Review VR
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Evaluation Brief Series

# Stories from Nebraska VR Career Pathways Advancement Project 2.0 Participants

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## Background

Beginning in 2015, ICI at UMass Boston has been the independent evaluator of the Nebraska Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Career Pathways Advancement Project (CPAP). Nebraska VR first piloted the CPAP model as one of four state VR agency grantees funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to carry out a 5-year Career Pathways for Individuals with Disabilities demonstration project. In 2021, Nebraska VR was awarded a second model demonstration grant funded by the RSA to build on and expand the CPAP model (known as "CPAP 2.0") for an additional five years.

For CPAP 2.0, Nebraska VR expanded both the target population and the number of targeted industries and businesses across the state. By expanding the target population and industries, Nebraska has been able to test the project's applicability to a broader range of job seekers who reflect the population Nebraska VR serves.

## Introduction

One of the components of the evaluation process includes qualitative interviews with current CPAP 2.0 clients. These interviews aim to gather the perspectives and experiences of CPAP 2.0 clients on what motivates them to participate, what services and supports they receive, and the career advancement process. You can read the preliminary findings from those interviews in What do CPAP 2.0 participants say about the Program?

Since the project started, the ICI evaluation team has been interviewing new CPAP 2.0 participants through an open enrollment process. Additionally, the team has been reaching out to past interviewees to follow along their journey in the CPAP 2.0 process.

These follow-up interviews enable the evaluators to better understand the realities and obstacles participants encounter as they pursue their goals, how the program is helping, and where participants have wanted more assistance. In this brief, we further explore aspects of career advancement alongside the challenges and setbacks CPAP 2.0 participants have experienced.

In some cases, participants described successfully overcoming obstacles identified during the follow-up interviews. In others, participants highlighted the realities of living with disabilities and the ways in which these experiences affect their career goals, plans, and overall trajectory.

In the following case examples, we share summaries of participants' stories. These case studies provide a more detailed understanding of some interviewees' experiences with the CPAP 2.0. Please note that the quotations in this section are directly from the participants we interviewed, with some light editing for clarity or to protect identities.

## Case Examples

### Interviewee A

Interviewee A, a hospital employee, described the help they received enrolling in classes at a local community college. They also received financial help with job-related expenses, such as purchasing appropriate attire and certification fees. Despite some challenges with the classes they took, Interviewee A reported positive outcomes in their current job and greater optimism about potential for career advancement.

The following quote highlights how Interviewee A gained confidence at work after learning new skills from the course material.

> *"And I no longer feel remedial in any of those areas. I would say those were four areas...where it was a barrier to my doing my job well and advancing it that no longer is. And so that's a complete victory."*

Interviewee A was extremely enthusiastic about the support they received from their counselor.

> *"Can't say enough things about [my counselor]. She was looking for opportunities to help. She called. She texts....And like I said, she was patient, helpful. We worked through texts; we sent voicemails back and forth."*

Interviewee A's new found confidence has prepared them to apply for better shifts and a promotion if one becomes available.

The case of Interviewee A illustrates how support from their CPAP 2.0 counselor and the project enhanced the participant's resilience, enabling them to navigate challenges they encountered during the course. Ultimately, their participation in the program helped Interviewee A achieve greater success in their career pathway and increased confidence in their employment.

### Interviewee B

Interviewee B entered CPAP 2.0 after facing significant barriers to career advancement. Although they held a college degree, health-related challenges prevented them from working in their degree field. Prior to enrolling in training, they had worked in a series of lower-paying jobs and were seeking greater financial stability. At the time CPAP 2.0 contacted them, Interviewee B was already enrolled in technical training at a community college. They described CPAP 2.0 as providing support that complemented the college's services, particularly by helping them navigate program requirements and complete paperwork.

During the follow-up interview, Interviewee B reported a change in their educational direction. A required course in their original program was not a good fit given their physical disabilities, leading them to pursue an associate degree in an IT-related field instead. However, after beginning the new coursework, Interviewee B experienced a mental health crisis that interfered with their ability to continue. As a result, they were unable to complete their classes and were informed that certain CPAP 2.0-funded supports could resume once they re-established satisfactory academic progress, a process that would take at least one academic quarter.

Despite these setbacks, Interviewee B did not place responsibility on the program. They acknowledged that their circumstances had involved a series of disruptions and changes that made consistent progress difficult:

> *"Yeah. In CPAP's defense here, I haven't done a whole lot since I've been there. Everything is, 'Well, I was going to do this, then I was going to do that, now I'm doing this, but oh, guess what? They cancelled a class. Guess what? I had to drop classes.' So, I mean, I can't really hold everything against them."*

Approximately four months later, Interviewee B reported experiencing another mental health crisis and had decided to leave school entirely. Without enrollment in school, they also chose to withdraw from CPAP 2.0. Although their counselor offered to continue providing services, Interviewee B declined, explaining that they had decided to focus on employment and meeting immediate financial obligations: "just to concentrate on work, pay bills."

Even after ending their participation, Interviewee B expressed appreciation for CPAP 2.0 and did not believe the program or staff were responsible for the outcome. Rather, they viewed their challenges as extending beyond the scope of what a career advancement program could reasonably address:

> ***"I don't think CPAP could have done anything to help me. And I don't think they did anything wrong. I don't think they're cut out to deal with this. And this is seriously bad timing for this to happen for me. I was doing pretty well. And then things changed."***

The case of Interviewee B highlights a situation in which the immediate demands of a mental health crisis and the need to maintain daily living responsibilities competed with longer-term career advancement goals. By the time of the third interview, these competing priorities had resulted in career advancement goals being placed on hold.

While the participant's future plans remain uncertain, the interview suggests that the participant developed a greater awareness of available career advancement opportunities and appeared more open to re-engaging with VR services when circumstances in their life become more stable.

## Interviewee C

Interviewee C decided to go back to school for nursing and received help from CPAP 2.0 first with tuition and then with certification fees. In the follow-up interview a little over a year later, Interviewee C had completed their degree and was working as nurse in their chosen specialty. Interviewee C described their career advancement process as integrating their past experience in other hospital departments with the training they received through CPAP 2.0 to be an effective nurse.

> ***"So, as I transition from lab to [patient care], I've learned a lot. I've taken that experience moving it forward.... 'How can I use this to help my [patient]?' I feel like just learning those small tips and tricks that I learned in the lab and moving it forward."***

When Interviewee C started school, they had some challenges. They had struggled with school in the past and were unable to complete at least one past training program. This time, they were more assertive about asking for accommodations, which enabled them to perform better. They also had challenges balancing education and family and eventually needed to change to part-time. Once they developed a routine and moved through the program, their confidence increased, which impacted their family as well, showing their children that "you can do anything that you put your mind to."

> ***"I proved to myself that I can do this and I can become a nurse.... I was practicing on my daughters, and they loved it... And so, on one of my daughter's papers it said, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' And it said, 'I want to be a nurse like my mom.' And I was like, 'Aww!' So, I think in a whole aspect that this has drove me to be better for the fact that I do have little ones that are watching me."***

The case of Interviewee C exemplifies how significant life changes that initially impede career advancement may later become a source of motivation for pursuing those same goals. In this case, the addition of two young children to the participant's family introduced new responsibilities that

complicated the pursuit of career advancement opportunities. However, over time, the desire to serve as a role model for their children emerged as a motivating factor in re-engaging with and ultimately completing the process.

Taken together, these three cases paint a nuanced picture of the challenges and complexities of career advancement for people with disabilities. These narratives illustrate that career advancement is rarely a linear process; rather, individuals may encounter evolving barriers and shifting circumstances over time. Collectively, these cases underscore the importance of participant resilience in navigating obstacles, using available supports and resources, and advocating for continued growth and advancement in their careers.

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**VISIT:** Nebraska VR's CPAP website to learn more about this effort.

**ACCESS:** ICI's Career Pathways Toolkit

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