



VR Counselor Huddles: Providing VR 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 11 state VR agencies using the video conferencing platform Zoom (see box below for participating agencies). These events brought VR counselors from several agencies together to discuss how they are adapting to working remotely during the time of COVID-19. We asked them: How are you doing? What do you need? What do you want to share with your peers from other states?

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

Our objectives were to:

1. Provide VR counselors the opportunity to learn from each other, sharing strategies, methods, and tips that are helping them fulfill their professional responsibilities in this new environment.
2. Learn about the areas of need VR counselors have identified for providing services to their clients and for themselves professionally.
3. Identify things that ICI could provide to VR counselors to support and help them function optimally during this pandemic.

As this health crisis eventually ends, and the need for social distancing is reduced, there will remain key lessons learned through the COVID-19 experience. These lessons can, and likely will, shape the future of how VR services are delivered to its dual customers: individuals with disabilities and businesses.

In this publication, we provide a big-picture overview of what counselors shared. Other briefs in the series go into more detail about specific topics related to service provision during the pandemic:

- » **Providing Job Search Assistance Remotely**
- » **Accessing Virtual Mental Health Services Remotely**
- » **Providing Counseling and Guidance Remotely**
- » **Providing Transition Services Remotely**
- » **Agencies for the Blind Providing Services Remotely**



PROVIDING VR SERVICES

While most VR agencies have closed their offices and moved to providing services remotely, a few are keeping some offices open with minimal coverage for clients who need to meet in person. Many also have a designated staff member who goes to the offices to help with administrative tasks. All the VR counselors who participated in the huddles were working remotely. Three main aspects of providing VR services virtually emerged:

1. Adapting to virtual technology and working from home
2. Adjusting to social distancing
3. Adapting the work itself

ADAPTING TO VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGY AND WORKING FROM HOME

In general, VR counselors liked the flexibility and autonomy of working from home. VR case-management systems are accessible remotely, although some states don't have everything available electronically. The main issue brought up is the availability of medical records and student transcripts that have not been scanned into the system.

Most VR counselors had some familiarity with video conferencing platforms like Zoom and Teams, but are making much more use of that technology now. The use of instant messaging varies from agency to agency with different policies governing its use. However, the telephone continues to be the most common and accessible tool for communication with clients and is preferred by many. Referring to the use of technology, one counselor made the comment that "this has made VR enter the 21st century."

VR counselors with children at home face the additional challenge of home schooling and caring for their children while trying to work from home themselves. This is overwhelming at times. These counselors find they need to flex their schedules to attend to their children's care, frequently doing "split shifts" in which they trade off childcare with a spouse or partner, or designate certain hours for childcare and others for their VR work.

ADJUSTING TO SOCIAL DISTANCING

VR counseling has traditionally been done face to face, so providing it remotely has been a significant change. Interestingly, some counselors reported that they felt their clients are being more communicative with them now, and that clients are relying more on their counselor for emotional support around the anxiety

they're feeling. Because many individuals and family members are at home most of the time, it is easier to connect with clients and to get family engagement.

Counselors liked the ability to offer various forms of communication from telephone to video conferencing to instant messaging, and felt these options increased client choice. Nevertheless, they felt that communication with non-video options reduced their ability to read the client's responses, missing the cues they usually get from body language and facial expressions.

Many counselors expressed missing the social aspects of the workplace and experiencing feelings of isolation. All of the agencies participating in the huddles have virtual team meetings scheduled at least weekly, with frequent supervisory check-ins, mostly through video. Agencies have also created opportunities for social interaction with virtual coffee breaks, lunches, exercise, and happy hours to keep social distancing from becoming social isolation. Agency leadership and staffers are finding creative ways to address the stress and anxiety they are feeling and to connect with one another in new ways.

ADAPTING THE WORK ITSELF

VR counselors are now using different ways to communicate with their clients, largely dependent on the needs and capabilities of the client and access to technology. New processes are being developed for obtaining signatures, with options ranging from electronic solutions like DocuSign, to "snail mail," to case notes documenting client agreement.

New referrals are down, but counselors are moving forward with those they receive. Getting timely medical records is difficult due to the closure of many medical offices and this is impacting meeting the 60-day eligibility requirement. Counselors are using this time to focus on services that can be done remotely.

While some clients are obtaining employment, many are choosing to put their job search on hold until the stay-at-home orders end and businesses re-open. During this waiting period, counselors are supporting clients to develop their resumes and do research on jobs. Transition counselors are trying out virtual career exploration tools, like [Virtual Job Shadows](https://www.careeronestop.org), [Careeronestop.org](https://www.careeronestop.org), and [livecareer.com](https://www.livecareer.com), to keep youth engaged.

Counselors shared helpful strategies that they have identified:

- » Organize the home office, separating it as much as possible from your living space.
- » Establish a schedule/routine.
- » Dress for work.

- » 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.
- » Make sure you move throughout the day. Take stretch breaks and mindfulness breaks. Play with the kids or pets!

OBSERVATIONS

We received positive feedback from the counselors on the value of getting to talk with one another and share innovative strategies. Most of the counselors we talked with reported adapting well overall. They're learning to use virtual tools more effectively and are able to use their case management system remotely.

Some counselors felt that their clients are more open to communicating with them and coming to them for support around their anxieties and need for services. Clients are also seeking information about additional resources from their counselors and counselors are spending time learning about what is available. Due to the general high stress level of clients, counselors have their "therapist hat" on more than ever. They are learning to move at the pace of the consumer and be guided by what the person needs at this specific moment.

Transition counselors are finding that it's easier to get family involvement. More people than usual are at home and parents are eager for suggestions on how to help their youth safely through this time. Counselors are developing new time management skills and 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 the pandemic ends.

Counselors also shared the challenges they're experiencing. While some clients are still ready to move forward on their employment goals, many want to hold off until they feel safe returning to community activities and leaving home. This makes it harder for counselors to do the most central part of their job: helping people find fulfilling employment. Counselors also cited difficulties with obtaining electronic signatures, processing new referrals, and reaching out to businesses. Additionally, they noted inequities in access to technology for consumers, as well as pressures to return to face-to-face communication before it feels safe.

Most counselors are quickly learning to use new technologies for communication and are incorporating this technology readily. They see benefit in maintaining these new systems in the long term.

LOOKING FORWARD

Counselors expressed the desire to take the lessons they're learned during this pandemic and incorporate them into VR's new normal. They would like to use flexible methods of communication with clients and each other, moving away from requiring that interactions need to be face to face. They've discovered a myriad of effective online resources, from virtual job shadows to online assessments to texting apps, and plan to continue using them.

Many counselors found that working from home increased their productivity, especially eliminating commute time between client visits. They hope for increased flexibility in telecommuting, at least part of the time. A few can't wait to get back to the office for more support and social interaction, but are fearful of the health risks, to themselves and their clients, of doing this too quickly.

As the nation transitions out of this time of social distancing, counselors are optimistic that many businesses will be open to telecommuting, providing new opportunities for employment for VR clients, particularly those with transportation challenges.



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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