



TRANSCRIPT

Virtual Series: Disability Employment – Looking Back & Moving Forward

Event 4 of 4: Future Images of the Face of Vocational Rehabilitation

October 28, 2020 from 1:00 – 2:30 pm [Eastern Time]

>> **Barry Whaley:** It is 1 o'clock. Welcome everyone. My name is Barry Whaley, Director of Southeast ADA Center, a project of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University. Welcome we are glad you are here. If you have been around for the other two webinars in the podcast welcome back. We are happy you joined us today.

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month. For 2020 the theme is increasing access and opportunity. This year is also the 75th anniversary of National Disability Employment Awareness Month -

- NDEAM. Led by Office of Labor. During 2020 we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the ADA. We are also celebrating the 100th anniversary of vocational rehabilitation. In recognition of these important milestones the Southeast ADA Center has been hosting this 4 event Virtual Series: Disability Employment - Looking Back and Moving Forward on each Wednesday in October.

This webinar is the final tribute to National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the first 100 years of VR and the 30th anniversary of the ADA. We want to welcome a panel of VR innovative leaders that will discuss issues around racial equity, service deliverability design, employer engagement and reasonable accommodations, technology transition services, statewide workforce system integration. This webinar will also cover future emerging issues and challenges and trends in the public vocational rehabilitation program.

It is truly a pleasure for me to introduce our guests for today.

- Cora McNabb, is the Director of Kentucky Vocational Rehabilitation.
- Joe Xavier, Director of California Vocational Rehabilitation.
- Felicia Johnson, Commissioner of South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation.

- David Doukas, Director of Connecticut Bureau of Rehabilitation Services.
- And finally. We are pleased to have as a host for this webinar Allison Flanagan. Allison is the Director of the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and she is the president of CSAVR. Welcome everybody and Allison I will turn it over to you.

>> ALLSION FLANAGAN: Good afternoon and thank you, Barry and the Southeast ADA for continuing the conversation of disability employment. It is great to see my colleagues from the other part of the country here today to share their wisdom and future thoughts regarding the public vocational rehabilitation program. For anyone that is unfamiliar, the public VR program, a state federal program that assists individuals with disabilities to obtain employment. There are 78 public VR agencies in the country and that includes the territories and the public VR program assists about 1.4 million individuals with disabilities a year and while all disabilities that creates employment may reach the -- [Indiscernible] -- 33 percent of VR customers are those with disabilities -- [Static]

About 20 percent make-up the physical disabilities, 11 percent are auditory or communication disorders and five percent are individuals with visual impairments. One of the most amazing aspects of the VR

approaches the individualized and COVID-19 he lives by the saying no two individuals are the same and there are unique circumstances it allows VR to provide the most valuable services to help them succeed in their employment search.

This is certainly been an external year with the pandemic and I know everyone has felt the pandemic this year and there's been a lot of changes made in the public VR program to make sure our services continue for our customers. States have had to make quick changes moving to a virtual delivery of services and continuing to work with our stakeholders as well as customers to continue the service that leads them to employment.

Today as Barry said my expert panel will share their thoughts and approaches to service delivery and staff challenges and workforce partnership and employer engagement. I know it will be a good conversation and openly gives everyone some thought to think about future changes. Panel, we will rotate through the questions I will ask each of you to respond to a question I pose that each of you will have an opportunity to respond after the first one answers the question.

I hope for some good dialogue that will benefit our audience the most if we just have discussions back and forth. Panel, are we ready to begin?

>> **PANEL GROUP:** Yes.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Cora, I will start with you. We will start the first question talking about service delivery and how it's changed especially with the pandemic and everything that's happened this year so far. When you think about the future about what and how do you expect the lessons that we have learned during the pandemic and how they impact our customers interact and engage with VR services?

>> **CORA MCNABB:** I think the forefront of Kentucky the lessons learned deal with technology and then simply how individuals will access employment services moving forward.

We know that technology has allowed many people in the world across the country and in our states to work from home and to stay at home but not everybody has had the benefit of that technology and certainly not many of the individuals that we serve, individuals with disabilities. Many of the states have worked to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities through different initiatives, focus on employment and Kentucky has done that through its employment first initiative. But for sure I think with us the onset of COVID-19, our leadership recognized how important for us moving forward is to make sure we are more prepared at the onset of a pandemic or any other major occurrence that happens. I know we were not as prepared as I should have been

for the abrupt switch that we face in service delivery. Typically, we have been face-to-face in person services and we had to switch to virtual platforms. We weren't prepared for that and I feel like many of the individuals we serve were not prepared for the. The changes that occurred in service delivery had a major impact on our staff and the people we serve.

Communication has been a challenge, providing information that is accessible by phone, email, websites, although platforms and modalities that we used.

It also presented us with many questions on how we were going to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to the employment services. This had a big impact on how we work and going forward I think all the states have experienced the effects on their community-based organizations and their ability to provide services.

I don't know that as of yet we know exactly how the pandemic is going to affect the labor market long term, and I've heard a lot of discussion around automation and change the way that service delivery occurs moving forward. On top of that you add all the internal processes of making sure we are able to process authorizations electronically and obtain signatures and informed choice came to the forefront in making sure that we give individuals the information that they need about

services, their right to services and the risk of COVID. I think those are the two things that I would identify as the most important. Technology and just making sure that individuals can access those ongoing employment services.

>> **ALLISON FLANAGAN:** Definitely some excellent points. Technology has proven to be a great benefit during this pandemic. Like you said a lot of the agencies were not ready to go into the 100 percent virtual worlds and we had to switch very quickly.

Would anyone like to add anything?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** A couple thoughts that I would add to this is we have the impact we talk about the people that we serve, but it is also created some opportunities and frankly forced the escalation of some things that at least for us might have taken 5, 10, 15 years. We had to become more nimble than we thought government could do. One good thing is we know we can be nimble know how to be stay with it? For us here a couple things in California is shifting to this virtual approach to providing services has enabled us to reach populations and reach them in place that perhaps were not being connected before.

In some programs we see greater participation because transportation is no longer that barrier that it might have been for that method of

engaging is more conducive to a particular individual. But the other thing that I would say is that our systems have had to change and change very quickly. Three things that I would point to that I think will survive post COVID-19 and be beneficial, the electronic signature. We are not only changing electronic signatures but our whole mindset around signatures. It is authentication of the individual much like what we all do with our banking or online retail work that we do good we don't sign anything but just communicate who we are. Nothing new once that's important because we are stuck on ink to paper and it has to move beyond that. Second is just thinking about how we deliver services to the consumer we are in the process of shipping to use of debit cards instead of paper checks or banks as a way for a consumer procuring those things that are appropriate for them to procure.

And finally, in the long term telework. We are trying to push the telework for four years and did not make the progress we were able to make in four weeks. We expect that long-term upwards of 75 percent of our staff will -- that has a lot of implications across not only service delivery but quality of life for our staff as well.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you, Joe. A lot of similarities which I know a lot of the state VR programs are going to move towards a permanent telework approach. It's been beneficial during the pandemic

for the staff here in Florida and I know Joe in California he said the same thing. You see a lot of productivity and creativity as well during the virtual approach and services. But the challenges you mention my pen and paper signatures that a lot of the agencies were still looking backwards at we have to keep moving forward and trying to align herself with the business practice right now.

Let's move on to the next question please dear David, I will start off with you on this one. A critical topic today is a quality in all aspects of our life and includes equality for individuals with disabilities. An important emphasis for the future of VR services is equality for the services to individuals with disabilities and working to address institutional bias that exists within programs. David, what changes or additions do you see in terms of current and future efforts to maintain equality?

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** Thank you, Allison. I think that in Connecticut we have had about a decade or longer history of attempting to really address the inequality issue. It was recognized by us quite some time ago where we were not receiving or achieving the same outcomes with individuals from minority backgrounds that we work with nonminority's. We really try to get out that from a very long time.

He started with staff surveys, lots of discussions internally trying to figure out what the discrepancy was and where its roots were. We moved on, based on some of the input we had from staff to numerous trainings on multiculturalism and bias and even with that level of education we still definitely weren't impacting the outcomes the way we had hoped for. Over the more recent years we have contracted with the national coalition of community justice and have them provide some very intense training for our staff. What grew out of that was a recognition that institutional bias, no matter of our best efforts to try and not allow that to influence us, truly does permeates through organization and the services that we deliver.

We have been attempting to address that. As it relates to services for consumers, the improving services and outreach to minority communities is one of our state plan goals. We have been focused on that in recent years and attempting to improve our infrastructure so we could be able to outreach more effectively and so these individuals more effectively. Infrastructure in terms of trying to mitigate any communication barriers that may exist in particular with our high incidence of Spanish speaking populations here in Connecticut as well as trying to outreach to some other urban centers with a large incident of minorities. Where we are headed in the future with this and possibly the most important part of only infrastructure is the training of our

counseling staff. We have been working with a college professor who is a subject matter expert in the area of institutional bias and racism that he's worked with us over the past 3 to 6 months and has interviewed numerous counseling staff and has worked with us to develop a plan on how to address this. The areas of focus that we consider essential to building the infrastructure necessary to be able to outreach to these populations and work with them effectively, there's five major areas. One is building cultural awareness and that is providing counselors with the ability to consider ways that his or her own culture reshape their own attitudes about minority consumers. This includes identifying the root of common stereotypes in the ways these stereotypes negatively impact our ability to be effective vocational rehab counselors. Second is about building cultural knowledge. And that's where we provide counselors with basic knowledge about a particular African-American and Latino history and culture and third is developing cultural skills. We use our awareness and knowledge in order to increase our ability and evaluate the consumer and develop a plan that takes their culture into consideration.

Fourth is cultural encounters.

We focus on specific racially charged encounters in order to work towards effective ways of negotiating these challenging situations. Our experience has been these cultural encounters not only occur with our consumers as we attempt to serve them but also between our own staff ourselves. And last is very important just cultural desire indicated that is cultivating a desire both professionally and personally that motivates us to challenging and confronting racism and bias. I can say that over this last 10 to 15 years it's been a personal journey for me and it is something that I'm very invested in and I think the future of our VR program rests with trying to offer equal access to individuals no matter of their background.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** A lot of great things happening in Connecticut. Thank you for sharing that. Very impressed with the work you are doing with that outside of educator. I think all the states made a conscious effort to really work at our programs and where do we have any quality because we certainly don't want that happening and it's allowing us to take a deeper dive into our data and customers we are serving and I know Florida is a very diverse state and was a little bit surprised even though we have a lot of diversity I was surprised at the lack of positive outcome from a minority population is certainly something that can be worked on here in Florida and those things that you mention the

cultural awareness I think all of that is key for our staff to make sure we are providing quality services.

California, Kentucky, Florida, anything you are doing to adjust just like address the equality issues in your state?

>> **FELICIA JOHNSON:** Very impressive information from David and what they are doing. I hope we can move in a similar direction to bring in some outside assistance. But we have taken the steps to start looking at our outcomes and service provision and collecting data to do some comparisons will be of issues and concerns that need to be addressed. We've already identified that are outcomes for our minority populations tend to take a little longer and they may not be all of the individual's transferable skills may not always be considered in the types of outcomes that their successful closure ends up in. We are collecting data to take a look at that. We realize, and to be honest with you and is not anything we've ever looked at up until recent times. But with everything going on in our country it is bringing things to the forefront that you may never have considered to be an issue and then you take a deeper dive and you see that there is something here that maybe we can take a closer look at because we want to make sure we are being fair and consistent. We are taking the steps. Just getting started but I hope to one day be able to go down the road that David

and the team in Connecticut are doing to really take some measures to address it and be effective and intentional and how we address the concerns.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you Felicia and David. The topic of equality is all businesses and our counsel and save administrators have been working diligently on not just an equality statement but taking it a step further and looking at action steps in the conversation will be continuing next month at the fall conference and looking forward to what action steps the public VR will identify to increase our equality for all individuals.

Let's move on, they assist the state VR. Many CRP providers provide vocational services, job development, job placement services. Some examples their critical to us.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Felicia I will start with you. The issue of staff retention or nutrition is a well-known long-term concern related to community rehabilitation providers and other vendors are so critical to the service delivery models of state VR agencies. With the onset of COVID-19, this issue has been heightened. How is your state addressing this ongoing issue with our community?

>> **FELICIA JOHNSON:** I will start with our state -- staff attrition. As a state and the question our staff build relationships with our partners in the community and it sometimes causes a lapse in service delivery or lapsing communication when you have employees that are the point of contact for the only provider and the employee is no longer with the agency. About 10 years ago we started to notice that we were losing counselors at a more rapid rate. And I have a little saying that if you can work at VR you can work anywhere. I think what's happening is we're getting good employees and turning them up well and they were doing other things. When I became the Commissioner and South Carolina basically thought are we being realistic to think that folks are going to come to state government and work for 25, 30 years and retired or do we need to shift our mindset and prepare ourselves for the fact that staff will continue to come and go and stay with us on an average of five or so years and maybe go on to do other things? You put together a focus group 3 years ago with an employee sentiment with VR three years or less because we wanted to be realistic in our planning for the future and also figure out what could we do to better attract employees to the agency to make VR place where folks wanted to come to work? Can I put this question to the workgroup I said in my unrealistic to not want you just to work but for you to stay here or more than five years? On the feedback that we received this was a

younger group of folks, I would consider then all millennial's in the feedback we received, I think studies show this as well that they wanted purpose and a feeling of belonging good they looked for opportunities that they could have a purpose and sense of belonging and make a difference and add value. However, they weren't of the mindset to think about retiring so early in their careers. We started to look at ways to make VR more attractive.

He started to focus on training and making folks -- or helping folks to enhance their skills while they were at the agency working on different career paths to help folks see that there are different things you can do within the agency. You may come here as a counselor but there's other opportunities. We revamped our leadership program to help folks not just learn about how to be a leader, but also this program gives them opportunities to shadow folks in different positions so that they can see if that is really what they want to aspire to do within the agency. We put a real focus on that because we wanted to, even if folks didn't state with VR while they were here, we wanted to make sure they had a sense of belonging and they understand the purpose, the mission, the vision and values of our agency. We also revamped our new employee orientation program so it's very clear what we do at VR, while you are here and whether your position is the Commissioner or groundskeeper that you matter.

Socially efforts we put in place to address our concerns with employee retention and nutrition and also just from the executive level just start to be realistic about the fact that we are going to have staff turnover and we have to prepare for that. How do you prepare when you have a counselor that serves a school district and the counselor leaves the agency? Who is going to serve the students? It will make contact with those partners within the school to make sure that there is still a line of communication and their needs are being met? Those are some of the things that we put in place to address that issue.

The next year, community rehabilitation providers, South Carolina is set up a little different than some other states. We don't contract out very much at all. We handle everything in-house. We have our own vocational evaluators, our own drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. Our own comprehensive evaluation center. But we recently started to contract vendors for -- services would be noticed two things. The first that the folks that we contracted with help provide some of the services really depended on us for funding. We had to figure out how we could continue to help them so that they could maintain their operation in this new virtual climate and it was really difficult.

What we did was we worked with them to help them understand our regulations and what it is that we can and can't do what we can and can't pay for, what we needed from them they also communicated what they needed from us and we had to develop new agreements to go through the proper channels to make sure we could still work with these providers so that our consumers could receive those services but we weren't in violation of any things, any regulations that were set in place. It is all about communication and partnerships when you are working with your providers and vendors.

You have to get on the same page and make sure that we all have the same goal and that's to serve the consumer. What do we need from VR and you and how can we work together to make sure our consumer is reaping the benefits from our partnership in a way that will be helpful for them in the parameters that we both have set for our organization? Those are just a few things we have done here regarding staff retention in our community.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you, Felicia, and a lot of hard work you are doing there. Staff retention I think is another big thing. I like to hang onto the fact that we are not -- [Static] There was a big influx in the career choice and I remember in Kentucky we had counseling programs - but there was only met one Master's program. When I think about

1973 number of individuals that went into the field of VR that reach the retirement age and then ended up leaving the younger folks are entering other fields other than VR's was a challenge for us. Felicia talked about staff retention. Joe, with your big stay in California, before I throw this question to you, would you like to talk but how many staff you employ in California?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** We have about 2000 staff in VR in California. A couple things that I would add to what Felicia already shared. One is I think that if there is a positive to come out of COVID-19 and the nimbleness I referred to earlier, one of the things is we are becoming much more adaptable and comfortable with video so our staff now or potential staff can continue virtually that can minimize the cost they would have out-of-pocket to interview for a job especially in a state the size of California you might need to get on a plane to go to an interview. I think that is beneficial. The other one is the nimbleness in terms of providing telework opportunities, much more flexible schedules that are beneficial for younger workforce when they have kids and whatnot. The third thing that I think is helping is weak shift into a tailored approach for services. It is not that you don't need to know both how to get somebody ready for a job and how to help them find a job, you still need both but now that you have a team approach to that your

knowledge and experience can be more one-sided and be effective and engaging. Just a few things there that contribute to how we engage in keeping our workforce. I think on the provider side the other thing I would point out his business models are changing.

As the business models have changed, they will change even more with this new COVID-19 and post COVID-19. One of the things we have to take a hard look at when we do a fee-for-service the question we have to be asking ourselves what are we asking for in that theme? How much burden are we placing all the provider and is a commensurate? And how to be just things like volume of referrals as well as --

[Indiscernible]. For partner is banking on someone showing up for service and they don't they are not getting paid for that that becomes an impact on their financial abilities as well. There's a lot of moving pieces, I don't think any magic answers. I think we are all challenged to look at all that and find ways to stabilize and keep our business partners moving forward as well.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you, Joe. David and Cora, anything you want to add about things in your state about staff retention or --

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** I will comment on Felicia's comments on the need for training and shrilly working with the newer staff that begin with your agency. We have recently been through an effort to implement a

developmental milestone check in for counselors as they start with our agency. This was borne out of losing roughly 25 percent other counseling staff over a two-year time. Good staff was jumping from VR and going to private rehabilitation, school system, other social service agencies we had a really big Exodus of talent. An exit interviewing what we were able to identify was a lot of the staff although they really cared about the consumers they were working with, closely adhere to the mission and vision of voc rehab they didn't think they were getting what they needed to thrive in the job over time.

In all honesty they had some issues with how they were treated in the first year of working here. They would start and be handed a caseload and often left to their own devices to a certain extent other supervisors were engaged it was the day to day operations of managing a caseload and not feel confident in what they were doing. The scope and breadth and depth of a voc rehabilitation officer's job is enormous good when you pick it apart and look at all the things that you need to know to function effectively based on may walk through your door it's a difficult job to wrap your head around and to learn. We took the time and made the effort to develop a month by month developmental milestone approach to onboarding new staff as they join us. That has only been in place for about a year but we have had a big drop-off in losing staff. The news or -- newer staff is feeling confident and we hope that bears fruit

downstream. I think that was one of the biggest things that we have done around. In Connecticut we are reliant upon contracting vendors to act as CRTs. The average length of stay of an individual working for a CRP is 16 months.

When you consider Felicia's comment earlier about the relationships that are necessary with these contracting vendors in order to work effectively with the consumer having that kind of turnover is really difficult for our program and we use a lack of institutional knowledge on the contracted vendor side and working with the system. We have been taking the approach of utilizing distant learning platform to be able to make available to CRTs some onboarding training that will assist them in learning how to work with us. That's really about managing attrition and getting to the root cause is a whole other story. The root cause and speaking directly with many of the leaders in the CRP community is really about the reimbursement.

As we all know working in VR, we have a finite amount of resources to apply to expanding towards community providers.

I think the real trick is looking at how to be do this a little smarter and maybe develop ways that we can pay more per hour or more per service to the CRP so they can reimburse staff at a higher level but at the same time reduce the number of hours through specific service

through higher Aldi division. That's really what we are exploring right now. We anticipate we may go out with competitive procurement to address those types of changes in the coming year or two. But it is a major issue for us and one we really need to be aggressive in trying to solve.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** I couldn't agree more. It sounds like you have a really good handle - rugged implemented a lot of good things but also a good handle on what you know you need to do in the future. It is definitely a challenge for all states keeping that balance with our CRP providers but we couldn't do the job without them but also keeping the staff. I will do a public service announcement I feel like all my panelists will agree. Eddie went out there interested in going to the human services field, we are always looking for passionate, qualified staff to work for us. Anything else you want to add on the panel?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** Here, here.

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** Agreed.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Let's switch it up a little bit. Cora, let's talk about our workforce partners. Service delivery design has changed with deficit on statewide work for system integration. What changed in

Kentucky and what challenges and successes do you expect in the future with planning to provide VR services with workforce partners?

>> **CORA MCNABB:** I think over the past 10 years Kentucky has experience major changes to its workforce state system and really prior to the passing of WI 08 and 2014, Kentucky already had taken a proactive approach to systems change and integration.

Over the years we have experienced growing pains and multiple challenges but have also had a lot of success. We have been involved in at the table and the development of service delivery policies and procedures and I think we made a lot of progress in moving from being more of a standalone operation outside of the workforce system to working closely with the workforce partners.

I think the greatest challenges sometimes take place based on the fact of where you sit structurally in a state. And in our state, we sat in the Department of workforce and had a goal to have all the workforce agencies together even adults at the workforce system.

Sometimes that makes it easier and sometimes it doesn't. And often we would find ourselves in meetings where they would look at DLL guide since and they would forget that we had another oversight agency and regulatory guidance. Recently I think it's been very helpful that joint

guidance has come out between the Department of Labor and rehab services administration that addresses things. And obviously we are integrated in the comprehensive centers across the state. We've had staff on the field and had to work through the service delivery issues finding the balance where you are effectively collaborating and streamlining the programs yet you maintain the integrity of the VR program. Assuring that VR touches VR consumers and balancing the staff duties ensures the demand for service delivery do not cross the line even in heated discussions about covering the front desk and being the front line person in our career centers.

Infrastructure agreements have been a definite challenge and an ongoing issue and ensuring that costs are reasonable and that continues read we've had a lot of success like I said, our regional managers serve on the local boards and I in my role as executive director sit on the state workforce board. There's a voice and assistant to advocate for disabilities for individuals. Our greatest success has come through grants we have had. We just closed out the five year career pathway grant -- -- -- through that grant we actually contracted with two other local workforce areas and they became the employer of record six career pathway coordinators through the state.

That really integrated services in the comprehensive centers where we had individuals that took advantage of many of the different service facets.

The other agreement we currently have is in the Department of workforce in Kentucky, oh VR is the lead on one of the eight nationwide retained grants which is a demonstration grant through DOL that develop strategies for stay at work and return network for individuals who sustained an illness or injury off the job. And through the Department of Labor and specifically in Social Security administration for this is a grant we are working with multiple state partners on in order to facilitate the project. Recently in Kentucky we went through another reorganization that actually moved unemployment insurance and the other programs tray, farmworker into the labor cabinet. They split the workforce programs between two cabinets. We are not really sure how that is all going to come together.

Currently we are undergoing another transformation of how the service delivery will look in the states. But certainly, at this time voc rehab has a large imprint and all the career centers across the state.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you, Cora. Start a virtual session unless someone forgets to unmute themselves. A lot of things have been happening as far as workforce partners go. A lot of good work. David Joe or Felicia anyone want to add about your relationship with your workforce partners and what's working well in your states?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** One thing I would share that we have found to be very beneficial, we partnered with a number of the workforce boards for student services. We have asked them to deliver and provide the paid work experience for students. And that has turned out to be an invaluable effort not only are the youth getting that actual work experience is so very meaningful, but because the workforce boards and centers are playing a more integral role in that, their awareness and engagement with youth with disabilities you can just see it changing the belief that you disabilities can go to work and that has some cascading implication. We have found that to be an invaluable partnership you're working to continue and expand on.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Great, thank you. Let's keep moving on. Let's talk about -- when Dr. went past it was the introduction of the preemployment services. Specifically, for students with disabilities. And it further emphasize the transition services as ways to provide career development approach for you to understand identify the employment

interest and to enter an advance and competitive integrated employment rate I know since 2014 all the states VR is to implement WIOA and it's been a challenge but also developed a lot of benefits. David I will start with you. What challenges and strengths have you seen in your state and what you see in the future related to preemployment services?

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** I will go back to when I was a counselor 20 some odd years ago. For the record I started with voc rehab when I was seven years old. Connecticut, we have a very strong belief in transitioning. Our former director was on the cutting edge of really trying to embed our counseling staff inside will systems. We were able to co-locate certain staff right inside some of the major schools and it was a belief that we had that early intervention was the key to long-term success for these kids. And I think I grew up with a culture within this program that really emphasize that and we continued it on through the years. When WIOA introduced preemployment services it wasn't a huge philosophical leaf gentleman that but a logistical lead that all of us in VR have had to deal with the challenges away -- around legislation and the way it's worded.

But the commitment to youth population is something that is definitely strained here. Through the commitment we have had great

relationships with our state department of education and many of the schools around the state. That existing for many years has positioned us well to be able to work with the population. That being said not every school district is the same. And personnel changes and often times much like with CRP when a person who was a champion of our cause leaves, they school our relationship terminates and we have to begin again. Sometimes we are successful in that effort and sometimes we are not. That is really one of the big challenges that we have is identifying the champion. And it can come from a lot of different places. It can be a special coordinator, special ed teacher, the school nurse, administrator. It can just be a random teacher who has a student and will introduce us to their entire system. Another challenge that we have here is really a drop off between preemployment transition students entering the adult services world of VR. As a child graduates high school have a high percentage of loss of those that we fail to engage with us as an adult and we are really trying to get at that through some of the efforts we have going right now and try to develop strategies to mitigate the problem.

Another thing that we are really studying could be contracted recently with our state education resource Center and they are going to do resource mapping for us in Connecticut down to a very granular level. He wants to be able to identify by each local education authority what

schools are providing for transition services through their programs and how do we augment that through the use of our preemployment transition services program? Again, those two schools - but no two schools are like. Their position programs are not mandated to have certain components in Connecticut.

There able to develop and how they see fit. With that in mind we have to meet each school system where they are and provide services that will fill gaps as opposed to replicating and causing redundancy in but we are offering to students. I think that is one of the big challenges moving ahead and trying to adjust our programming around that so that we can fill gaps as opposed to becoming redundant.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** A lot of good things you are doing. But I think one of the key steps moving forward is identifying the challenges which you are doing an excellent job becomes a strength you are deftly doing a lot of good things. In Florida we are working with all the school districts and have set up work-based learning experiences with them. A benefit of this is that VR is paying the school district are rate for work-based learning experience for students with disabilities the school is able to actually obtain some additional dollars which is deftly beneficial for them and that has been a good thing for us and allowed us to make sure we are working with all 67 school districts in the state of Florida.

Cork, Felicia, Joe, anything you want to add any challenges and strengths you have with your states?

>> **CORA MCNABB:** In Kentucky I feel like we have a lot of really good providers of services. We've had some similar challenges that David mentioned. We've had a lot of success with stem camps that we have done and it has been very moving to see, especially in the rural areas in appellation Kentucky and Kay subarea. I would say that has been some of our great success stories as well.

We have developed some specialized services for individuals that are in blind, ownership with University of Kentucky and that has been something that we've worked really hard to establish and develop with them as well as Allison you probably remember the insight program at Morehead University.

We have tried to reach out to some of those populations that are underserved as well as in the school system. We have during COVID, it has been difficult for the schools, many of hours do not have children in the seats in the school system. They don't have students. And a lot of them are still doing virtual services. It's been a very challenging year in

that respect in the schools are right there along with us developing those remote services for students.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you. Joe or Felicia anything to add?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** Lots Allison, one thing I have learned --

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** One thing I have learned, it's always refreshing when we hear from our colleagues that they are having challenges with the same things we are. It's not unique to each state but seem to have the same issues that we all are working through.

Let's talk about assistive technology services and devices are increasing the weight more VR consumers can participate with employment.

Kind of levels out the playing field on someone has assistive technology they can do the same task. Felicia I will start with you. What challenges do you see to meet the demands of rapidly advancing changes and increased need for these services?

>> **FELICIA JOHNSON:** Assistive technology and technology in itself has been such a blessing, especially with working with our consumer population like you just stated. It gives them a level playing field. In South Carolina it is a big part of what we do in working with our

consumers. We are fortunate enough to have our own rehabilitation technology division. We have rehab engineers who their job is to stay up on the latest assistive technology so they can make appropriate recommendations to our consumers so that they are prepared to compete on a level playing field with job applicants who do not have some of the barriers that they face.

What we do in South Carolina is we are very well connected with our state's assistive technology network. Our rehab engineers, they attend trainings. They are in the network. They are always testing the latest technology or reading up on it and going to any kind to show cases they can so that we know what is out there and what's available for our consumers in order to help them address some of the barriers that they face when it comes to employment. Not just employment but in everyday living with their ADL in their communities, in school so forth and so on.

We do have a heightened focus on assistive technology through our rehab engineers. But it can't just stop there because if our rehab engineers they may know what's out there or for the consumers but if the counselors and the job readiness preparedness instructors and the vocational evaluator's and the job coaches. If they don't know what is available then they have a gap in serving our consumers effectively. In

addition to staying on top of the latest and greatest types of technology out there to benefit folks with disabilities that we serve we also have to make sure that that information is shared throughout the agency.

Our rehab engineers do what they can to share that's information but we've also make sure that we are communicating through our internal intranet that we have within the agency so that our staff can look at a video and see this is a new communication tool that may help someone with auditory challenges try to communicate as effectively as we can to our staff so that they know and working with their consumers that they can offer them or discuss different resources that may be available to them to help address some of the challenges that they face.

Training is definitely needed so that you know what is out there to make those recommendations and work with your consumers. But the other part of the question, employer acceptance. In part of building relationships with employers and business partners in the community to work with the VR, to give our consumers a chance and to prove that our consumers are just as good if not better than anyone else applying to some of the same positions, sometimes we have to show them how these technologies. South Carolina set up a little differently than other states. We are fortunate enough to have job training centers at all of our locations throughout the states and in the centers, we often bring

employers in to see what our consumers are able to do. We can also bring our rehab engineers in with the employer and a consumer so that they can see how things can be set up in our facility and that shows the employer what could possibly be done at their location because we get a lot of concerns about liability. What if I bring this person in? What if they hurt themselves or they can keep up the pace or if they don't hear the fire alarm if there's a fire drill? And a lot of times you may run into someone who may not be accepting of you making changes in their business or you have an employee that gets something different from the rest of the employees. Educating employers and sometimes showing them a visual or a hands-on example helps them to accept the assistive technology if they can see how not only does it help this consumer perform the job but how it can also help their business to benefit.

The last part of your question is cost of the devices. That is always a challenge. We try very hard to budget, prior approval kind of helps with that. You have to forecast what your needs will be. But how to budget for the needs of the costs and cost effective ways of doing things instead of purchasing an iPad, we maybe can get the same benefit out of an android type of tablet.

Try to project your needs of the population you are serving and look at the needs of businesses and computer-based you have and how your consumers are moving through the rehab process and when these types of purchases may be needed. But that is a tough one. The cost of devices, especially the latest and greatest newest technology is going to be up there but then again, we have an obligation to serve our consumers and get them what it is they need to be successful. It's a balancing act. It is not easy. I do not have the answers to that. But again, it is a challenge that I think that we not only deal with in South Carolina but I bet that every single VR program deals with as far as making sure you get your consumers what it is they need to be successful. But also having the funds to do so. If anybody has an answer to that I would love to hear it.

>> ALLSION FLANAGAN: I will say that when you think over the last 20 years technology obviously has advanced and we have so much out there I can easily get very confused about it. But I do see the cost coming down a little bit if we think about how much a laptop cost in 2000 versus 2020. Definitely a deep light in the laptop and I think we will continue to see more competitive costs for assistive technology as companies continue to broaden their approach to individuals with disabilities and make sure they are included with the technology. But I see training, Felicia you mentioned training and I cannot agree more it

is not just training staff but like you said training the employers and customer on what's out there and how to use its peer training to me is key in this area because technology aspect changes every time you turn around to new device something that is different about it and it is hard to keep on top of all of that.

Cora, Joe, David, anything specific happening in your states on assistive technology you would like to share?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** I want to pick up on both of your comments, especially on the business side of this. We are in the middle of a pretty significant evolution when it comes to assistive technology. We think about what Microsoft is doing by building a lot of the assistive technology right into their suite of products are the same thing is being done for Apple. As a blind user I just go in and turn the switch is on and have availability and accessibility. I think it's important to front especially in the coming years. One is it removes some of the mystery from the businesses in terms of installing software onto their systems. And two, it is no cost. I think as this continues to evolve, I think it is a change on the front end of this for businesses being more accepting and open to the use of the assistive technologies and clearly as it is with any other major change is not a light switch moment so this will be something that unfolds and has been unfolding and will unfold over the coming 3579 years or so.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you Joe. I know you also use assistive technology. No one I think whatever know that you are an individual, you have your video showing because you are able to participate in anything, we do just like we expect our customers to. You lead by example and it's a good thing with your assistive technology so thank you very much for that.

Let's move on little bit for the sake of time. Cora, we discussed the challenges and staff retention. Let's think about the services they provide to our customers. Think about most significant disability population and supported employment services. You see their role increasing or changing in the future?

>> **CORA MCNABB:** I would say yes to both of those questions because I think in order for their role to increase, I think their role will change. We've already talked about COVID-19, the pandemic and how really, it's challenged everybody in all aspects of our life. Socially, politically, personal lives, the economy and of course this includes individuals with disabilities. And I think as a result, the providers of employment services have had been impacted by what has happened. And those providers are critical to the overall service delivery system. We need them. Providers like VR agencies and businesses. We found ourselves in

a very unprecedented situation and having to switch to virtual platforms as well as in person services.

A huge factor has been that we have some of the individuals that we serve that we have chosen to shelter at home and wait the pandemic out. They want to wait for things to open. Moving forward I think providers are going to have to develop service strategies that encompass remote services as well as how to deliver services safely. One of the things that Felicia said earlier that really hit home with us is she had mentioned how dependent providers are on the funding that we provide and I think that has been true during the pandemic. And it all sounds really easy but as I mentioned earlier, I don't think we really note the long-term effects. We know the short-term effects, lower referrals to employment providers which has resulted in decreased revenue causing financial shortfalls for them and some instances the viability of their programs has been threatened.

I don't have all the answers here. But I think it is a great need for us that are providers are involved in collaborative efforts and another thing I really liked what Felicia and David both said is you have to kind of look at the providers and what we want from them what they are able to give to us and then figure out how to do it well.

I think it is going to take a collaborative effort on different groups nationally and on the local level to solve some of the issues moving forward.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Any other panelists would like to talk about the CRP services and the most significant populations?

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** We are ending our time some going to focus this next little bit on a final topic of our employer engagement and business relations. There was a large emphasis on our business engagement side and we really have individuals with disabilities who continue to achieve employment goals will be also have the employer business side and services we are providing for them and thinking about our business side of the customer what collaborations or changes have you all seem to increase that employer engagement especially right now during this pandemic and what you see that being in the future?

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** I figured I would comment, I think where we need to go in the future is to work within all the partners within our system including the community rehab providers to frankly avoid tripping over one another as we look to engage with employers. Employers are flooded with different agencies and entities reaching out to them trying to place individuals within their businesses. To the extent that we can

coordinate what we are doing and engage employers as a system for the holistic system that can meet a wide swath of their needs. It is just going to improve outcomes by consolidating and coming at them with a well-thought-out strategy to offer services I think is probably the greatest thing that we can do to assist employer community.

With respect to continued work services or job retention services. In Connecticut we face a really big decision a couple years ago. We were about to implement an order of selection in which for those that are not familiar, we are required when financial resources or capacity of the program is not going to be sufficient to serve all eligible individuals, we need to work with those first. Some amounts to make a decision as to whether or not would like to continue on with employment retention services along with the category of individual we are working with. We Connecticut decided that we were going to continue on with employment retention when implementing order of selection. We thought that was critical because of the need to be able to address the needs of employers as a gateway for future consumers to be able to work within those businesses. Eliminating bias on monks the employers increasing the level of comfort of hiring somebody with a disability is a really huge part in paving the way for the future.

It is imperative that we demonstrate that the employer is going to receive the supports of our entire system should they hire someone and by allowing us ourselves to continue to serve people even after they are placed into a job or if an employer has an employee that needs something and they feel comfortable and coming to VR I think it's very important for us and for the long-term to make that decision.

Thankfully we have moved out of that order of selection we would have lost a lot of ground to pleaded make those decisions.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** In Florida when it went in for the order selection when WIOA came out and the job retention aspect we did that and is beneficial for the customers who have a job that needs services in order to maintain the job. It is a critical service we have a lot of individuals that we assist in that way.

Joe, Cora, Felicia?

>> **JOE XAVIER:** A couple things to follow up with what David said. I think you also have to recognize that the impact that has occurred to us as organizations and business they are doing in a different way we have to appreciate and understand that there is some of the positive side to that for example virtual -- we have to scale up our talent consumers so they are prepared for those interviews. But the other thing that is also, David mentioned this earlier when talking about student services. We

are now here in California exploring and embedding counselors in large corporation with employers to do things, one cannot help but the second one is really to align that counselor skill set with what that business really needs. And we hope that that will expedite and make it easier for that corporation to give individuals with disabilities an opportunity to go into the job markets, and work. We are looking at different ways of thinking about how we engage by embedding the counselor as I said and also by aligning caseloads by industry settings. Not just across all sectors but somebody that can target for example the IT sector and be able to understand the skill set what they are going to be looking for, how to better prepare and better interview.

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** I would like to also call it. One of the things we've been very successful with his industry-specific placement programs but we developed over 10 different training models within host employers here in Connecticut and it results in many people being placed within the host employer but also building their skills so they are transferable to other similar employers and industry we found that that is a great way to really interface with the employer's and built up some pathways for the consumers to engage in.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** That is an excellent point. A lot of our work experiences, all the things that VR is doing especially with the young population is focus on the industry sector to your state. We've had a lot of partners that we have collaborated with especially over the last few years the student population. But definitely a lot of good things happening with our employer engagement. I think David you said that employers are bombarded all the time. We often hear from the employers that they want the one point of contact. They would like the one person they can contact and say I got 20 openings help me fill the positions and I think we can all certainly respect that as well. But this is an opportunity with the workforce partners to really collaborate together and come up with those employers that that is an opportunity that we saw and I think all the states are benefiting from that relationship as well.

We have about nine minutes left and I know the panels probably getting a little tired but I'm going to throw one final question out there and just let you talk or anything you may not have been able to talk about today that you wanted to make sure to share with the audience. Are there any future emerging issues you are expecting to be a part of the future of VR services?

>> **FELICIA JOHNSON:** I can make a comment on that. What we have learned in dealing with this pandemic and I will use Joe's word, we have got to be nimble. Not just as individual state programs, but as a VR community. I think I have heard on several different calls in several different pedals that a lot of our programs were not equipped to telework. VR in South Carolina counselors have had laptops for years but the reason we have laptops is because our counselors go to different itinerary sites. Probation and parole, different places and they have their laptop for that reason. But when the governor said to send everybody home, we had folks just like what are we supposed to do? We don't know how to work out of our house. We need to be in our office in order to be productive. It really made us shift and figure out not only can we be productive from a location other than our office, but we can also come up with new and innovative ways to serve our consumers. We don't have to do things like we've done that for the last 20/30 years.

I think that we have seen that locally here in our states. But my hope is that that is seen from a much larger scale. From a national level and federal level. And that things are put in place to help the VR programs to become more innovative and to look at our communities and to look at business and schools and see where they are going and help lead and guide the VR program so that we can make the shifts necessary to meet

the needs of businesses and meet the needs of schools and meet the needs of the new workforce that would be more likely to come to a state agency that has an option of teleworking. I think it was Joe that said a large majority of your staff will be teleworking permanently and that is great. I'm over here in the southeast and it is kind of like we've got to get everyone back in those offices because that's the only way they can be productive and get work done.

The challenge that I see as I think it's going to take time for everything to kind of get near the same page and we can realize that there are better ways to do things. We need to use technology. We need to be more flexible. We need to be more innovative. Some of these changes may require legislative changes but I feel like the VR program there will have to be some changes made from a legislative standpoint in order to help us to progress to this next level of innovation and serving our consumers, our business partners and getting the work done that we need to get done as VR employees.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you, Felicia. Any other panelist 's either I get excited like this -- about this. A lot happened with COVID-19, the illness and death should not be discounted. But it accelerated a lot of things that were taking place. And for me I see such tremendous possibilities in our near future. If we think about what is going on with

technology and not only that's already here but what is coming when you think about artificial intelligence, I just see such potential opportunities for people with disabilities.

>> **JOE XAVIER:** I think the challenge will be is VR ready willing and able to lead in an embrace all those possibilities? Not just VR but about partners and families and society it is think about the fact that we are here on this virtual panel, who would've thought this was possible a year ago. It's not just technology is new, but we are using it in new ways. We are doing things with existing technology we never dreamed that we would be doing or at least not doing it.

I am very hopeful. I think a lot of opportunity is going to materialize here but I would also say as a VR profession, we need to embrace it and not fear it.

>> **DAVID DOUKAS:** I will be very brief, but I just want to jump on that point of the importance of technology and the role that it will play. One of the things I am most grateful down was prior to the pandemic striking late 2019, our department went through a complete technology refresh and we outfitted all of our staff with remote capability good everyone packing a lightweight laptop, virtual private network capability to access networks and really all of the tools necessary to telework and serve individuals remotely. Despite having all

the hardware, it was the wetware of our own staff that was one of the biggest doubling blocks as we transitioned from working in our offices to a full remote situation which we are still in eight months later.

What we have found is there are big gaps between what many of our staff are capable of and working remotely and those who have not embraced it.

I think raising the baseline level of functionality of monks our own staff will be critical and modeling to consumers that we are working with in a remote way and encouraging them to be able to use technology to the fullest extent and engaged not only with us but the world around them. We started the practice of purchasing tablets for consumers to engage with us along with Wi-Fi capabilities to allow connectivity necessary to work with us. We are trying to go at this very aggressively, the lesson learned here is we need to take the time to invest in our staff so they can use the tools that they have available.

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** Thank you, David. It is 2:29 PM so I wanted to thank our panel experts for spending some time with us today to share your thoughts about the future of VR. I know the pandemic has made necessary for the public VR program to be flexible and change the way we have served our customers. We have learned a lot through the pandemic that many of the services can be conducted virtually and we

are seeing success in this approach for customers. However, we also know not all of our customers have the ability to connect virtually in the population will need the more traditional approach to better assist them. I started this panel discussion talking about the individualized approach that VR is proud to support and allowing greater flexibility especially during the pandemic as allow the individual approach to expand services delivery and outreach. I want to end this panel discussion with a quote from a very near and dear favorite colleague of mine, it is not verbatim. He may have to correct me but this is the just. Never miss an opportunity to improve during a crisis. Very I want to thank you for allowing us to have this discussion today and I will turn it back over to you.

>> **BARRY WHALEY:** Thank you so much Allison and thank you to our entire panel core, Joe, Felicia, David did and especially Allison for leading the discussion. As a former employee of voc rehab I found the discussion fascinating and I think the future of VR is very bright. To our folks listening today I want to thank you again for participating in this webinar. Future images of the face of vocational rehabilitation this is the final of four events in the virtual series disability employment looking back in moving forward.

As a reminder a certificate of completion is available for this webinar appeared to receive the certificate you must meet permit requirements, you have to have been registered for this webinar, I said listen to all of the webinar, your attendance to this entire webinar must be verified.

You must complete the online multiple-choice Post-Test or the webinar but if you have joined us for previous webinars in the series we insert an Easter egg somewhere in the questions and the Easter egg this week Marsha, there she is, isn't she beautiful this is Allison Flanagan's dog Rosie and she may just show up as a test question. Isn't she something?

>> **ALLSION FLANAGAN:** That's a look she gave me when we were going back to Kentucky.

>> **BARRY WHALEY:** After you submit the Post-Test and verify your attendance you will be provided with a link to put in your completion that a copy of the certificate will also be sent to the email address you provided when accessing the posttest for the webinar your feedback is very important to us as always. We appreciate your input and we always are looking for ways to improve these webinars and identify future topics of interest. Please reach out to us for the link to the Post-Test and the evaluation of the webinar will be emailed to all registration participants in the next couple of hours. This webinar along with all materials in the four event series will be archived with

recording, transcripts, and presentation. We encourage your colleagues and friends to share the link to the archive of this series for the link is [adasoutheast.org /webinars/archives.php](https://adasoutheast.org/webinars/archives.php).

Thank you again for being with us. For this webinar and the four-part series in celebration of NDEAM - National Disability Employment Awareness Month, and the 30th anniversary of ADA and 100th anniversary of VR.

And finally, if you have questions about your rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act, you may contact your regional ADA center at 1-800-949-4232. Or in the Southeast you can call us directly at 404-541-9001 or you can email us at adasoutheast@law.syr.edu.

Remember, all calls and emails are free and confidential. Thanks again, join us next month, we will have a webinar on “Protecting your Mental Health during the Pandemic and Holidays.” See you then.

End of Transcript

Event 4 of 4: Future Images of the Face of Vocational Rehabilitation

Virtual Series: Disability Employment – Looking Back & Moving Forward

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