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### Exploring Exit from the Vocational Rehabilitation System

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# Fact Sheet

## Exploring Exit from the Vocational Rehabilitation System

In the U.S. labor force, the unemployment rate is more than twice as high for people with disabilities (17.9%) than it is for people without disabilities (7.7%; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). In actuality, this disparity is much higher because many people with disabilities have stopped actively seeking employment. Although unemployment rates are influenced by many intersecting factors, premature exit from Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services likely contributes to the stubbornly high unemployment rates for people with disabilities.

The Vocational Rehabilitation program helps people with disabilities find and maintain employment. However, approximately half of VR consumers leave the VR system prematurely. Premature exits include cases when VR loses contact with a consumer because of inaccurate address, disconnected phone, or consumer relocation; the consumer refuses to continue services; or the consumer fails to cooperate (RSA 911, 2012). Premature exit is costly for both the VR agency and the consumer. In 2012, VR spent \$138,830,563 on cases closed for reasons described as, “unable to locate or lost contact” and \$226,028,814 on cases closed for “failure to cooperate” or “refused services” (RSA 911, 2012).

Past research shows that consumers who do not follow through with VR services experience lower employment rates compared to those who find competitive employment with VR assistance (Hayward and Schmidt-Davis, 2003). To better understand factors influencing attachment to the VR system, researchers from RTC: Rural interviewed 47 VR consumers about their experiences working with VR.

## Methods

Researchers conducted qualitative interviews as part of a larger two-year longitudinal study. The longitudinal study surveyed VR consumers at baseline and every six months over a two-year period to better understand their progression through the VR system. Randomly selected survey participants who exited VR services were invited to participate in a brief 15-20 minute interview to further describe their experiences. Of 122 individuals asked to participate, 47 took part in a follow-up telephone interview (12 at baseline, 14 at 6-months, 11 at 12-months, and 10 at 18-months). Two researchers coded interviews for common themes using NVIVO qualitative data analysis software. Data from the longitudinal survey were used to describe the qualitative sample and provide additional context for interview answers.

## Demographics

Interviewees ages ranged from 19 to 63 (M = 45.28, SD= 12.755). Most participants identified as female (n = 33, 66%) and Caucasian (n = 35, 74%). Five interviewees identified as African American, five identified as Hispanic and two listed “other” as their race/ethnicity. Respondents reported less than a high school education (n =

5, 11%), a high school diploma or equivalent (n = 8; 17%), some college (n=18, 38%), associate’s degree (n = 8, 17%), and college degree or higher (n = 8, 17%).

About one-third of the sample (n=15) reported having more than one disability type. Ten participants reported experiencing a cognitive impairment (21%), 26 reported a mental health impairment (55%), 17 reported a physical impairment (36%) and 12 reported a sensory impairment (26%). Two participants did not identify their disability. Interviewees indicated that their disability was mildly limiting (n = 9, 19%), moderately limiting (n = 22; 46%), or severely limiting (n = 13, 28%),

Interviewees reported receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI; n = 8, 17%), Supplemental Security Disability Income (SSDI, n = 10, 21%), or both SSI and SSDI (n=1). Most interviewees lived in an urban area (n=29, 62%).

## Results

Of the people interviewed, 13 left VR services for positive case closure reasons, 26 left for negative reasons, and 8 left for neutral reasons that had little to do with the VR program or services. Table 1 provides detail about these exit reasons.

**Table 1: Primary Exit Reason**

Exit Reason	Reason Type	N = 47
Found employment	Positive	7
Received desired equipment from VR	Positive	6
Conflicts with the counselor	Negative	12
Found a job without VRs help	Negative	8
Services too slow; nothing happening in the case	Negative	3
Received training but no job development services to become employed	Negative	2
Misunderstanding with a vendor	Negative	1
Health Concerns	Neutral	5
Misperceptions about VR services	Neutral	2
Concerns with losing benefits	Neutral	1

## Positive Reasons for Exit (n = 13)

Interviewees who exited VR services with a positive case closure (n = 13; 27%) described strong relationships with their counselor that were based on mutual respect and understanding. Four respondents described counselors who were generally knowledgeable about the consumer's disability and job related needs. One consumer described his experience this way:

*They [VR] did things for me that I couldn't do. They opened doors for me that I couldn't open. I had no way of doing it....*

Another consumer went on to describe the understanding her counselor had for her situation:

*"Well, in the first couple of meetings she seemed like she was ...a very good listener. She understood a lot about some of my issues, like my age and my disability. And... some of the things that have happened in my life she could understand."*

Five people who exited VR with a positive case closure talked about the overall efficiency and organization skills of their counselors. One participant noted that:

*She was...really organized and helped me ... I am on disability social security... [She] helped me work through that and how much I could work without losing my benefits.*

Of those who reported positive exit reasons, twelve said they were satisfied with VR services on the longitudinal survey. Only one interviewee indicated dissatisfaction with services stemming from poor job fit. This interviewee explained that the job the VR counselor helped him find exacerbated his disability and caused him a lot of pain. He felt that his counselor pushed him into taking the first job that came along rather than taking the time to find a job that better fit his needs. Failure to find jobs that are a good fit for the consumer may have implications for long-term job retention. Although this research was not

designed to evaluate long-term job retention, it is notable that another interviewee whose case was closed to competitive employment, had lost her job at the time of our interview and was working on reopening her case with VR.

## Negative Reasons for Exit (n = 26)

*Conflicts with the counselor (n = 12) and vendor (n = 1).* The most common negative reason for leaving the VR program related to interpersonal conflicts with the counselor. Conflicts with counselors primarily stemmed from the perception that the counselor was not following through on promised services (n=5) or there was a divergence between the consumer and counselor regarding desired services (n=6). Although most consumers who left had a long-term relationship with their counselor, two explained that after an initial interview, they never heard from the counselor again.

Often, counselor/consumer divergence focused on the types of jobs consumers were interested in pursuing. One interviewee describes his frustrations in the following exchange:

*Interviewee: She didn't seem to want to help me. She wanted me to do dishes or janitorial work or pack boxes.*

*Interviewer: And that wasn't what you wanted to do?*

*Interviewee: Right.*

Another interviewee felt like his counselor pushed him into a job that increased his disability.

*"I felt pushed into getting a job... it screwed me up...it made me have anxiety."*

Others talked about how their counselor didn't follow through with services they promised. One participant talked about his experience this way:

*It might be just because of the county I was in, but ... it was actually like they didn't help with anything. It was like they made me go to a bunch of meetings and I met with the lady one time, but after that it was like they just*

*lost contact with me and years went by and I never saw her again. She never helped. She offered me a bunch of stuff, but never came through.*

*I did so much on my own because I was on a waiting list and you can't sit around waiting your whole life for other people so I'll just do it myself*

Of those who left due to conflicts with the counselor, two indicated they were satisfied and ten indicated they were dissatisfied with VR services on the longitudinal survey. From interviews, we learned that satisfaction ratings were related to experiences with Job Club. Both interviewees found Job Club helpful and enjoyed attending weekly meetings to brush up on their job seeking skills. Dissatisfaction primarily focused on not receiving desired services and poor counselor-consumer relationships. Interviewees who were dissatisfied with VR services described counselors who were discouraging of their job opportunities (n=4) and rude to them during meetings (n=3).

In addition, five of the eight people who found a job on their own lived in a rural area and three of these mentioned that their counselor traveled to provide services and that the local office was staffed intermittently. Intermittent staffing in rural areas likely contributes to slow service delivery.

Of the eight people who found a job on their own, four reported that they were satisfied and four reported they were dissatisfied with VR services on the longitudinal survey. Dissatisfaction primarily stemmed from slow delivery of services. Satisfaction with services resulted from a positive counselor-consumer relationship even though counselors were limited, for a variety of reasons, in the amount of assistance they could provide.

Although conflicts with counselors was one of the most common reasons for premature exit, one person also described a conflict with a vendor as the primary reason for leaving the system. He described the vendor as harassing and not understanding of his current situation.

*Services too slow (n = 3).* Three interviewees said slow service delivery was their primary reason for case closure. One of these interviewees may have still been enrolled in VR services, but assumed that she had been dropped because she had not heard from her counselor in so long. The second found a way to pay for the hearing aids he needed to continue working without having to wait for VR services. A third interviewee attributed the slow services to her counselor leaving her position:

*Found job without VRs help (n = 8).* Eight participants found a job on their own without assistance from their VR counselor and closed their cases because they no longer needed services. Three of these described services that were too slow. They felt like they were left with no option but to continue to look for a job on their own. Slow services left consumers feeling unimportant as described by one former VR consumer:

*I think it was like a cut off---like the lady who had helped me, she did good for what she did, but it didn't go any further because she quit and I can't really say that she didn't do a good job because she quit.*

*I am not sure if my counselor is sincere. He appears interested and caring but services have been very slow to appear. He has ascribed that to numerous delays but it seems like one way or another I am not very important or I fall through the cracks.*

Although personnel turnover was not a primary reason for leaving VR services, it was a contributing factor for eleven interviewees. They described frustrating delays in services as a result of personnel turnover that ranged from waiting for the new counselor to get caught up on the case to never hearing from their VR counselor again. It is notable that almost 25% of the sample experienced counselor turnover.

Slow service may be related to factors beyond the counselor's control such as order of selection and where the consumer lives. Two participants who found a job on their own talked about being placed on a waiting list.

Slow service delivery may be a contributing factor to many premature exits from VR services. For example, slow service delivery might prevent VR from capitalizing on consumers' early motivation to work. These consumers, whom VR counselors may have a relatively easy time placing in a job, eventually find a job on their own, but not before VR spends money on their case.

*Services without follow up (n = 2).* Two participants exited after VR paid for their schooling, but then failed to follow up with them after they graduated. One participant indicated that she was simply told by her counselor to, "put in a bunch of applications and if you find anything give us [VR] a holler." The other interviewee talked about graduating from school, but then losing contact with VR because the counselor left the position and she was unable to get ahold of the new counselor. Another interviewee who left VR services because he found a job on his own, mentioned that VR paid for his schooling, but never followed up with him after he graduated. He said that he "got lucky" and found a job without VR's help. Losing contact with individuals in whom VR has already invested through education or training is a lost opportunity for a positive case closure.

### **Neutral Reasons for Exit (n = 8)**

*Health concerns (n=5) and concerns with benefits (n=1)* Six people we interviewed left VR services for reasons unrelated to VR including health problems (n=5) and concerns with benefits (n=1). Of these individuals, four expressed satisfaction and two expressed dissatisfaction with VR on the longitudinal survey. The two consumers who were dissatisfied did not agree with the diagnosis that their health problems prevented them from working.

*Misperceptions about VR services (n = 2).* Two people voluntarily left VR services after entering the program with misconceptions about what VR could help them with. One interviewee entered the program hoping for help paying for prescription drugs. The second found another program that better suited her vocational desires.

## **Conclusion**

Consumers leave the VR system for a variety of reasons and experiences. A good counselor-consumer relationship can leave consumers satisfied with VR even when their employment goals are not realized. On the other hand, a poor counselor-consumer relationship can drive consumers away from the program. Slow service delivery and gaps in services resulting from counselor turnover may intensify poor counselor-consumer relationships and contribute to negative feelings regarding VR. Furthermore, slow services fail to capitalize on a consumer's early motivation for employment.

The research discussed here supports a larger body of literature suggesting a positive correlation between the counselor-consumer relationship and VR consumer outcomes and experiences (Donnell, Lustig, & Strauser, 2004; Lustig, Strauser, Rice, & Rucker, 2002; Lustig, Strauser, & Weems, 2004). Future research should examine ways to strengthen and reinforce counselor-consumer relationships early in the VR process. This is especially important in rural areas where financial and geographic barriers may only permit intermittent staffing of VR offices. Promising strategies suggested by this research include early and frequent contact with consumers and connecting consumer with local resources such as Job Club.

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