

# ***Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling: Lack of Professional VR Counselors and the Implications for Individuals with Disabilities Seeking VR Services***

*By Tarra Nystrom, MBA*

*June 23, 2016*

As the need and positions for vocational rehabilitation professionals increases each year, fewer and fewer qualified professionals fill these positions. The number of disabled people seeking services increases each year as well. Individuals with disabilities seeking rehabilitation services should receive the respect due to them by having access to adequately educated, masters-degreed rehabilitation counselors.

We can all agree that the result is to ensure that every person with a disability who seeks services receives the supports he or she wants and deserves. We can also agree that while there will probably always be dedicated, concerned employees working in a variety of service-oriented programs, a greater level of training of VR Counselors allows for the most targeted and efficiently delivered services. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 20% increase in the job outlook for VR Counselors through 2022.

Fewer individuals educated and trained as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors means that vocational agencies including those within the State-Federal VR system must hire new VR Counselors that are not trained as Rehabilitation Counselors. These hires are not as prepared to work in the VR field as those graduating from a Rehabilitation Counseling Master's degree program are. The concern is that these untrained individuals are not adequately prepared to fully assist VR consumers achieve timely and appropriate employment outcomes. There is also concern that many of these hires are not ready for the employment focus of VR counseling. There is concern that those without Rehabilitation Counseling training hired in the VR world are not ready to address the VR issues related to individuals with disabilities, along with functional limitations, and employment limitations. Those not trained in rehabilitation counseling may not be ready to deal with the production orientation associated with the VR system (getting VR consumers through the system and employed in a timely fashion, while being able to close unsuccessful cases regardless of the reason). With a seemingly secure career, fewer and fewer VR Counselors are graduating in collegiate VR programs. Reaching potential VR professionals is a challenge. One way is to market to undergraduate students in majors such as psychology, sociology, social work, rehabilitation services, etc. Majors where students would typically have a desire to help people, but might not have a clear focus on what job will allow them to do that. Educating/marketing to these students about Rehabilitation Counseling might give at least some of them the career direction for which they are looking.

The challenge is two-fold. First, Rehabilitation Counseling is a bit of a niche field within the area of counseling. More students are familiar with Clinical Mental Health Counseling and School Counseling. So one of the challenges goes back to educating/marketing Rehabilitation Counseling to High School students and especially Undergraduate college students.

Another possible reason for the decrease is that undergraduate students are accruing so much debt to get through college that the thought of taking on more debt to attend graduate school doesn't seem like a great option. While some Rehabilitation Counseling Master's degree programs be awarded grant money from the U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation

Services Administration to assist their students with tuition, many programs do not have this same compensation.

Fewer individuals educated and trained as Rehabilitation Counselors means that vocational agencies (including those within the State and Federal VR systems) must hire new VR Counselors that are not trained as Rehabilitation Counselors. These hires are not as prepared to work in the VR field as those graduating from a Rehabilitation Counseling Master's degree program, and the concerns include:

- Untrained individuals are not adequately prepared to fully assist VR consumers achieve timely and appropriate employment outcomes
- These hires are not ready for the employment focus of VR counseling
- There is concern that those without Rehabilitation Counseling training hired in the VR roles are not ready to address the VR issues related to individuals with disabilities, along with functional limitations, and employment limitations
- Those not trained in rehabilitation counseling may not be ready to deal with the production orientation associated with the VR system (getting VR consumers through the system and employed in a timely fashion, while being able to close unsuccessful cases regardless of the reason)

A lack of more highly-qualified VR Counselors negatively impacts the outcomes and the lives of people with disabilities. The shortage continues to strain vocational organizations in finding appropriately, adequately trained rehabilitation counselors into their open positions. It has short-term and long-term impacts regarding the concern of whether individuals with disabilities seeking VR services are served appropriately. If the shortage of appropriately educated/trained Rehabilitation Counselors persists, it could have a detrimental impact on the profession of rehabilitation counseling. It could call into question the viability of the profession especially if others not adequately educated and trained and rehabilitation counselor are doing the job, regardless of their effectiveness.

Dr. Carl Sabo, Ph.D., CRC summarizes, "The bottom line is having rehabilitation counselors adequately trained works to better serve individuals with disabilities. I believe that when the VR system hires untrained individuals as rehabilitation counselors it impairs the Individualized Rehabilitation Program's delivered to individuals with disabilities."