



## VR Counselor Huddles: Providing Job Search Assistance 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<sup>1</sup> 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 features ideas shared by counselors about providing VR clients with job search assistance and other supports to prepare them for employment.**

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

- ▶ Accessing Virtual Mental Health Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing Counseling and Guidance Remotely
- ▶ Providing Transition Services Remotely
- ▶ Providing VR Services Remotely
- ▶ Agencies for the Blind Providing Services Remotely

<sup>1</sup> 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

Counselors shared how they have continued to work with clients using remote approaches. While employment remains the goal for clients, the COVID-19 situation made some pause their community job search, while others continued their pursuits. Counselors discussed their approaches to meeting clients at whatever stage they're at.

Having ongoing communication emerged as a critical ingredient for maintaining the counseling relationship. Counselors indicated that they continue to help clients learn about jobs and careers. They shared online tools and techniques they have been using to help their clients make informed choices about jobs and careers and whether they could safely be working.

For those ready to pursue employment, counselors shared strategies for using online resources for the job search, connecting clients with businesses, running or attending virtual job fairs, and other strategies to move clients along with their job searches.

#### *Communication*

Virtual communication has become the new normal and likely applies to any specific service provided by VR. For clients with access to smartphones, tablets, or computers, virtual communication has been a good option for keeping in regular contact. For those without access to such technology or to the internet, the telephone has still been a good back-up option for keeping in touch.

Counselors indicated that the time typically spent traveling could now be spent on more virtual meetings with clients. In addition, virtual communication platforms work well with initiating and building relationships with businesses, who are using these same platforms to keep in touch with their workforce, customers, and other key contacts.



### ***Job search and exploration strategies***

Counselors continue to help clients prepare for the job search and for work, but due to social distancing, there are few opportunities for job tours and informational interviews in actual work settings. Most career exploration is now done using online tools, which allow clients to learn about jobs and industries. Counselors have also worked with clients on preparing for the actual job search by making resumes current and strong, and introducing clients to the many online mechanisms for conducting a job search.

Virtual job fairs have been pursued by some agencies to get businesses meeting more VR clients, and ongoing partnerships with the workforce system have helped to link clients to work opportunities. Essential jobs during COVID-19 have been obtained and performed by VR clients. As businesses return to work, it is anticipated that increasing numbers of VR clients will be applying for work opportunities with the help of their VR counselors.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Counselors agreed that, while not everyone is ready to engage in the job search process, steps still can be taken to help move people in that direction and to help guide their decision making. Regular communication between counselors and clients is central to this process.

Counselors also discussed the online tools they've been using for career and job exploration. Many endorsed tools that allowed clients to view the job being performed (such as Virtual Job Shadow). There was an overwhelmingly positive opinion that these tools gave job seekers a more realistic understanding of jobs and careers, which would normally have been achieved by work-based learning experiences.

For clients with pre-existing health issues, those living with elderly or vulnerable family members, and those with significant concerns about their own well-being, a job search is not a viable option. Doing career exploration is a good way to help them prepare for when it will be safer to be out in public. Also, making sure clients' resumes and references are current helps them prepare for beginning the job search. Finally, sharing information about safe practices in the community is also helpful to ease their concerns and help them prepare for safe re-entry into their communities.

### ***Maintain ongoing communication***

The following are examples of techniques or applications used by VR counselors to maintain

ongoing communication with clients and businesses:

- » Computer, tablet, and smartphone video conference platforms allow for virtual meeting to take place. These include Zoom, Skype, MS Teams, WhatsApp, FaceTime (for Apple/iPhone devices), and Google Chat.
- » Clients with smartphones and computers can use the chat/text/instant message feature. Many of the applications listed above also have a chat feature. This option is handy as it allows for quick messaging/updates between clients and counselors, counselors and business, or clients and businesses.
- » Telephones with land lines still work too. This tried and true technology is needed in some instances; some clients won't have knowledge of, or access to computers, smart phones, or tablets. Others living in rural areas may have limited internet access.
- » In some instances, the only way to share important documents is through the mail. This was mentioned for some rural areas or for clients with no technology access.

### ***Pursue job search and career exploration strategies***

Counselors shared other examples of strategies to prepare individuals for the job search and work:

Reworking or building stronger resumes for the job search process. Using formats that work for electronic submissions.

- » Updating references for the job search.
- » Exploring online career exploration tools with clients. These provide detailed information about careers including video examples of the jobs being performed. They explain the knowledge, skills, and training requirements, the job outlook for each type of career, as well as job current opportunities by geographic area. Examples include Virtual Job Shadow, LiveCareer.com, CareerOneStop.org, O\*NET, and TCI Plus.
- » Entering clients into the Talent Acquisition Portal for broader visibility to businesses and to see what positions are available with companies courting employees with disabilities.
- » Introducing clients to networking sites such as LinkedIn, which has a more business and less social focus. Helping clients set up an account and profile can present them more professionally as ready for work and can open up opportunities for networking with business people.

- » Helping clients navigate through the numerous online job search tools that help link job seekers to opportunities (starting with the exploration tools listed above, as well as other such as USAJobs, Indeed.com, CareerBuilder, Monster, etc.).
- » Pursuing virtual job fairs in partnership with other state agencies or business groups.
  - One VR agency used Zoom for a virtual job fair in partnership with a large university. Through the use of Zoom's breakout rooms, individuals could meet with hiring managers, privately or in groups.
- » Partnering with business organizations with many essential jobs needing to be filled to help with their recruitment of VR clients. (Grocery stores, health care settings, pharmacies, elderly/assisted living complexes, etc.)
- » Working in partnership with providers and helping clients pursue self-employment opportunities selling items online (face masks, silk hand-painted scarves, snacks, etc.)
- » Informing job seekers of the CDC guidelines for safe interactions in community settings.



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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## RESOURCES

### Providing Employment Services

- ▶ [APSE](#) webinar on Strategies for Providing Remote Employment Supports
- ▶ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has created tools that can help counselors prepare workers going into jobs in the community on how best to prepare. Examples: [How to protect yourself and others from getting sick](#) and a one-page color guide on [Stopping the Spread of Germs](#) provides a good visual reminder on safe practices.
- ▶ [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.

### Job Search & Career Exploration

- ▶ The [Career OneStop](#) website helps job seekers explore careers, including doing self-assessments of interests, skills, and work values. It provides information on training options depending upon the chosen career. And it provides information on available jobs by geographic area as well as by job type.
- ▶ [O\\*NET](#) is a robust tool for career exploration and decision-making.
- ▶ [Rescue My Resumes is a free online tool to help with resume design.](#)
- ▶ The [Talent Acquisition Portal](#) is available through the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation. TAP is an online system that includes both a national talent pool of VR candidates looking for employment and a job posting system for businesses looking to hire individuals with disabilities.
- ▶ [Virtual Job Shadow](#) has been discovered by many agencies as a great tool to introduce job seekers to many careers. The site also lists available jobs and helps connect job seekers with businesses hiring in those areas.
- ▶ [Live Career](#) helps job seekers to build resumes and cover letters and then apply for jobs. This site gives numerous resources and tips including how to manage your footprint on social media sites.