



VR Counselor Huddles: Providing Counseling and Guidance Remotely

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INTRODUCTION

In late 2019 or early 2020, a novel coronavirus causing severe respiratory symptoms began spreading in the United States. The illness caused by the virus became known as COVID-19. A national emergency was declared in March 2020, and states began implementing orders to stay at home and practice social distancing. Businesses closed, unemployment soared, and health care systems became overwhelmed. America's workforce transformed the way they worked and the way we live our lives changed dramatically. Due to this context, state vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies closed their offices and began providing services remotely, forcing VR counselors to work from home and change the way they interact with their clients and co-workers.

In April and May 2020, the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) conducted five virtual "counselor huddles" with 106 VR counselors from 11¹ state VR agencies using the video conferencing platform Zoom. These events brought VR counselors from several agencies together to discuss how they are adapting to working remotely during the time of COVID-19, what strategies they've found helpful, and what practices and tools they expect to keep using after the pandemic ends.

This brief summarizes the discussions around providing quality counseling services remotely.

Other briefs in this six-part VR Counselor Huddle series:

- ▶ Providing Job Search Assistance Remotely
- ▶ Accessing Virtual Mental Health Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing Transition Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing VR Services Remotely
- ▶ Agencies for the Blind Providing Services Remotely

¹ Participating State VR Agencies: Arizona Vocational Rehabilitation, Maine Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, Michigan Services for the Blind, Minnesota Rehabilitation Services, Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation, New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, New Hampshire Vocational Rehabilitation, Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services, Oregon Commission for the Blind, Washington Services for the Blind

DISCUSSION

Rehabilitation counselors from these agencies identified advantages and disadvantages in providing counseling and guidance remotely. They have encountered obstacles such as inequity in access to technology; lack of responsiveness from clients; difficulty acquiring signatures; medical records, and transcripts; diminished rapport; and lack of in-office camaraderie.

Despite these challenges, counselors noted advantages to working remotely. These included accessibility of client case-management systems, availability of family members (for transition cases), more counseling time with clients, and flexible methods of communicating.

The majority of the counselors reported the following observations:

Client Accessibility

Counselors felt that many of their clients were more open and willing to receive counseling around their circumstances, anxieties, and service needs. Others shared that some clients withdrew or became less available, leading to counselors' concerns about their well-being.

Family Involvement

Transition counselors reported finding it easier to have family involvement with their clients due to more people being home and parents being eager for suggestions on how to help their youth.

Online Assessments and Inventories

Counselors were keenly interested in resources that allowed for assessments and inventories that could be completed by clients online, with the results available or shared with them for counseling and planning.

Job Readiness

Similarly, counselors were both eager to share and interested to hear about resources that could be used online or virtually to assist clients in achieving job readiness. Tools for resume development, interview skills, and job retention skills were highlighted.



Documentation

Participating counselors reported that remote work was a great opportunity to update client records. The remote accessibility of client/case-management systems were mentioned on multiple occasions, and counselors shared putting considerable time into client record accuracy and completeness.

The New Normal

There was consensus among the counselors that the remote work conditions brought about as a result of the COVID-19 have potential, when the pandemic resolves, to result in a new normal: a hybrid work situation that incorporates elements of remote and in-office work settings to serve clients most productively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Organize the home office, separating it as much as possible from your living space.
2. Establish a consistent schedule/routine for completing work tasks, activities, and duties.
3. Dress for work. For example, if your agency has a business casual dress code, wear those clothes when working from home.
4. Separate your work time from your personal time. Take a walk, or even a drive, before and after work to mark the beginning and end of the workday.
5. Make sure you move throughout the day. Take stretch breaks and mindfulness breaks. Play with the kids or pets!
6. In addition to those noted in the resources section below, complete additional research online for other tools and resources that can be employed in counseling with clients.

RESOURCES

Inventories and Assessments

- ▶ [Career One Stop](#) is a U.S. DOL website with a self-assessment area for exploring careers. The site is user friendly, and contains assessments in the areas of interest, skills, and work values. The site also provides for the assessment results to be used to guide career planning.
- ▶ The [O*NET Interest Profiler](#) can help clients determine their interests and how they relate to the world of work. Results can also help them decide what kind of work they might want to explore.
- ▶ The [Balance Careers](#) site provides links to about one dozen free online career aptitude and career assessments.
- ▶ [PA Career Zone](#) and [Utah Futures](#) are state-based online tools with assessments included. Highlighted here are resources from Pennsylvania and Utah. You may find that your state has a similar site, but if not, these are still usable.

Resume/Cover Letter Development

- ▶ [Rescue My Resumes](#) is a free resume builder with multiple templates and resume formats.
- ▶ [Zety](#) is a free resume builder with multiple templates. It provides ready-to-use suggestions to help with professional design. It also has a tutorial on writing an [effective cover letter](#), as well as templates.

Job Readiness

- ▶ The [Snagajob](#) and [Job Seekers](#) channels on YouTube host videos related to job readiness, including resumes, online applications, job interviewing, and what employers are looking for. The videos are generally 3-5 minutes long, allowing for them to be included in counseling sessions on this topic.



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