



VR Counselor Huddles:

Agencies for the Blind Providing Services 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 focuses on observations from the VR agencies for the blind that participated in the huddles.

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

- ▶ Providing Job Search Assistance Remotely
- ▶ Accessing Virtual Mental Health Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing Counseling and Guidance Remotely
- ▶ Providing Transition Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing VR 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

Many consumers receiving VR services also receive specialized training due to their vision loss. This may include braille instruction, orientation and mobility training, and assistive technology training. Agencies for the blind traditionally provide pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) during the summer months through camps where skills are taught and employment exploration is emphasized.

At first counselors experienced difficulty in adapting to remote service provision. Some counselors, some of whom are blind or visually impaired themselves, lacked the appropriate equipment or environment to work from home. Administrative responsibilities needed to be adapted, such as case notes, gaining signatures from consumers and supervisors, and keeping in touch with the agency's administration.

Counselors discussed the various types of teleconferencing technology being used and their accessibility. Access to coworkers for discussion and social interactions did not occur as frequently as in the office environment, although some agencies were conducting weekly counselor meetings. Counselors felt that more emphasis needed to be made to ensure peer-to-peer conversation occurred regarding consumer services.

Counselors noted that they were able to provide guidance and counseling remotely by phone or by video conferencing, but difficulties were experienced if the consumer did not have access to technology. Deliveries of assistive technology and computer equipment had been postponed.

The provision of blindness skills training appeared to be the greatest challenge. Consumers often did not have the equipment or the knowledge to receive training on activities of daily living or Assistive Technology (A/T), or they were at the beginning of their training, which required a more hands-on technique. Orientation & mobility training presented the most difficulties, particularly with inexperienced travelers. Low vision and computer A/T assessments were difficult. A deaf/blind counselor noted that providing services to their consumers was especially difficult since many consumers



required American Sign Language or tactual communication. Gaining the assistance of a family member was noted as a possible solution.

Many consumers who lost employment due to the pandemic feared that their position would not be available in the near future or would be eliminated. Businesses were not available to contact regarding placement and internships. As a result of the pandemic, many summer programs were cancelled. Virtual summer trainings were developed to adapt the Pre-ETS trainings for students through video conferencing and online activities.

Counselors found it difficult to receive vision reports needed to determine eligibility from doctor offices which had closed due to the virus, delaying eligibility determinations. On a positive note, since travelling time was eliminated, counselors found that they could provide more counseling than usual. Transition counselors noted that since schools were closed, the consumers were more available and conversations often included their parents/guardians.

Some counselors noted that they would prefer to work remotely as much as possible after the restrictions are lifted. Two reasons were noted: increased efficiency when working from home, and fear of being infected with COVID-19 due to compromised health conditions.

The most significant theme was the use of technology to provide trainings and counseling to consumers virtually. However, some consumers, especially at the beginning of their trainings, still required in-person visits. With more counselors accessing their agency's information systems, and the ability to reach more consumers by eliminating travel time, counselors might find it more efficient to retain some aspects of these virtual services in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As businesses use virtual techniques to reach customers, counselors can use the same techniques to communicate with businesses. Also, as comfort with and access to technology continue to increase, more opportunities to work from home might become available for agency consumers.

RESOURCES

- ▶ The [American Council for the Blind](#) provides virtual education instruction from the American Foundation for the Blind and instruction on conducting virtual meetings.
- ▶ [American Foundation for the Blind](#) provides career information and other resources pertaining to general career opportunities for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Counselors can access the *Journal for Visual Impairment and Blindness* digitally.
- ▶ [American Printing House](#) provides educational resources such as books and equipment, virtual blindness-related summer camps, webinars, and tips on how to work at home. Their Accessibility Hub provides information on accessibility tips to include documents and files.
- ▶ [ExploreVR offers a range of VR research, related data, and tools for planning, evaluation, and decision-making. It contains toolkits on topics such as business engagement, employer supports, labor market information, customized training, and paid work experiences.](#)
- ▶ The [Hadley School](#) provides instructional skills training for low-vision and blind students. There are also programs designed for parents and family members. In addition, the [Forsythe Center](#) provides programs for business and entrepreneurs.
- ▶ The [National Association of Blind Merchants](#) has COVID-19 related information related to the Randolph-Sheppard vendors.
- ▶ The [National Federation for the Blind](#) provides accessible COVID-19 resources including information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, individual state information, remote education techniques, virtual activities such as job fairs, virtual Pre-ETS activities and accessible Zoom instructions. Free resources from A/T providers can be found on the site. In addition, state-by-state affiliates' virtual activities are listed.
- ▶ The [Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center](#), in addition to offering COVID-19 resources for VR services in general, also provides techniques for providing blindness-related services such as A/T training, activities of daily living, braille, and orientation & mobility training from the Nebraska Commission for the Blind and the Iowa Department for the Blind.



Review VR is a publication of ExploreVR, the data hub for a group of vocational rehabilitation research projects at the Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI) at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

ExploreVR is funded in part by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) and the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of the US Department of Education, grant #H133B070001 and grant #H133B120002.

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www.ExploreVR.org | www.CommunityInclusion.org