

## Chapter 11 Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling & Guidance

### 11.1 Authority: 34 CFR 361.48(c)

As appropriate to the vocational rehabilitation needs of each individual and consistent with each individual's informed choice, USOR must ensure availability of vocational rehabilitation counseling and guidance. Through the counseling relationship referral necessary to help clients apply for and secure needed services from other agencies is provided and applicants and established clients are advised about the Client Assistance Program (CAP) available under 34 CFR 370. These vocational rehabilitation counseling and guidance services are exempt from the determination of financial need and the availability of comparable services and benefits.

### 11.2 Policy

VR Counseling and guidance has consistently been cited by successful VR clients as the single most valuable service provided by USOR. VR counseling and guidance is the unique professional domain of the certified and licensed Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, and is the service through which the VR Counselor mobilizes their education, experience, and on-going training to benefit the client. VR counseling and guidance is USOR's core service and is provided throughout the client's entire experience with the agency. VR counseling and guidance is provided by the VR Counselor to:

1. Establish and maintain a successful **counseling relationship**;
2. Engage the eligible individual in the decision-making process by providing **informed choice** leading to the establishment of an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE);
3. Provide information and referral that enable the eligible individual to exercise informed choice in the selection of a vocational goal, services required to reach that goal, methods for procuring necessary services, and options relating to potential service providers;
4. Assist the client in understanding and adjusting to disability and the workplace.
5. Actively shape the client's expectations of disability, work, and the vocational rehabilitation process.

VR counseling and guidance is provided by USOR VR Counselors and is not purchased from other sources. However, other community members (e.g. services providers, family, friends) can play a crucial role in the effectiveness of counseling and guidance by supporting the achievement of the client's vocational goal. Successful VR Counselors enlist those who can support the client in the vocational rehabilitation effort.

### 11.3 Scope of VR Counseling and Guidance

Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling and Guidance are provided to:

1. **Encourage** the client through establishing a **relationship of mutual respect**, where the VR Counselor can be both supportive and challenging in promoting the client's development of the skills needed to achieve employment.
2. **Facilitate informed choice** throughout the entire rehabilitation process by providing information about the scope and limits of vocational rehabilitation services, and by helping

the client obtain specific information on programs, resources and services that can assist him/her in the selection and achievement of an employment outcome. When there are limits on the provision or availability of vocational rehabilitation services, the VR Counselor can assist the client in exploring alternatives.

3. Gain a comprehensive and individualized **understanding** of the client's abilities, capabilities, interests, strengths, resources, priorities and concerns in order to identify factors that will be critical to employment.
4. Facilitate the client's understanding of his/her **strengths** that can be utilized to achieve employment and plan with the client to find ways to work around any impediments, such as functional limitations related to health, personal, economic (e.g. benefits, work disincentives/incentives) and social issues.
5. **Assess** the client's readiness for change and the counseling techniques that may be employed to help the client overcome resistance to change.
6. **Assist** the client in selecting a vocational goal and developing a plan of outlined services that will ensure achievement of that vocational goal.
7. **Involve** "significant others" (with the client's consent) such as family members, relatives and friends in the community who can be assets to counseling, support the desired outcomes, and, at times, provide valuable resources and natural supports.
8. Provide follow-along services that are not intrusive but continue to support the achievement of long-term employment outcomes.
9. **Enhance self-reliance** by teaching the client how to get information and tap into supportive workplace and community networks, promoting independence beyond the provision of vocational rehabilitation services.

**NOTE:** Therapeutic Counseling Services: If based on the VR Counselor's observations, assessments or training reports, the VR Counselor believes that a client can benefit from therapeutic counseling, the VR Counselor should strongly recommend that the client seek these counseling services from an appropriate professional. If the client agrees to participate in therapeutic counseling services, the VR Counselor should arrange for the service and revise the IPE as needed. If the client refuses therapeutic counseling, the VR Counselor should advise the client that failure to address these issues may impact the client's ability to participate successfully in their vocational rehabilitation program. VR Counselors should be mindful of scope of practice and setting appropriate boundaries reflecting their scope of practice.

#### **11.4 Significance of the VR Counselor/Client Relationship**

Regardless the specific types of services provided, the key to successful client employment is the relationship the client has with a highly trained and skilled Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. It is the VR Counselor who helps each client discover unique strengths, impediments, and rehabilitation needs. It is the VR Counselor who helps the client gain understanding and develop a realistic plan that leads to productive, satisfying, employment consistent with the individual's primary employment factors. The VR Counselor/client relationship is considered the primary core service of the vocational rehabilitation program.

It is also important for the VR Counselor, through the counseling relationship, to shape the client's understanding of the unique professional expertise that a VR Counselor has to offer. The VR Counselor is not a "case worker", not a "social worker", and not a "case manager". By having a clear understanding of the qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor's education, experience, expertise, and scope of practice a client can develop confidence and trust in the relationship and realize the value added through the relationship with their VR Counselor.

### 11.5 Counseling Techniques and Theories

It is not the purpose of this Chapter to suggest that any particular counseling approach is superior to any other in all situations, nor is it within the scope of this Chapter to delve into the numerous theories and their applications. Instead, counselors are encouraged to acquaint themselves with various counseling techniques, become skilled in their use and evaluate their effectiveness in any given situation. Regardless of the particular theory or approach utilized by the counselor, there are three basic factors that are applicable to all VR Counselor/client relationships:

**Attitudes** - The beliefs and values of the individual will tend to influence his/her behaviors and actions. This includes the VR Counselor and the client. VR Counselors need to be aware of their own values, biases and beliefs as well as being aware of those of the client. A meaningful and productive counseling relationship will be hindered without this dual awareness.

**Communication** - Clear communication is the essential ingredient in a productive VR counseling relationship. Communication should reflect an investment in the individual and a genuine desire to facilitate a positive VR Counselor/client relationship. Communication should also reflect the values of the agency and the Code of Professional Ethics. Communication is the transmittal of information between VR Counselor and client. It occurs at two levels, verbal and non-verbal.

1. Verbal communication consists of oral and written communication. Active listening skills are also a critical factor in effective oral communication. VR Counselors should be aware of issues that impede effective, relationship building communication such as tone of voice, voice volume, and the wording selected as these issues may be perceived differently than intended.
2. Non-verbal communication is as important as verbal communication. Not only is it continuous, with or without verbal accompaniment, nonverbal communication is the primary means for transmitting attitudes and feelings especially in the early stages of the counseling relationship. These may include such things as professional attire and appearance, the way the VR Counselor's office is organized, the way the VR Counselor manages their time, body positioning, among others. Professional appearance, office appearance, and time management send messages to the client that either build confidence in their VR Counselor or erode confidence. VR Counselors should work to be "in the moment" with the client, both mentally and with their body language and be aware of unintended perceptions that may be impact the client's confidence in the VR Counselor's competence.

**Negotiating, Facilitating Agreement, and Conflict**- This aspect of the vocational rehabilitation counseling process is best reflected in the IPE. Here the VR Counselor and client collaborate as partners in a process whose desired product will be a mutually agreed

upon plan leading to employment. Differences of opinion and conflict are inevitable. Conflict when handled professionally and objectively can even be a healthy catalyst for change and improved VR Counselor/client relationship. Some conflict may be unresolvable. However, most conflict can be reasonably managed by VR Counselors skilled in collaborative negotiation. VR Counselors who have or develop this skill will find it helps them perform more efficiently, effectively, calmly and generally with clearer communication.

It is also important to remember that the VR client is dealing with highly emotional life issues and disability related issues. Frustration, anger, and hostility can be the expression of their situation and should not be taken personally by the VR Counselor. While USOR does not accept behavior that threatens the safety of our staff or the public, VR Counselors may need to allow the client to express their frustration and anger as part of the counseling relationship. Such understanding and catharsis tends to build better rapport, provides teaching moments applicable to employment, and helps the VR Counselor develop greater understanding of the client's point of view.

In most cases it is important for VR Counselors to realize that the expression of anger may be directed at the VR Counselor, but the true source of the frustration and anger is the client's situation, perceived lack of control, and general life issues. Disability factors can contribute to lack of coping skills, lack of appropriate communication skills, and other issues. Again, the VR Counselor can use these circumstances to teach, help build understanding, and re-engage in a counseling relationship that is directly related to employment.

### 11.6 Elements of Successful VR Counselor/Client Relationships

There are a number of general guidelines that are appropriate and applicable throughout the rehabilitation process. The Division of Rehabilitation services value statement includes; Respect, Kindness, Dignity, Integrity, Trust, and Diversity. VR Counselors who demonstrate these values in their professional practice will generally be able to build effective VR Counselor/client relationships. Other helpful considerations include:

- A. **Mutual respect.** A primary element in a productive counseling relationship is mutual respect between the VR Counselor and client. The VR Counselor is the person who has to establish the groundwork for the generation of this mutual respect. When the VR Counselor is able to demonstrate genuine respect for the client, the VR Counselor will begin to receive reciprocal respect from the client.
- B. **Honesty.** Honesty is critical to the counseling relationship. Clients and VR Counselors both need truthful and accurate input and feedback in a timely and appropriate manner. Trust is built by providing accurate information, admitting errors, following through with commitments, and keeping one's word. The VR Counselor should never provide information that they are uncertain of, and should only make commitments and promises they can keep. To do otherwise erodes trust and impacts the VR Counselor/client relationship.
- C. **Awareness of Preconceptions.** Both clients and VR Counselors may have preconceptions about each other, about expectations, and requirements of the counseling situation. Such preconceptions, depending upon their nature, may facilitate positive rehabilitation; but more often than not they present impediments to the counseling process. VR Counselors should invest time in attempting to gain an understanding of the client's preconceptions, expectations, and understandings. By gaining this understanding the VR Counselor can help

shape realistic expectations that will facilitate an effective counseling relationship. Ideally, the VR Counselor would enter into the relationship without biases or preconceived notions; however, this is easier said than done. We are all human and we are constantly making judgments. The intent here is for the VR Counselor to gain awareness of these preconceptions so that they can professionally engage in an effective and fair counseling relationship leading to client employment.

- D. **Two way communication.** The communication which takes place within the counseling setting must be two-way. Both parties must clearly communicate essential information to each other. Key information must be passed between both parties. Withholding of information, giving partial information, and presenting information for the purpose of controlling or manipulating the other breaches trust and erode an effective VR Counselor/client relationship. The VR Counselor must define service options in reference to client needs. The VR Counselor also must assess the expectations of the client in terms of the counseling relationship and of the rehabilitation services to be planned to meet their needs. It is the VR Counselor's role to help shape those expectations to ensure they are reasonable and within the scope of vocational rehabilitation services. These expectations may be unrealistic (in the eyes of the VR Counselor), but they do present an articulation of what the client expects. If these expectations are unrealistic, it is the role of the VR Counselor to clarify them in the light of what the agency is able to offer, considering ability levels, interest levels, resources, job market, etc.

Clients must clearly state to the VR Counselor what they expect from the counseling interaction. As part of the two-way communication, it is the responsibility of the client to clearly define their needs to the best of their ability. This can be facilitated if the VR Counselor openly and objectively listens to the client. VR Counselors must always be open to new, unexpected and out of the ordinary input, and accept such input non-judgmentally.

In reality, however, clients and VR Counselors may find themselves in situations in which the necessary two-way communication is difficult to establish or does not exist. This may be the result of many factors, including inadequate communication skills, interpersonal conflict, conflict between client and agency goals, etc. In such situations, positive goals may be difficult to achieve. The situation needs to be modified to enhance the communication.

Strategies to achieve this may include, but are not limited to:

1. Reassessment of the situation.
2. Additional counseling sessions.
3. Consultation or bringing in a third party for mediation.
4. Case transfer. (see Chapter 17 for details).
5. Referring client to another agency.

It is important for USOR VR Counselors to remember that the client is the reason we are here. The client is the reason the profession exists. Every effort should be made to establish, repair, re-build, re-engage, and recommit to the VR Counselor/client relationship. Again, while difficult to do in some circumstances, professionalism requires the VR Counselor to be objective, not take things personally, and remain focused on the best interests of the client.

### 11.7 VR Counselor's Role in the Counseling Relationship

VR Counselors have many roles and responsibilities. (See Chapter 2 for additional details.) The role of the VR Counselor often includes a number of legitimate sub-roles, including facilitator, teacher, sounding board, etc. VR Counselors can and should act in different appropriate capacities, depending upon the situation. There are, however, some roles which VR Counselors should not assume, i.e., psychologist, psychiatrist, physician, etc. In the course of the counseling relationship, issues or problems may come up that the VR Counselor is not able or qualified to deal with and which would be better handled by others. Here the VR Counselor's role shifts to one of a broker or arranger of services and a processor of information. The most important role of the many roles played by VR Counselors is probably that of being an advocate for the client.

### **11.8 Recommendations**

Below are recommendations VR Counselors may find helpful in their counseling and guidance relationships:

- A. Be aware of values that you demonstrate.
- B. Be aware of your judgments about your client.
- C. Be aware of what your appearance communicates.
- D. Be aware of what your office communicates.
- E. Exercise self-reflection.
- F. Treat clients with respect.
- G. Encourage client participation.
- H. Improve your skills and knowledge.
- I. Be aware of your own limitations.