Review VR

VR Counselor Huddles: Providing Transition Services Remotely

By Linda Mock, Julisa Cully, Vito DeSantis, Cecilia Gandolfo, Russell Thelin

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 11[1] 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 shared by counselors about ways to support youth as they transition from high school to postsecondary life.

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 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

A number of themes emerged in the huddles around transition services for youth. On the positive side, youth and their parents were more easily available since many family members were at home. Youth also are very comfortable with computers, cell phones, and apps and enjoy communicating virtually, and there are a lot of good online tools for career exploration.

On the other hand, work-based learning experiences were essentially brought to a halt by the stay-at-home orders, so some counselors were using virtual job shadows, doing telephone informational interviews, or delaying these services. Counselors also expressed concerns about equitable access to technology for all students. Some clients experienced high anxiety around social isolation and were reaching out to their counselors for support more frequently than usual.

Family engagement

Transition counselors found that it was easier to get family involvement with state-directed stay-at-home orders in place, schools being closed, and many adults working from home. All these factors made it easier to reach family members by phone or on virtual platforms.

Parents were eager for suggestions on how to help their youth stay engaged and safe through this time. Some counselors encouraged parents to use this extra time at home together to focus on helping their youth develop independent living skills. For example, one counselor stated, "Show them how to do laundry, cook, encourage them…you're doing great!"

Counselors also developed a list of activities that parents can do with their youth around career exploration. Some counselors noted that students' attendance was better than when they were in school. Counselors generally discovered that they had a variety of ways to communicate and could match their methods to the client's preferences and situation.

Clients' comfort with virtual services

Counselors found that in most cases technology made remote work possible. Computers gave them access

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to their case management systems so they could continue to move clients through their system and document their cases.

The greatest challenge was to find ways to serve clients who had no, or limited, computer access. Students do not have equal access to technology and thus their access to virtual communication was not equitable. Socioeconomic factors affect what resources students have at home, including computers, smartphones, and reliable internet access. With schools, libraries, and even coffee shops with Wi-Fi closed, some students have no way to use the virtual tools available online. Students living in rural areas face the additional challenge of lacking reliable cell phone and internet service.

Counselors and their partners in education felt a strong obligation to ensure that students have access to their services, trying to find alternative means of participation for students without technology or reliable internet access. Some were creating packets with activities that were mailed to clients and followed up with telephone conversations or texts.

Youth who did have access to cell phones liked to text and engage through social media, if their counselors were allowed to use these types of communication in their agencies. Students with smartphones enjoy using apps like WhatsApp and FaceTime. Transition counselors noted that many youth prefer texts, apps, and video calls to voice calls. Use of Zoom was less common and new to youth, but they easily adapted to it, particularly enjoying opportunities to interact with classmates in group activities.

Work-based learning experiences

In general, transition students were unable to do face-to-face work-based learning activities during COVID-19. Many community rehabilitation programs were not operating and students and their families were fearful of going out into the community. Many clients were opting to wait for restrictions to be lifted before contacting local businesses, even for telephone interactions like informational interviews.

Not having actual work-based learning opportunities has been a roadblock, but most counselors felt that they were able to find alternative ways to keep their clients moving forward on their plans. Counselors discovered virtual assessment and career exploration tools they hadn't previously used. Many used this time away from school to focus on career exploration activities and job seeking skills, using a variety of virtual tools to help students identify their career interests. They were also able to coordinate these activities with their educational partners.

Student isolation

Social distancing, particularly not having schools in session, created social isolation for students. This may well be part of the reason that students were reaching out to their counselors more. Teenagers long to be with their friends and need peer interaction. Some counselors connected with school personnel to help students find affiliative groups to connect with virtually. Others were seeking mental health services to help students address their anxiety and find ways to not become socially isolated when practicing social distancing.

Adaptability and creativity

Counselors were forced into a dramatic change in the way they do their work and adapted quickly. Overnight they started telecommuting, setting up home offices and providing services virtually. They figured out how to do administrative tasks differently, how to communicate effectively, and how to keep their clients moving forward with their plans during a pandemic. They developed new time management skills and many learned how to create a work/life balance while homeschooling their children and working from home.

One counselor summed it up saying, "I love learning how to be professionally disciplined in a different context. Learning to work from home has built confidence in my skill set." They learned how to be flexible about the way they work and their work schedule, and took advantage of this opportunity to learn about new resources and techniques. They discovered online tools that they plan to continue to use in the "new normal" after the pandemic is behind us.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Continue to use multiple, flexible communication methods.** Counselors like the flexibility of using various communication modes to match the client's needs and abilities. They hope that this flexibility will be part of our "new normal" once COVID-19 is over. Counselors who previously weren't allowed to text with clients hope that they can continue these alternative methods, which are particularly effective with youth.

2. **Maintain flexible/hybrid work schedules.** Counselors liked having the ability to flex their work schedules and hope they can continue to have hybrid work: working both in the office and from their homes.

3. **Continue to use online tools.** Counselor plan to continue to use the online tools they've identified and hope that their agencies will invest in more virtual tools for career exploration.

RESOURCES

Online Assessment Tools

▶ 123 Test is a work value inventory measuring 14 career values, such as autonomy, creativity, and structure. This tool helps identify what truly motivates someone, helping them make good career choices that lead to success and happiness.

▶ Balance Careers is a career aptitude test designed to narrow down job choices and assist in identifying a career path compatibility with interests, skills, values, and personality.

▶ Career Scope is a subscription-based career assessment and reporting system designed to help partners meet the standards of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. It is a comprehensive tool that measures both aptitude and interest to inform the career and educational planning process.

▶ Career One Stop is the U.S. Department of Labor resource for career exploration, training, and jobs.

▶ Live Career offers career tools including a resume builder, customized cover letters, and job search tools and applications.

▶ My Next Move is an O*NET resource that helps identify interests and how they relate to the world of work. It guides students as they decide what kinds of careers they want to explore.

Career Exploration Tools

▶ Education Planner is a planning tool to help students and their parents make decisions about colleges and careers, helping them prepare for life after high school. It helps students discover their interests and explore their options.

▶ Pennsylvania Career Zone is a free planning tool including an assessment of interests, researching what your choices entail, developing a budget to support your plan, and documenting your plan.

General Resources

▶ Education Plus is full of online learning resources for educators and parents like PBSKids.org and metmuseumkids.org.

▶ 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 ICI at UMass Boston has created a webpage to guide professionals, individuals with disabilities, and families through the COVID-19 pandemic. The site shares brief publications on providing day and employment services and supporting community life engagement. Sample topics include using technology, providing quality services remotely, and a guide for informed decision-making.

▶ The Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center pre-employment transition services list identifies free online resources available for the virtual delivery of transition services.

▶ The National Technical Assistance Center on Transition provides resources and guidance on transition planning, graduation, post-school success, and data analysis and use.

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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.

For more information, please email **knowledgetranslation@umb.edu**

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