete a statement of financial need prior to purchasing services on your behalf. Depending upon your financial resources, you may be asked to help pay for your services. In most situations if you are going to take classes at a post-secondary school (such as a community college or a university) you will be required to apply for financial aid. Regardless of your financial situation, if you are determined eligible for VR, you may receive the following services at no cost:

- ▶ Assessments to determine VR needs
- ▶ Vocational counseling and guidance
- ▶ Referral for other services

4. How does the **APPLICATION PROCESS** work?

Each VR office is different, but usually **a staff person will outline available services to you during your first visit to the office.** This may be done in a group orientation or during an individual appointment. The best way to get started is to call your local office.

If you decide that you are interested in receiving services, **you must apply for services.** A VR counselor will be assigned to meet with you. During the first meeting, you and your VR counselor will have the opportunity to discuss your employment interests, concerns, and employment goals. In addition to getting information from you directly, the counselor may ask your permission to get information about you from other sources in order to determine if you are eligible for services. Your counselor must determine if you are eligible for services within 60 days of your application.

If documentation of your disability is not available, or is out of date, then the VR agency may pay for you to have an assessment by a medical professional, psychologist, psychiatrist, or other appropriate entity.

5. If I am **ELIGIBLE** for services, what will happen next?

You and your counselor will **work together** to figure out what services you will need to reach your employment goals. Typically, you and your counselor will:

- ▶ Explore your interests, skills, experiences and support needs
- ▶ Decide on your employment goals
- ▶ Develop an Individual Plan for Employment to help you reach your employment goals

6. What is an **Individual Plan for Employment (IPE)**?

Each person is unique and therefore requires an individualized approach to reach their employment goal. You and your counselor will work together to establish your goal and identify the services that are necessary for you to achieve your goal. You may choose from a variety of different services and different ways the services can be provided. The following is a list of many of the services, that you might receive during the employment planning stage:

- ▶ Vocational counseling and guidance
- ▶ Job placement assistance
- ▶ College or vocational training
- ▶ Supported employment services
- ▶ Skill training
- ▶ Job coaching or tutoring
- ▶ Transportation
- ▶ Interpreter services for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing
- ▶ Assistance with school to work transition
- ▶ Reader services for individuals who are blind
- ▶ Assistive and rehabilitation technology services
- ▶ Referral services
- ▶ Support, advocacy, and follow-up services for at least 90 days following job placement

Services may be provided directly by your VR counselor, coordinated with other services, or purchased by the VR agency on your behalf. Purchasing services means VR pays another agency or organization to provide you with services. For example, VR may pay for skill training or for a community employment agency to work with you.

7. Is the IPE IMPORTANT?

Yes! **Take your Individual Plan for Employment seriously.** The IPE is your map for meeting your employment goal. Be specific when developing it. Making weekly or monthly "to do" lists is an effective way to track your steps and mark progress. Frequently it takes time to meet your goals. Your IPE may need to be revised to reflect changes in your goals. You should discuss this with your counselor.

8. What are community rehabilitation provider services?

Vocational rehabilitation agencies frequently purchase services from community rehabilitation providers (CRPs). These agencies are **often able to provide more intensive services** than typically provided directly by VR counselors. Your IPE may state that you will work with a CRP for more intensive employment services or training. You should be given a choice of providers and an opportunity to visit each one before deciding which one is best for you. If you decide to use the CRP's services, the staff there will work with your VR counselor and keep them informed. Take these resources seriously. Work on your goals with your CRP counselor or employment specialist. If you are not happy with the services provided by the CRP, you may always return to your VR counselor and ask to change providers.

9. What SHOULD I EXPECT from the services I receive from VR?

You should expect **respect for your choices and support in making decisions.** You should also expect individualized services that are tailored to your specific goals. This means that VR will work with you to identify, search, and apply for jobs or educational opportunities leading to jobs that match your employment goals. You should know that VR does not have a ready-made pool of available jobs that you can automatically fit into, but they help with the job search process.

10. What is MY ROLE in working with VR?

There are **many things that you can do** to work effectively with your VR counselor.

- ▶ Become familiar with the range of services VR offers.
- ▶ Understand that participating in VR services involves going through multiple steps. Work with your counselor to identify the steps you will need to take and what will happen at each step in the process.
- ▶ Be as clear as possible about what help or tools you think you need to reach your goals.
- ▶ Participate actively in creating your IPE.
- ▶ Read your VR agency's handbook for consumers. This is given out at orientation and can often be found by visiting your VR agency's website.
- ▶ Ask questions, and listen to the answers.
- ▶ Stay in contact with your counselor throughout the process.

It is important to show as much initiative as possible!

Finding a job is hard work. You should spend a lot of your own time on your job search and use many different methods. For instance, go to a One-Stop Career Center or college career center to use their services, attend job fairs to practice interview skills, network in your community to discover who may be hiring, and join employment-focused support groups. Ask your VR counselor about some of these local employment resources.

11. How should I PREPARE FOR MEETINGS with my counselor?

Each time you meet with your VR counselor, you should:

- ▶ Be prepared with **updates and questions**. You are your own best advocate. It is good practice to tell your counselor the things you are doing on your own, including both challenges and successes. Also ask for ideas on how to build on all your experience.
- ▶ Be prepared to **talk openly** with your counselor about your employment goal, and listen to suggestions. Providing information about your employment history and goals will help your counselor provide you with services that are right for you.
- ▶ Set **small goals** at each meeting that you can accomplish by the next one.
- ▶ Prepare yourself for each meeting **as if you were going to meet with a potential employer**. The more you practice these skills, the easier they will become.
- ▶ Keep appointments and **be punctual**. If you need to cancel, give as much notice as possible. If you are late, understand that your counselor may have another meeting after yours, so you will get less time.
- ▶ **Dress nicely** for the meeting. Be clean and neat.
- ▶ Bring with you **any materials you are working on**, such as a resume, job postings, school application, or cover letter.
- ▶ Bring a **pen and notepaper**, and **a calendar** if possible.
- ▶ Bring a **list of questions** and/or requests you may have.

12. Will my counselor HELP ME TO KEEP MY JOB after I get one?

You and your counselor may **identify services that you may need** to keep your job. These services may be provided directly by your counselor or by a provider agency. You may also be eligible to receive post-employment services at any point during the three years following job placement, even if your case has been closed. These services are short-term and directly related to helping you keep your job, and they must be consistent with your original goal on the IPE.

13. Can I use the VR system if I am ALREADY RECEIVING SERVICES from another state or private agency?

Yes. Even if you are receiving services from another state or private agency, you can receive services from your state VR agency. **VR may be able to provide or fund services that you do not already receive**. If you are receiving services from more than one agency it is important to let your VR counselor know this and talk about how your services will be coordinated. You will want to work with the agencies to make sure that the services you receive complement each other and that you and your team are working together toward the same goals.

14. How do I FIND a VR office NEAR ME?

You can **find the location of the nearest office on the internet** at <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/sbses/vocrehab.htm> or www.nchrtm.okstate.edu/resources/agencies.html. You can also look in the employment or disability listings in the government section (blue section) of the phone book.

Remember, in many states a separate office offers services for people who are blind through their state division for the blind. Contact your local VR office to find out if there is a separate office that serves people who are blind.

15. If there is MORE THAN ONE VR office in my area, which one should I go to?

While VR offices are generally assigned to serve people in specific cities and towns, **you may use whichever office is most convenient** and accessible for you. You do not need to use the one that is in your town or closest to your home.

16. May I use more than one VR office at a time?

No. You may only receive services from one VR office at a time.

17. What if I am UNHAPPY with the services I receive at VR or the CRP?

If you are dissatisfied with the services you have received, try to think of the reasons why you are unhappy. For example, is it because you have not found a job? Have you received the services you asked for? Or do you feel that your counselor is not listening to you? Discuss your concerns with your counselor and ask for suggestions. If you remain dissatisfied, you may ask to speak with your counselor's supervisor or the office director. You may also request a new counselor if you feel you cannot work things out with your current one. But **start with honest communication and request what you want and need.** If, after trying to work the issues out with your counselor and the supervisor, difficulties with services persist, you can contact your local Client Assistance Program.

18. What is the Client Assistance Program (CAP)?

CAPs exist in every state. **They provide advocacy and information for individuals applying for or being served by VR.** If you are having problems with VR that you have not been able to work out with staff in your local VR office the CAP may be helpful to you. To find out more about CAP procedures, contact your local VR office and ask about their CAP services, or call the CAP program directly. You should receive information about CAP during your orientation to VR.

Melissa—A New Career Path

After graduating from high school ten years ago, Melissa worked as a child care worker. Though she enjoyed working with children, she found the job a bit stressful due to her significant learning disability. About one year ago, Melissa injured her neck in a car accident and was eventually laid off from her job since she could not lift the children anymore. After a year of unemployment, her mother suggested that she contact her local VR office for help deciding upon a new career. At first Melissa was hesitant, since she had used VR services back when she first graduated from high school and had not found them to be very helpful. After thinking it over, she decided to give it a try and called the local VR office.

Melissa attended the orientation and thought the services there would be helpful for her. A few weeks later she met with Linda, a vocational counselor. Linda worked with Melissa to help her decide what career path she would like to try next. The two of them met a few times and talked about Melissa's education, past jobs, and interests. Melissa then completed a series of vocational assessment tests, which helped her learn more about her strengths and skills. After the assessments and meetings, Linda and Melissa came to the conclusion that a job as a medical records clerk would be a great fit. Together they came up with an Individual Plan for Employment that included going to the local community college and taking a certificate program in medical records. With help from Linda, Melissa is currently enrolled in the program and is gaining the skills she needs to find her next job.

17. What should I do if I cannot get services I need right away?

Sometimes more people need VR services than the state agency can serve. When this happens you may not be able to receive services right away. When you complete an application for services, ask how long the review process takes and how long it will take for you to begin receiving services.

Visit your state's VR website and see if there is any information that would be helpful, including a guide or handbook on services. Visit other public centers where you can access free employment and information services like a One-Stop Career Center, library, or college career center. You can find a One-Stop Career Center online at www.servicelocator.org/nearest_onestop.asp.

18. Does VR offer any OTHER SERVICES for people with disabilities?

The agency in your state that provides VR services may also provide other services for people with disabilities. Contact your state agency to learn about the range of services that may be offered.

Susan—Pursues her First Job

Getting Started

Susan has a mental illness and lives in a public housing development in a large city. Since graduating from high school five years ago, she has attended a clubhouse—a program for individuals with mental illness. Recently, Susan decided that she would like to get a job in her community. She talked with her therapist as well as a clubhouse staff member. They recommended that Susan contact the state VR agency to see if she would be eligible for their services.

Susan called her local office and was given an appointment to meet with a VR counselor, Jim. She completed an application during this meeting and some time later received a letter saying she was found eligible for services. When she met with Jim again, he requested permission from Susan to talk with staff at the clubhouse, her therapist, her caseworker at the Department of Mental Health, and her family. Jim explained to Susan that with input from people who knew her well, he could help her develop the best Individual Plan for Employment possible.

The IPE

Jim and Susan worked together to develop a good job. Together they came up with a plan for the services Susan would need. The VR agency agreed to fund job placement services for Susan along with some job coaching and support services as she began her job. Susan said she felt bad when she had too much time alone, so everyone agreed that it might be best for Susan to continue attending the clubhouse when she was not out looking for a job.

Selecting a Provider

Jim told Susan that she could get her job placement services from a private agency called a community rehabilitation provider. He gave her a list of three to visit. She visited and chose one she thought would be best for her.

Starting a Job

After working with a job placement specialist at the provider agency for four months, Susan was offered a full-time clerical assistant position with a local real estate company. When she began her new job a job coach went with her to help her get the accommodations she needed. He also helped her learn her job by providing one-to-one instruction. After a week the job coach was needed less and began to visit the worksite less frequently. Susan, the employer, and the job coach decided a weekly check-in by phone with the employer would be helpful. Susan also made plans to meet with her job coach once a week after work for additional support.

Keeping the Job

Susan continued to meet with Jim every six weeks. At these meetings they reviewed the public benefits that Susan was receiving to make sure she understood the changes that would result from her increase in earnings. Additionally, he and the staff at the clubhouse began to help Susan make plans to stay in touch with her friends there. Jim made sure that all of Susan's services were coordinated well, and he was there to listen to Susan's concerns. After she worked for six months, Susan found that she no longer required any services from VR, and her case was closed. She continues to attend social events at the clubhouse when they fit in her schedule and she gets informal support on work issues as they arise from staff and peers there. She also meets with her therapist after work.

Tips on Making VR Work from People Who Found Jobs Through the Program

Evaluate your expectations

Pat: "VR will not hand you a job. Nobody is ever handed a job. Expect to be given resources, advice and help on making connections. You must get involved in your job search."

Jose: "Working takes a lot of effort and finding a job takes just as much work-if not more. Be prepared!"

Ask questions

Juanita: "When I first went to the VR office, I was given a lot of forms and they asked a lot of questions. I was shy and did not say much even when I did not understand some things. I became frustrated and told a friend what had happened. She suggested I write down a list of questions to ask at my next meeting. I did this and I think my VR counselor and I understood each other better."

Advocate for yourself

Tom: "I had a VR counselor that insisted I apply for jobs that seemed beneath my qualifications and were a poor match for my skills. In fact, my counselor submitted my resume to such positions without telling me. When I tried to tell my counselor how I felt, there was no response. After some thought, I approached my counselor's supervisor. It was decided that another counselor would be assigned to me. I worked better with this new counselor and got a job in six months!"

Don't give up

Maria: "It can take from weeks to years to find a job, but those who stick with the program do the best. I once spent two years working on a job search while using VR services. Many times I wanted to give up. Finally, I was offered four different positions in one week! I chose one and have been employed ever since. I am pursuing my career!"

Try new approaches

Tasha: "When my VR counselor first advised me to ask people I knew about employment opportunities, I did not want to. I was used to looking in the newspaper for job openings. Eventually I found a job, but I got it after I started asking people I knew about jobs. I also started using other sources such as the One-Stop Career Center in my area."

Talk to your peers

Mohammad: "When I went to VR, I felt very alone. I was upset because I did not have a job. I really kept to myself except for talking to my counselor. One day my counselor suggested that I join the job seekers group. I thought it would not be for me since I had worked a lot in my past. I went and discovered that everybody had his own story. I got tips from them on what worked and did not work, different types of jobs and different resources that I would never had known about. We all found jobs. Some of us are still in touch."

Massachusetts Resources

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MA state VR agency)

Administrative Offices
Fort Point Place Suite 600
27 Wormwood Street
Boston, MA 02210-1616

MRC main information numbers:
800/245-6543 (voice/TTY) or 617/204-3600
(617) 727-1354 (fax)
www.state.ma.us/mrc

Vocational Rehabilitation Division

Phone: 800/245-6543 (voice/TTY) or (617) 204-3600
www.state.ma.us/mrc/vr

Statewide Employment Services

Phone: 617/204-3854
www.state.ma.us/mrc/ses/indexma.htm

Independent Living Division

Consumer Involvement, Independent Living Centers, Turning 22, Housing, and Supported Living programs: 800/245-6543 (voice/TTY) or 617/204-3851
Protective Services program: 508/823-2874 (phone) or 508/823-5186 (fax)
Homecare and Personal Care Assistance programs: 617/204-3853

Statewide Head Injury Program (SHIP):

617/204-3852

Disability Determination Services Division

Phone: 800/422-7200 (toll-free within Massachusetts)

Massachusetts Commission for the Blind

48 Boylston Street
Boston, MA 02116
Phone: 617/727-5550
Fax: 617/626-7685

Massachusetts Office of Disability, Client Assistance Program (CAP)

One Ashburton Place, Room 1305
Boston, MA 02108
Phone: 800/422-7200 or 617/727-7440

National Resources

Vocational Rehabilitation State Offices (from the Job Accommodation Network)

<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/sbses/vocrehab.htm>

Rehabilitation Services Administration

www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/IRSA/About/

General Disability Resources

www.disability.gov

Social Security Administration

www.socialsecurity.gov

Independent Living Centers

www.ilru.org/jump1.htm

For more information, contact:

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