



Section 5:

Working with Vocational Rehabilitation

What is Vocational Rehabilitation?	86
Services.....	86
Eligibility.....	87
Cost.....	87
Who are Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors?.....	87
What You Need to Know About the Vocational Rehabilitation Process.....	88
General Application Information	88
Income, Assets, and Liabilities	88
Insurance and Other Information.....	89
Health Information.....	89
Comparable Benefits.....	90
Seven Steps in the Vocational Rehabilitation Process.....	90
Applying for Vocational Rehabilitation Services	90
Evaluating your Disability.....	90
Determining Your Eligibility.....	91
Planning Your Services.....	91
Receiving Vocational Rehabilitation Services	91
Meeting Your Employment Goal	92
Using Post-Employment Services	92
Client Assistance Program.....	93

Working with Vocational Rehabilitation

Learning Objectives:

1. Know the services available through Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).
2. Understand the process for applying for VR and receiving VR services.
3. Learn how to contribute information to your individualized plan of employment and reach your employment goals.
4. Understand ways to ensure success of your plan.



Thad's Story

Thad was a working cowboy and ranch manager until he was injured, and arthritis developed in his hips. The severe pain and limitations put him out of a saddle and into a wheelchair. The doctors said he needed double hip replacement surgery. Unfortunately, his pre-existing condition of arthritis kept him from getting health insurance and there were not enough cash resources to pay out-of-pocket. He had to have the surgery if he was ever going to get back to work in the livestock industry. After a professional assessment, Thad applied for vocational rehabilitation to get him ready to go back to work.



What is Vocational Rehabilitation?

The legislative history of vocational rehabilitation starts back in 1917, when the federal government made money available to states on a matching basis to get soldiers and civilians with disabilities back into the workforce. Federal legislation on vocational rehabilitation (VR) has been updated several times over the years, culminating in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This version of the Rehabilitation Act redirected the efforts of VR to serve severely disabled individuals and to allow self-determination and involvement of the individual in planning his or her services as much as possible. Other amendments since 1973 have

added a separate independent living program, rehabilitation engineering services, and client assistance services.

Services

The Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services (OKDRS) (www.okrehab.org) directs VR services. VR is available to eligible individuals to prepare for work or become gainfully employed. The main services provided by OKDRS are counseling and guidance for job placement.



Other services include:

- Physical and mental restoration
- Vocational school assistive technology (AT) evaluation, equipment, and training
- Disability resources information
- Personal assistance services while receiving VR services
- Transportation in connection with VR services
- Supported employment
- Self-employment assistance
- Transition from school to work for youth with disabilities

VR does not provide cookie-cutter services; every individual receives services that are customized to their situation. One individual's plan for employment may require a set of tools to reach an employment outcome, while another individual may need an entirely different set of services. The plan for employment is usually written by the individual receiving services and their VR counselor.

Eligibility

An individual with a physical or mental disability that creates a barrier to employment is eligible for VR services to help the individual prepare for, obtain, keep, or return to work. In other words, there must be a chance they will benefit from being employed.

Cost

According to OKDRS, there is no cost for

services like job counseling or placement. As well, if the counselor requests a medical examination or other assessments to help determine eligibility for an individual's services, there is no charge. However, once eligible for services, an individual's participation with some of the costs is helpful if they have the income and resources to do so.

Who are VR Counselors?

Qualified VR counselors are educated and trained to work specifically with individuals with disabilities, usually having obtained the Master's level of education. They have a broad base of skills in assessment, treatment planning, counseling, case management, and advocacy to assist individuals in reaching their employment goals.

Many counselors have voluntary certification in this field through the nonprofit Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC).



Working with Vocational Rehabilitation

According to the CRCC, the commission developed its credentialing process in an effort to protect individuals with disabilities. Individuals who earn the designation of Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) must demonstrate that they are of good moral character, meet acceptable standards of quality in their practice, and have the requisite education and professional background.

To become certified, counselors must achieve a passing score on the CRC exam. To maintain the CRC designation, certificants must renew their certification every five years via continuing education or re-examination. In sum, counselors are professionals, and those with certification are giving the public an assurance they are ethical, skilled, up-to-date, and capable.

What You Need to Know About the VR Process

Applying for VR Services requires filling out an application. The process will go smoother if you gather some documents together first.

General Application Information

The application will ask for basic information such as name, address, phone number, and email. This information is needed to be able to contact you with any questions, information, or communication from the counselor. It is very important to keep your counselor updated if this information changes. The application will also ask for your social security number in order to identify you.

Other information on the application includes contact information for three individuals who will know where you are if you move, change phone numbers, or cannot be reached through the information you gave on the application. Again, it is important to keep your VR counselor informed in case your contact information changes.

To apply for VR Services contact OKDRS at 800-845-8476 or visit their website at www.okdrs.org.



Income, Assets, and Liabilities

You will be asked to list all the household members residing at your address and basic income for each individual. As you will see later, this information is needed by the VR counselor to determine whether there is any extra income you can contribute to carrying out your plan of employment, or whether another household member can contribute to the plan. Income includes wages, social security income, social security disability income, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), workers'



compensation, or any unemployment income. Other types of income include pensions, interest, dividends, or royalties received.

The VR counselor will also inquire about any assets you may have like savings, bonds, cash, or certificates of deposit and other assets like recreational vehicles and non-business related property or equipment at its fair market value.

An individual's liabilities are also considered on the application. This includes what you owe on your debt, medical expenses not covered by insurance, health insurance premiums, disability-related expenses, child support or other court-ordered commitments, and educational expenses like tuition, books, and fees. Medical expenses not covered by insurance may be things like diabetic testing supplies, colostomy supplies, wound care products, or other items. Disability-related expenses might include anything you have already purchased to help you live at home, work, or get around (if you have mobility problems). For example, materials purchased to build a ramp into your home or to modify your bathroom might be a disability-related expense.

Once income, assets, and liabilities are established, the counselor can determine what, if any, funds you may be able to contribute to your employment plan. If your counselor determines you can contribute to the plan, follow their instructions about your financial input.

Do not purchase anything in your plan, or before your plan is completed, without the approval of VR; you might be responsible for the expense. Because VR is a state government department, it must use an accepted procurement process to

expend money on your behalf (even if it is your contribution).

Insurance and Other Information

Be prepared with the name of your insurance carrier, insurance policy number, and Medicaid or Medicare information. VR will also want to know about your educational history and past three jobs. If you are only self-employed as a farmer or rancher, this section should be easy to complete. But if you do work off the farm or ranch for income, you may need to find the employment information in your records.

If you are a veteran, please have your serial number and dates of service available. If your disability is service connected, the Veteran's Administration has a VR program that you might want to connect to for services.

If you are a Native American farmer or rancher, you may also have the option of using the tribal VR affiliated with your nation.

Health Information

The VR application will include a general health questionnaire; you might see questions such as your height, weight, disability, etc. The questionnaire also has a checklist that asks whether any of your health conditions have kept you from working. It is very important to be truthful about this. Many farmers or ranchers do not consider lost time from injuries as missing work, or think that health conditions are interfering with work as long as the work can be done even with excruciating pain, help from their children or spouse. Do not overinflate your

Working with Vocational Rehabilitation

difficulties, but do not minimize them either.

Most importantly, collect the names of healthcare providers, addresses, phone numbers, and approximate dates of when you have been treated for your condition. This includes visits to the doctor, hospitalizations, medicines you are taking, and any temporary or permanent restrictions you have been given by healthcare providers. For example, after serious back injuries and surgeries, an individual may have restrictions on the amount of weight they can lift or carry given to them by their orthopedic doctor. If you have copies of your medical records, take them with you to your first meeting with VR. This may save them some time in trying to track it down. Remember, you are part of a team.

If your health issue or disability is primarily visual in nature (blindness/low vision), VR Services are provided through the OKDRS Division of Visual Services (VS). VS has additional expertise in working with individuals who have visual impairments like blindness, macular degeneration, glaucoma, etc.

Comparable Benefits

Another aspect of working with VR is determining whether you are eligible for any other programs or services that are available to assist you; for example if you decide to enter into a new field for which you need education or training. If you are eligible to apply for educational loans and grants, VR would expect you to apply for these programs instead of relying on VR to pay the tuition and fees for your education. If you are eligible for Medicaid or home and community-based waiver

programs, your counselor can help you apply for the services. Sharing expenses for the services in your Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) makes sense if other funding is available to you through your own resources or those of other programs; it increases the capacity of VR to serve more individuals.

One more thing to remember about applying for VR is that it's a process. It will take weeks or even months to get through the entire process. You will need to keep in contact with your counselor to check where things are in the process. If there are immediate and urgent needs for assistive technology or work modifications, you may need to consider finding additional funding resources.

Seven Steps in the VR Process

Step 1: Applying for VR Services

Requesting an application for VR is just the first step to take in receiving services. At the time you request an application, you can also arrange an appointment to meet with a counselor to provide the information discussed previously in this section.

Step 2: Evaluating your Disability

Once your application is complete, OKDRS will gather any other information needed or conduct further assessments. They will look at all the information and explore your background, abilities, and disability-related barriers to employment and rehabilitation needs.



Step 3: Determining Your Eligibility

VR has 60 days from the time you apply to determine whether you are eligible, unless you and your counselor agree to a specific extension.

If you are eligible for services, you are then assigned to a priority group based on the severity and seriousness of your disability. This classification is important in several ways.



VR's funding resources depend on the amount that the state matches provided by the legislature to "pull down" funds. Unfortunately, few states draw down the entire

funding match available. This means funding is not unlimited to purchase every service needed by all the eligible clients. This financial situation can force a state VR program to have an "order of selection."

Under federal law, individuals with the most severe disabilities receive priority in being served if a state VR is under the order of selection.

In some states, individuals with less serious disabilities will wait for months and even years to receive services. Such circumstances are why it is important to help your counselor gather the necessary and important documents needed to determine your eligibility and appropriate priority group.

If you do not fall into a category currently being served or if you are not eligible for services, your counselor will refer you to other programs or services that can help you with your employment needs.

Step 4: Planning Your Services

If you are eligible for VR services, your counselor can assist you in developing a document called an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). There are other resources in the state that can help with writing the plan, if you would like that kind of input. AgrAbility has been helpful in many states for reporting the results of on-the-farm assessments and recommendations to assist with planning services in the IPE, especially for rehabilitation technologies and assistive technologies that promote work capacities.

The IPE will be the roadmap to help you return to employment. Although most individuals have an employment goal to continue farming or ranching, there are those who want to use VR services to enter a new field or enterprise. If this is something you feel strongly about exploring, this would be a perfect opportunity to do so.

Step 5: Receiving VR Services

Once you and your counselor finalize and sign the IPE, VR services move into an action phase. The IPE can be updated during the process if your needs should change. If you are in a priority category being served, your counselor will start implementing the plan with you. As we mentioned before, services may be a combination of many strategies, such as training, purchase of

Working with Vocational Rehabilitation

assistive technology, information and referral, career planning if you are changing vocations, and other specialized services. Keep in mind that there is a procurement process for some services, especially assistive technology; the device may need to go out for bid. VR counselors are required by policy to seek at least three bids for the service or item. This process takes time, and sometimes there are not bids offered to fulfill the service or furnish the item. If you know of a potential vendor needed for the service or item, let them know there is a process they can follow with VR to become a vendor and submit a bid. National AgrAbility may also know of potential vendors, since many services and items are related to agriculture specifically.

Step 6: Meeting Your Employment Goal

For many VR clients, entering a job successfully is a desired goal. If an individual obtains and successfully maintains employment for at least 90 days, VR will typically close the case. The 90-

day period allows the individual an opportunity to identify any other issues that are jeopardizing success in keeping the job and implementing other VR services. As for most farmers or ranchers who are maintaining their current employment, you will not be doing a job search, but your case will also be closed in 90 days. Use this time to talk about any other concerns, as well as your satisfaction, with the services you have received. The goal is to be safe, successful, and participate in your chosen vocation.

Step 7: Using Post-Employment Services

Life happens and health status changes. If you find yourself in a situation where you may lose or have trouble staying at your farming or ranching job because of disability issues, you can get back in touch with VR for further assistance. They may be able to provide short-term, post-employment services, or if you need more assistance, they may request you reapply for services.

Tips for Working with VR

1. Be on time and keep appointments with your counselor
2. Check in at least monthly, and make the call. Be involved!
3. Follow the advice of your health providers.
4. Gather documents and information requested by your counselor as promptly as possible.
5. Keep copies of all correspondence, paperwork, and documents.
6. Be willing to compromise, negotiate, and advocate.
7. Be able to prioritize your needs.
8. Be patient, courteous, and respectful. Be a team member.



Client Assistance Program

If you disagree with decisions made by your VR program at any point, you can request a fair hearing or mediation from the Client Assistance Program (CAP). CAP was established in the federal VR law as a way of helping resolve concerns about the process. If you have a concern or disagreement with DVR/DVS, you can contact CAP in Oklahoma at:

Client Assistance Program
2401 N.W. 23rd Street, Suite 90
Oklahoma, OK 73107
Phone: (800) 522-8224
Fax: (405) 522-6695
Email: CAP@odc.ok.gov
Web: <http://www.ok.gov/odc/C.A.P/>