2025 NATIONAL
VR DIRECTORS SURVEY
RESULTS

March 2025

INTRODUCTION

Schmieg Consulting, with the endorsement of CSAVR, conducted a nationwide survey to better understand the challenges, needs, and strengths of vocational rehabilitation (VR) agency directors—with a particular focus on those new to the role. This report presents a summary of participant responses and highlights key findings drawn from both quantitative and qualitative survey items. It also offers strategic insights into how individual agencies and the VR system as a whole can better support agency leadership.

The report is organized into the following four sections:

A. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION (page 3)

B. NEW DIRECTOR RESULTS (page 5)

C. ALL DIRECTOR RESULTS (page 13)

D. SUMMARY ANALYSIS (page 17)

We extend our sincere appreciation to all VR agency directors who took the time to complete the survey. Your input is invaluable. We also wish to thank CSAVR—and in particular, Steve Wooderson and John Connelly—for their endorsement of this effort.
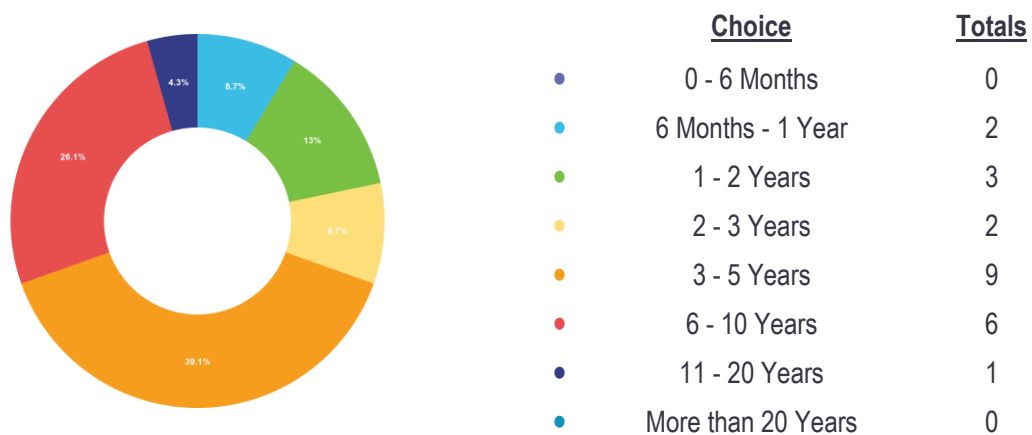
Finally, on behalf of Schmieg Consulting, we recognize and commend the dedication of VR agency directors across the country. The work you do to deliver high-quality vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities is both essential and deeply appreciated.

Greg Schmieg, Ph.D.
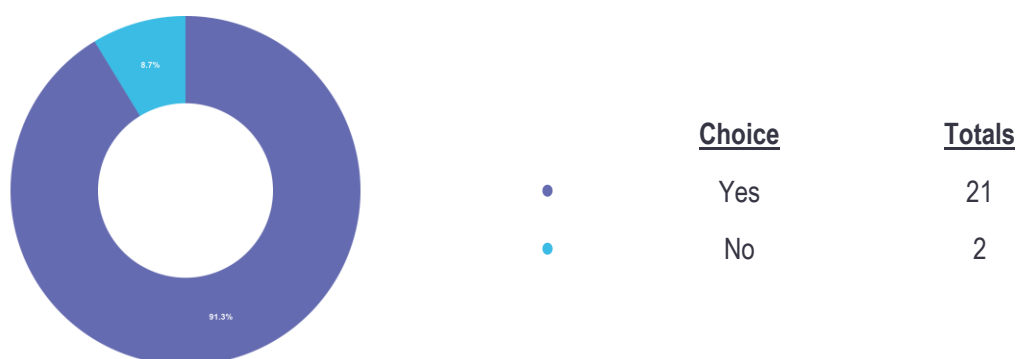CEO, Schmieg Consulting, Inc.

1. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

A total of 23 VR agency directors participated in the survey, representing 29% of all directors nationwide. The first four survey questions focused on participants' tenure as a director, overall tenure with their agency, experience in vocational rehabilitation, and whether they identified themselves as a "new" director. Their responses are summarized below.

Q1 How long have you been in your current role as the VR agency director?

	Choice	Totals
•	0 - 6 Months	0
•	6 Months - 1 Year	2
•	1 - 2 Years	3
•	2 - 3 Years	2
•	3 - 5 Years	9
•	6 - 10 Years	6
•	11 - 20 Years	1
•	More than 20 Years	0

Q2 Did you work for the same VR agency before becoming the VR agency director?

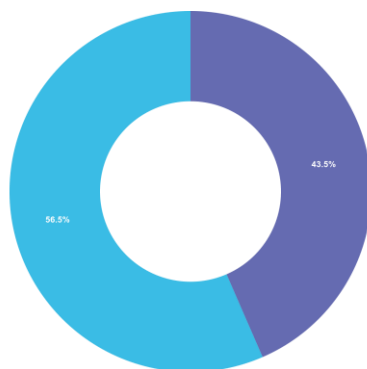|	Choice	Totals
•	Yes	21
•	No	2

Q3 How many years of vocational rehabilitation (VR) experience have you had prior to becoming the VR agency director?
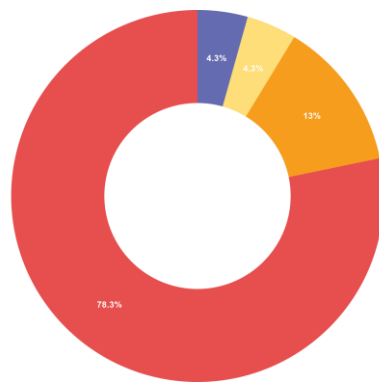
Choice	Totals
No VR Experience At All	1
1 Year or Less	0
1 - 3 Years	0
3 - 5 Years	1
6 - 10 Years	3
More than 10 Years	18

Q4 Do you consider yourself to be a "new" VR agency director, regardless of how long you've been in that role?

Choice	Totals
Yes	10
No	13

2. NEW DIRECTOR RESULTS

The next seven survey questions were directed exclusively to participants who identified themselves as a new director, regardless of their length of service in their role. These questions explored participants' perceptions of their effectiveness as a director, including their personal strengths, challenges, areas for growth, time demands, resource and support needs, and perspectives on mentoring. A summary of responses to each question is provided below.

Q5 As a "new" VR agency director, what would you consider to be your greatest strengths to be an effective director?

From the responses, a number of strong, recurring themes emerged. Although the backgrounds and styles of each director vary, several common strengths stand out. These themes reflect both personal attributes and professional competencies and help illustrate what new VR Directors believe equips them to succeed. A summary of the participants' responses to Q5 is presented below.

1. Deep Program Knowledge & Experience in VR *(Mentioned in 6 responses)*
A clear majority of respondents referenced long-term, hands-on experience within the VR system as a primary strength. Their past roles ranged from rehabilitation counselor to WIOA Program Manager to CRP leadership.
Examples:
- "Having had prior long-term VR experience at this agency."
- "My long-term experience in VR... counselor, supervisor, Supported Employment Program Coordinator..."
- "In-depth knowledge of the VR program and WIOA programming."
- "Understanding of VR history, function, and what is and is not."
- "VR Knowledge; Management/supervisory skills; HR experience and knowledge."
- "My own experience as a VR customer and CRP leader has been invaluable."

☑ Insight:
This suggests that directors who rise from within the system bring a deep operational awareness and contextual understanding of both clients and systems, which they see as critical to effective leadership.

2. Leadership Attributes: Adaptability, Empathy, Fairness *(Mentioned in 5+ responses)*
Many respondents listed personal qualities essential to leadership, particularly in high-change environments like VR.
Examples:
- "Perseverance, optimism, transparency, kindness, building partnerships, and fairness."
- "My ability to pivot, adapt to changing times, and build a great team."
- "Passion, empathy, and compassion to lead my teams."
- "Solution-oriented, values-based leadership, and creative."
- "I listen and I empathize with staff."

☑ Insight:
This signals that emotional intelligence, ethical leadership, and a capacity for adaptation are not just soft skills—they are perceived as core qualifications by new directors themselves.

3. Team Building & Staff Engagement *(Mentioned in 3+ responses)*
Several directors emphasized their success in creating strong teams, fostering morale, and building internal trust.
Examples:
- "Creating a team atmosphere."
- "Build a great team."
- "I listen and empathize with staff."

☑ Insight:

New directors often see themselves not just as managers, but as team facilitators and cultural stewards. They see their ability to connect with staff as directly linked to agency performance.

4. Operational & Fiscal Competency *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
A few directors referenced skills in budgeting, policy, and task delegation as key leadership assets.
Examples:
- "Understanding budgets... ability to pivot..."
- "Delegation and monitoring of those tasks."
- "Knowledge of fiscal and programmatic policies."
- "Program policy development."

☑ Insight:

While interpersonal strengths are heavily emphasized, directors also recognize the value of technical acumen—especially in managing resources and implementing policy within a complex regulatory environment.

5. Collaboration & External Partnerships *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
Some responses mentioned external collaboration as a strength—particularly with workforce partners and state agencies.
Examples:
- "Collaboration with workforce partners and other State agencies."
- "Building partnerships."

☑ Insight:

New directors understand the importance of cross-agency coordination, particularly under WIOA and in integrated service delivery environments. They view their networking and partnership-building capabilities as core to VR agency success.

Q6 As a "new" VR agency director, what would you consider to be your greatest challenges to be an effective director?

This question surfaced a remarkably consistent and candid set of responses, showing that fiscal management and systemic complexity are the most pervasive challenges facing new directors. However, there are additional layers including staff morale, onboarding gaps, administrative misalignment, and external policy tension. A summary of the participants' responses to Q6 is presented below.

1. Fiscal Complexity & Financial Constraints *(Mentioned in 8 responses)*
Unsurprisingly, this is the most dominant challenge. Directors expressed a struggle with understanding and complying with Uniform Guidance; learning the intricacies of the grant, including Match and MOE; state-level funding shortfalls and inability to draw down full federal funds; budget forecasting, fiscal rules/regulations, and program funding limitations; and balancing the financial relationship and authority between DSU and DSA.
Examples:
- "Uniform Guidance."
- "Budget forecasting; Fiscal rules & regs..."
- "Funding in my state is a challenge... underfunded."
- "Financial constraints and the funding pendulum swing..."
- "Understanding the grant (financial aspect)..."
- "Match and MOE... balancing control and decision-making between DSU and DSA."
- "Fiscal rules, language translation across audiences..."

☑ Insight:
The learning curve on fiscal operations is steep and often not fully supported by training. Moreover, financial challenges are not just technical, they are structural (inability to secure state match) and political (conflicting federal vs. state guidance).

2. Lack of Onboarding and Structured Training *(Mentioned in 2+ responses)*
New directors consistently reported a lack of formal onboarding or access to resources.
Examples:
- "Lack of onboarding training. Difficult to find necessary information at times."
- "The amount of time it takes to wrap our brains around the unique fiscal challenges..."

☑ Insight:
This highlights a major gap in leadership transition planning. Directors often step into extremely complex roles without a clear roadmap, toolkit, or systematic orientation process.

3. Staffing Capacity & Staff Morale *(Mentioned in 3+ responses)*
Staff-related issues are a recurring concern, ranging from inability to hire due to funding or bureaucratic constraints, to staff burnout and toxic workplace culture.
Examples:
- "Meeting needs of clients with available staff (not able to easily add positions)."
- "Staff-related burnout."
- "Dealing with toxic staff."
- "The new administration has caused an enormous amount of anxiety throughout the agency."

☑ Insight:
VR directors are struggling to both maintain and grow service capacity amid limited resources and internal culture challenges. Directors feel the weight of staff morale and organizational health alongside the technical aspects of the role.

4. Navigating Multi-Level Bureaucracy & Policy Conflicts *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
Several responses pointed to complex and sometimes contradictory policy layers across federal, state, DSU, and DSA entities.
Examples:
- "Balancing our state policies and leadership that sometimes conflict with the federal policies and leadership."
- "Balancing of control and decision making between the DSU and DSA."

✅ Insight:
This reflects a governance challenge—new directors must not only manage operations but also become fluent in the political and policy dynamics that affect decision-making and compliance.

5. Time & Bandwidth Limitations *(Mentioned in 2+ responses)*
A few respondents mentioned that the sheer volume of responsibilities and available time posed a serious challenge.
Examples:
- "Available time."
- "Capacity issues to provide all the necessary services while being innovative and creative."

✅ Insight:
The pressure to be strategic, innovative, and responsive, all while navigating internal and external complexity, can overwhelm even experienced leaders.

6. Technology Integration *(Mentioned in 1 response)*
One director described technology as a consistent barrier to innovation and efficiency.
Example:
- "Technology integration is always a nightmare."

✅ Insight:
Although this was less frequently mentioned, it likely intersects with fiscal and operational frustrations, especially if systems aren't aligned with performance, reporting, or client service goals.

Q7 As a new VR agency director, what are the top three areas where you feel you need to gain knowledge or skills to perform your job effectively?

Across all responses, there is a strong and recurring focus on fiscal management, federal regulations, and grant oversight, which builds on the challenges discussed in Q6. However, this question also revealed deeper aspirations for strategic leadership, technology integration, and staff management, indicating that directors are thinking beyond survival mode and aiming for transformation and sustainability in their leadership. A summary of the participants' responses to Q7 is presented below.

1. Fiscal Management & Financial Strategy *(Mentioned in 8+ responses)*
Nearly every respondent mentioned fiscal knowledge as a core area where they need to grow. This includes Uniform Guidance (31 CFR); forecasting and budgeting; understanding grant structure, spending, and revenue optimization; and state and federal regulatory compliance.
Examples:
- "Fiscal matters, state/fed regs for BEP, perf measures"
- "Fiscal forecasting & overall fiscal knowledge and support"
- "Fiscal knowledge, DDS regulations, RSA reporting."
- "Grant management, interpretation of federal rules, increasing revenue"
- "Legislative strategy, fiscal strategy, procurement strategies"

☑ Insight:
This confirms that financial literacy is the single most critical learning need for new directors. Even those with strong leadership skills and VR backgrounds struggle to keep pace with fiscal demands and compliance expectations.

2. Federal Regulations, Reporting & Data Management *(Mentioned in 5+ responses)*
Several directors expressed a need to better understand federal rules, performance measures, and data reporting requirements from RSA and other oversight bodies.
Examples:
- "Federal reporting"
- "RSA reporting"
- "Developing decision-making guides for staff to refer to"
- "Interpretation of federal rules"
- "Continue to develop a deep understanding of the Federal Grant and reporting of the grant and data"

☑ Insight:
This suggests a need for plain-language resources and structured guidance around interpreting federal regs and using data as a leadership tool—not just for compliance but for program improvement.

3. Grant Management *(Mentioned in 3–4 responses)*
Closely related to fiscal management, grant administration emerged as a distinct knowledge gap—particularly around maximizing revenue, ensuring compliance, and planning grant expenditures strategically.
Examples:
- "Grant management"
- "Federal Grant and reporting of the grant and data"
- "Increasing revenue"

☑ Insight:

There is a desire not only to manage the grant accurately but also to leverage it proactively, to fund innovation, meet state needs, and avoid lapses or under-utilization of federal funds.

4. Leadership Development & Strategic Planning *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
A few directors highlighted bigger-picture leadership competencies, including strategic planning; vision-building; and balancing needs of staff vs. clients.
Examples:
- "Strategic planning and thinking to develop long-term strategies"
- "Managing teams with constant turnover"
- "Balancing staff needs/wants with customer needs/wants"

✅ Insight:
These leaders are aiming to shift from reactive leadership to visionary leadership. While they're focused on mastering foundational competencies, they also want to build a sustainable, intentional leadership practice.

5. Workforce/Staff Retention & Management *(Mentioned in 2+ responses)*
Ongoing staff turnover, burnout, and retention were cited again, this time in the context of building skills to manage and retain strong teams.
Examples:
- "Managing teams with constant turnover"
- "Retaining VR staff"

✅ Insight:
New directors are acutely aware that without effective staff management strategies, fiscal and operational success will be hard to sustain. There's a desire for more tools to maintain morale, engagement, and retention.

6. Technology & Innovation *(Mentioned in 1–2 responses)*
While not mentioned broadly, one respondent explicitly noted a desire to use technology and AI to increase efficiency.
Example:
- "Learn how to utilize technology and AI to increase efficiencies"

✅ Insight:
Even though this was a one-off response, it reflects a forward-thinking mindset that could grow as more directors focus on modernization.

7. DSU/DSA Relationship Building *(Mentioned in 1–2 responses)*
Another important leadership development theme was navigating the complex relationship between DSU (Designated State Unit) and DSA (Designated State Agency).
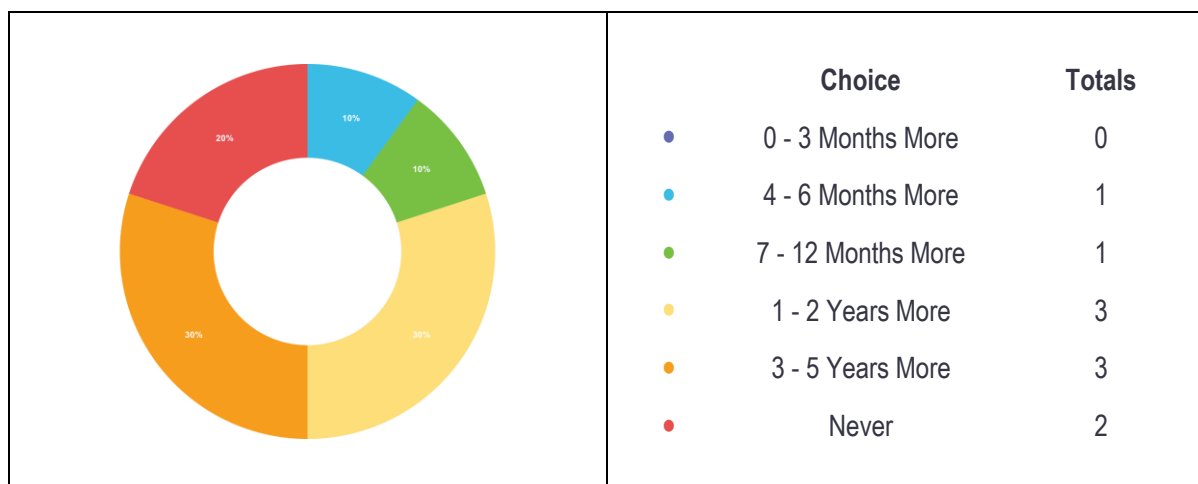Example:
- "DSU/DSA Relationship Building and Management"

✅ Insight:
This highlights a structural challenge and indicates a need for governance training, communication strategies, and clear role delineation between these entities.

Q8 As a new VR agency director, how much time do you estimate it will take for you to feel fully confident and comfortable in your role?

	Choice	Totals
•	0 - 3 Months More	0
•	4 - 6 Months More	1
•	7 - 12 Months More	1
•	1 - 2 Years More	3
•	3 - 5 Years More	3
•	Never	2

Q9 As a new VR agency director, what resources, support, or experiences do you believe would help you feel fully confident in your role more quickly?

Responses to this question show a clear appetite for structured, accessible, and relational support, especially around fiscal management, mentorship, peer networks, and experiential learning. Several respondents expressed the non-linear nature of confidence, with some admitting they fluctuate between feeling capable and overwhelmed. This adds a layer of emotional realism that complements the more technical themes. A summary of the participants' responses to Q9 is presented below.

1. Fiscal Understanding & Support *(Mentioned in 3–4 responses)*
As in previous questions, fiscal competence remains the most consistently identified need for new directors to feel confident.
Examples:
- "Fiscal understanding, program development, RSA leadership building"
- "Continue TAC-QM fiscal support & advice"
- "More interactive training, coaching…"

☑ Insight:
Fiscal support is not just about knowledge—it's about ongoing, contextualized advice. Directors don't want just training, they need a sounding board, a safe space to ask questions, and timely guidance as issues arise.

2. Mentorship from Experienced Directors *(Mentioned in 3–4 responses)*
A number of respondents suggested mentoring relationships with other state directors as a key confidence-builder.
Examples:
- "Structured mentorship"
- "Mentor from another State Director"
- "Networking with other VR directors & agencies"

☑ Insight:

Mentorship is seen as a powerful accelerant to confidence and competence, especially when it's structured, timely, and focused on real-time challenges rather than abstract concepts. Peer support adds both technical help and emotional resilience.

3. Peer Relationships & Networking *(Mentioned in 3+ responses)*
Beyond formal mentorship, directors pointed to the value of peer relationships and cross-agency learning.
Examples:
- "Peer relationships"
- "Learning effective practices of other VR agencies is helpful"
- "Networking with other VR directors & agencies"

✅ Insight:
This suggests that directors benefit from collaborative learning, seeing what has worked in other states, and normalizing their challenges through shared experiences.

4. Accessible, Practical, and Ongoing Training *(Mentioned in 3+ responses)*
Training was frequently mentioned, but the type of training desired was very specific: accessible, interactive, and ongoing, not one-off or remote-only.
Examples:
- "New Director training accessible without having to fly across the country"
- "More interactive training, coaching, and other resources"
- "Regular meetings with the RSA liaison"

✅ Insight:
New directors want convenient, cost-effective learning opportunities, especially virtual or regional options that reduce travel burden. There's also a desire for coaching, not just instruction.

5. Time to Learn & Transition *(Mentioned in 2 responses)*
A couple of directors referenced the need for protected time to step back, learn, and gain footing.
Examples:
- "More time to learn"
- "Time. Internal agency supports"

✅ Insight:
Leaders feel that they're thrown into an already-moving machine without a buffer or ramp-up period. Agency transition planning and internal support structures could help bridge that gap.

6. Centralized Access to Agency Resources & Best Practices *(Mentioned in 1–2 responses)*
One director explicitly asked for a centralized, coordinated repository of VR agency policies and practices.
Example:
- "A more coordinated place to see all agency policies would be of great assistance"

✅ Insight:
This points to the need for a national knowledge hub or portal—a "VR Director's Toolkit"—to promote shared learning, consistency, and ease of access.

7. Emotional Resilience & Confidence Fluctuations *(Mentioned in 1–2 responses)*
One candid and relatable response highlighted the emotional rollercoaster of the role.
Example:
- "Some days, I'm very confident, and other days, I'm back to my counselor days."

✅ Insight:
This underscores the value of peer empathy, leadership coaching, and mental health support. Confidence is not just about competence—it's about managing stress, doubt, and imposter syndrome.

Q10 As a "new" VR agency director, do you think director mentoring would be helpful?

	Choice	Totals
•	Yes	10
•	No	0
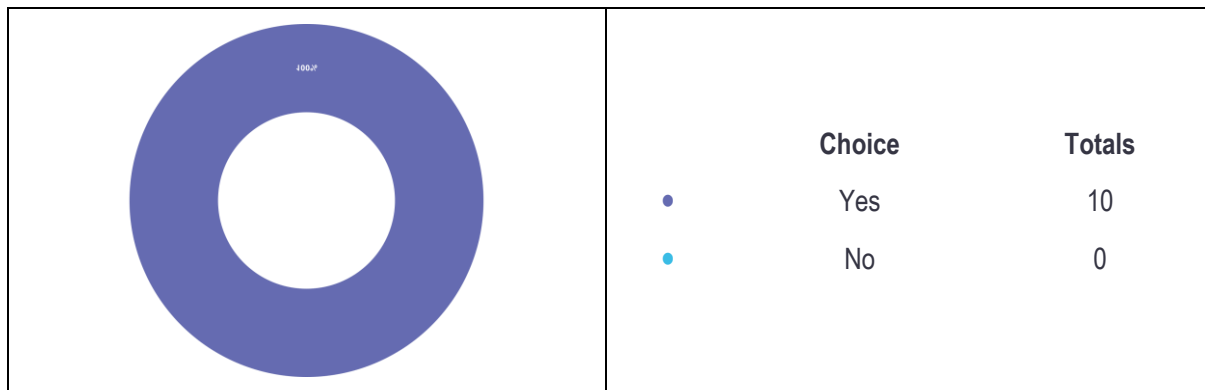
Q11 Since you answered "yes"; please describe what kind of mentoring you would find most helpful.

The responses reflect a strong desire for mentorship that is practical, accessible, empathetic, and deeply grounded in lived experience. Directors don't just want mentoring in the abstract—they want mentors who understand the daily pressures of the role, especially the fiscal complexities, the emotional toll, and the decision-making demands. Most importantly, they want real relationships with real people they can call on—not another training module or compliance checklist. A summary of the participants' responses to Q11 is presented below.

1. Practical, Hands-On Support *(Mentioned in 6–7 responses)*
Most responses point to a need for mentors who can share how they actually do the job: what works, how they organize their day, and how they get through tough decisions.
Examples:
- "Show me the ropes, share how they prioritize and manage their work, how they manage internal controls..."
- "Having access to a veteran director to bounce questions and ideas with."
- "Q&A session"
- "As a VR director, you are constantly learning... everyday questions and the more complex ones."

☑ Insight:
This is not about theory—it's about real-time, situational guidance. Directors want operational mentoring grounded in day-to-day realities, not general leadership concepts.

2. Fiscal Mentoring *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
Several responses specifically call out fiscal knowledge as a critical mentoring need.
Examples:
- "Fiscal related matters."
- "Share how they manage internal controls."
- "Been through... fiscal challenges."

☑ Insight:
As in previous questions, this confirms that fiscal strategy is a consistent pain point. New directors want veteran guidance on interpreting rules, managing match, forecasting, and staying in compliance—all in real-world language.

3. Emotional Support & Crisis Navigation *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*

Some directors emphasized the value of a mentor who has been through adversity: layoffs, toxic staff, OOS closures, or agency upheaval.

Examples:
- "Other directors who have been through layoffs, OOS closing categories, fiscal challenges... this work is HARD!"
- "Directing during upheaval and difficult times, dealing with toxic employees."
- "Someone I can call when I need support."

☑ Insight:

There is a mental health and moral support component here. Mentoring is not just about problem-solving—it's about feeling less alone during periods of uncertainty, instability, or isolation.

4. Relationship-Based, Human Access *(Mentioned in 3–4 responses)*

A recurring theme is the importance of having a real person to contact—someone who is reachable, responsive, and informal.

Examples:
- "Just having a point of contact and an email or phone number to call is wonderful."
- "Someone I can call when I have a question or need support."
- "Bouncing off ideas and trading best practices."

☑ Insight:

Mentorship is less about formal programming and more about consistent, human access. Directors want a safe, trusted connection they can reach out to without fear of judgment or bureaucracy.

5. Strategic Thinking & Leadership Development *(Mentioned in 2 responses)*

Some directors also indicated a desire for mentorship in leadership strategy, contract management, and stakeholder engagement.

Examples:
- "Professional mentoring, leadership development."
- "Improving relationships with stakeholders... language to add to the contract to hold a vendor accountable."
- "Processing on decision making, strategizing, guidance as needed."

☑ Insight:

While much of the mentoring need is tactical, there's also a desire to build strategic capacity, improve influence, and handle complex negotiations with confidence.

6. Stretch Assignments & Growth Opportunities *(Mentioned in 1 response)*

One respondent uniquely referenced the desire to take on new challenges with mentor support.

Example:
- "Take on stretch assignments."

☑ Insight:

Some directors are not only looking to survive the role—they want mentorship that helps them grow, push their limits, and build their leadership identity in meaningful ways.

Q12 Since you answered "no"; please describe why you do not think mentoring would be helpful.   No answers provided.

Q13 (OPTIONAL) If you would like to discuss mentoring in more detail, please provide your email below. Not applicable.

3. ALL DIRECTOR RESULTS

The final two survey questions were directed for all participants and focused on identifying their greatest challenges, as well as the resources and support they believe would be most beneficial. A summary of responses to each question is presented below.

Q14 As the VR agency director, what do you see as the most significant challenges currently facing your agency?

This question yielded one of the most urgent, wide-ranging, and deeply felt collections of responses. The submissions reflect a landscape of uncertainty, underfunding, policy tension, and staffing strain—where directors are struggling to manage multiple systemic pressures simultaneously. Four dominant themes emerged: fiscal instability, staffing shortages, federal uncertainty, and infrastructure stress. Each is deeply interconnected.

1. Fiscal Constraints & Budget Instability *(Mentioned in 10+ responses)*
By far the most frequent theme, fiscal concerns were expressed with intensity and specificity. Directors cited: budget cuts; flat federal funding; program income complexities; underfunding due to inability to match; pre-ETS requirements disrupting financial balance; reallotment and carryover constraints; and escalating costs and loss of financial cushion.
Examples:
- "Managing the budget."
- "Flat funding, underfunding, Pre-ETS taking money from the adult program."
- "Fiscal savings and growth."
- "The financial cushion is gone... we need more federal and state resources or cut services."
- "Budget challenges, impending federal budget cuts."
- "Funding and resource allocation is an ongoing issue."

☑ Insight:
Directors are not just struggling with limited funds—they're overwhelmed by the complexity of managing them under rigid and often contradictory requirements. The fiscal model is perceived as inflexible, reactive, and insufficient for today's service demands.

2. Recruitment, Retention & Pay Challenges *(Mentioned in 9+ responses)*
The VR workforce crisis is pervasive. Directors cited: difficulty attracting qualified counselors; lack of candidates with VR-specific education; low salaries; and loss of providers and specialized professionals (e.g., TVIs, O&M).
Examples:
- "Filling VR Counselor positions... pay scales are not competitive."
- "Decrease in candidates with VR background to fill counselor positions."
- "Recruitment of TVIs and O&M professionals."
- "Low pay for staff."
- "Retaining/recruiting staff."

☑ Insight:
Recruitment and retention are not just HR issues—they are core operational threats. Many agencies are unable to meet demand or federal expectations because they lack the personnel to do so, compounding the fiscal and compliance pressure.

3. Federal Landscape & Policy Uncertainty *(Mentioned in 8+ responses)*

Many directors named the current federal environment—including administrative changes, political volatility, and regulatory pressure—as a major stressor.

Examples:
- "Current federal administration and the unknown."
- "The unknowns given changes at the DC level."

✅ Insight:

Directors feel exposed to shifting political winds and question how stable their programs will be under new or future leadership. This atmosphere of uncertainty undermines planning, innovation, and morale.

4. Complexity of VR Program Administration *(Mentioned in 5+ responses)*

The structural complexity of VR—from policy constraints to administrative systems—was repeatedly described as a significant operational barrier.

Examples:
- "Conflicting priorities—adult vs student... Pre-ETS taking money from the adult program."
- "Balancing compliance and quality work."
- "Overcomplicated system (MOE, Match, Carryover, etc.) makes it difficult to manage."

✅ Insight:

The accumulated complexity of VR's funding streams, mandates (e.g., Pre-ETS), and layered compliance requirements are draining both staff and leadership capacity. Simplification and flexibility are needed to help directors manage and lead effectively.

5. Pre-ETS & the Adult-Youth Funding Tension *(Mentioned in 4–5 responses)*

Multiple directors called out the specific challenge of Pre-ETS requirements diverting resources from adult services, staffing, and general program operations.

Examples:
- "Pre-ETS taking money from the adult program."
- "Managing Pre-ETS."

✅ Insight:

Pre-ETS is seen as a well-intentioned but resource-disruptive mandate, particularly for agencies already under strain. Directors need support in balancing mandates across populations with limited resources.

6. Staffing Capacity vs. Burnout *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*

A few responses focused on internal staff capacity, staff burnout is rising and stretching teams thin.

Examples:
- "Asking staff to stretch vs. balancing burnout."
- "Capacity issues... balancing compliance and quality."

✅ Insight:

Agencies are expected to do more with less, which is accelerating turnover and morale decline. This challenge is closely linked to both funding and staffing issues—and requires strategic workforce planning and retention tools.

7. System Change, Modernization & Technology *(Mentioned in 1–2 responses)*

Only one or two responses touched on systems or infrastructure transition.

Example:
- "Adjusting to our new case mgt system."

✅ Insight:

While not widely mentioned, modernization (especially IT and case management systems) can disrupt service flow and add new learning curves, especially in agencies already under stress.

Q15 As the VR agency director, what resources, support, or strategies do you believe would help you address your agency's challenges more effectively and efficiently?

This question draws out actionable recommendations from directors and highlights a consistent desire for better communication, more responsive federal and technical support, increased funding, stronger peer networks, and workforce pipeline improvements. Importantly, responses underscore the urgency of adapting to new post-COVID realities—many feel their agencies have changed significantly, yet federal expectations and support mechanisms have not kept pace.

1. Ongoing and Responsive Technical Assistance *(Mentioned in 5–6 responses)*
Directors were generally positive about the support received from Technical Assistance Centers (TACs) and CSAVR, but emphasized the need for continued, evolving TA that keeps up with new challenges.
Examples:
- "The quality VR technical assistance centers have provided excellent support."
- "We had significant support from Technical Assistance Centers... continued support would help."
- "CSAVR and the TACs need to just as quickly pivot facilitating discussions on increased referrals, budget restraints, waitlists..."
- "Continued support from TA Quality Management."

☑ Insight:
TA centers are valued partners—but they need to remain nimble, solutions-focused, and in-sync with real-time issues, especially as agencies emerge from COVID-era adaptations into a new normal.

2. Improved Federal Communication and Policy Clarity *(Mentioned in 3–4 responses)*
Directors expressed frustration with silence or ambiguity from RSA, and called for clearer, more proactive communication—even when answers are uncertain.
Examples:
- "RSA needs to communicate as much as they can... silence causes speculation."
- "Congress really needs to decide what VR does... they need to fund us appropriately."
- "Guidance to address non-compliance."

☑ Insight:
Directors want transparency and policy direction—even imperfect information is better than a communication vacuum. Agencies are making high-stakes decisions with uncertain guidance and inconsistent expectations.

3. Structural Reform of Funding *(Mentioned in 3–4 responses)*
Several directors offered specific policy recommendations, including revisiting the WIOA-era Pre-ETS mandate and restoring a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to the federal formula.
Examples:
- "Restore the COLA to the federal formula."
- "Separate allocation of funding to serve [Pre-ETS] population."
- "You are robbing the adult program to serve the students... can't keep up with demand."
- "Flat funding, waitlists, resource management issues."

☑ Insight:
There is a growing urgency to re-examine how VR is funded and structured. Directors are flagging that the current model forces them to make impossible tradeoffs, particularly between youth and adult services.

4. Peer Networks and a Directors' Community of Practice *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
Several directors asked for more structured peer learning opportunities, not just networking, but topic-focused, director-to-director learning spaces.
Examples:
- "Sharing policies and procedures among states is most helpful."
- "Development of a Directors Community of Practice."
- "We don't always have a dedicated time and space to learn from one another."

☑ Insight:
This points to the need for intentional peer learning infrastructure—not just conferences, but ongoing communities of practice around specific challenges (e.g., budgeting, staffing, Pre-ETS).

5. Workforce Pipeline & Credentialing Reform *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
Some directors voiced concerns about the erosion of professional standards and state-level barriers to hiring, especially in specialized roles.
Examples:
- "Establishment of agency O&M and ASL certification program."
- "The CRC has been watered down... we need qualified professionals representing clients."

☑ Insight:
Beyond funding, directors are looking for strategic workforce development, including reforms to credentialing and better recruitment of professionals into the VR field.

6. Operational Streamlining and Administrative Relief *(Mentioned in 2–3 responses)*
Some directors asked for reductions in administrative burden, particularly related to service delivery and grants management.
Examples:
- "Reduce the amount of administrative burden in the VR service delivery process and the grants management process."
- "Operationalizing all aspects of VR to ensure compliance and internal controls."

☑ Insight:
Administrative expectations are perceived as out of proportion to available staffing and systems capacity. Streamlining processes could free agencies to focus more on outcomes than paperwork.

7. Business & Legislative Partnerships *(Mentioned in 2 responses)*
One respondent noted the value of business partnerships, while another emphasized educating legislators on VR's purpose and value.
Examples:
- "Business Partnerships."
- "Education of legislators."

☑ Insight:
There's an opportunity for external engagement strategies—both to attract private-sector allies and to build advocacy at the legislative level for better funding and understanding of VR's impact.

8. Individual-Level Supports & Leadership Growth (Mentioned in 2–3 responses)
One respondent simply said: "Learning how I can support staff more." Another said they already had the resources they needed.

☑ Insight:
Leadership development remains relevant - directors also want to grow in their own effectiveness, particularly around staff support, resilience, and internal leadership capacity.

4. SUMMARY ANALYSIS

1. **Fiscal Complexity Is the Most Pressing and Pervasive Challenge.**
   The dominant concern across nearly every question was mastering fiscal oversight, as referenced with comments on
   - Match, MOE, Pre-ETS funding mandates
   - Budget forecasting, program income rules
   - Lack of training and real-time support
   - Pressure to manage complex systems with shrinking state match or flat federal funding

2. **Staffing and Workforce Pipeline Issues Are Reaching a Breaking Point.**
   Directors are struggling with:
   - Difficulty hiring and retaining qualified VR counselors and specialists (e.g., TVIs, O&M)
   - Low salaries, rigid state hiring rules, and credentialing erosion
   - Staff burnout and morale challenges exacerbated by post-COVID workload increases

3. **Leadership Transition Is Under-Supported**
   Many directors described feeling thrown into the deep end, with:
   - No formal onboarding
   - Limited or inaccessible new director training
   - Inconsistent or ad hoc mentoring
   - Uncertainty about federal expectations

4. **Federal and State Policy Misalignment Undermines Effectiveness**
   Several responses reflect tension between:
   - Federal mandates (e.g., Pre-ETS, RSA guidance)
   - State-level constraints (budgets, political priorities, procurement barriers)
   - Administrative overlays (DSU vs DSA conflicts, shared services)

5. **Directors Crave Real-World, Relational Support**
   More than any training program, directors want:
   - Mentors who have lived it
   - A safe space to ask questions without judgment
   - Practical examples, decision-making guides, and peer-generated best practices
   - Communities of practice to combat isolation