A Tip of the *HAT*, from *CAP*

The Client Assistance Program (CAP) is a federally-designated program to monitor Vocational Rehabilitation Services in every state. In Oklahoma the CAP program is located in the Office of Disability Concerns. If you have an active case with the Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services or are considering applying for services, this information may be of interest to you.

Without a doubt, the most frequent concern I hear in the CAP office is that the client has poor communication with their DRS counselor. Clients complain they have left 10 messages in the last three days for their counselor to call them, but they never got that return call.

Let's talk about those 10 messages and see if we can reduce your frustration as a client and the counselor's anxiety level. Consider reducing the number and frequency of your calls.

Give ample time for the DRS counselor to return that first call. Sometimes your DRS counselor will be sick. Sometimes they will be at a professional meeting or out in the field visiting other clients. Sometimes the DRS counselor will be on annual leave. Give the counselor five working days to return your call.

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After five working days, make that second call and leave a message if the counselor is not in. Give the counselor five more working days to return that second call. Still no call.

Now it's time to go to the supervisor. (In DRS, the supervisor is called a Program Manager.) But you don't know who the supervisor is? Call the State Office at 800-487-4042 and follow the prompts. It will get you to the office that serves you. Ask the receptionist the contact information for the Program Manager of your counselor. The Program Manager is not always located in the same office. Call that Program Manager.

Be prepared to tell the Program Manager when you tried to call the DRS counselor. "I called the Counselor Monday, January 1 and again on Tuesday, January 8." That lets the supervisor know that you have tried to solve the communication problem on your own. Now tell the supervisor what you needed to talk about and get resolved. The supervisor will have access to everything about your case on their computer.

Let the supervisor solve your problem. If the supervisor insists the Counselor solve the problem, ask the supervisor to get the Counselor to call you. Ask the supervisor if they would mind your calling them back if the Counselor did not call you in a certain time. The next time a communication problem came up I might not wait as long before going to the Program Manager.

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Now let's talk about some other things you can do. You call your Counselor and need an answer quickly, and the message on their phone voices they will not be back in the office for three days. What to do?

Ask to speak to the Tech who works for that Counselor. (Some people call the Tech the Secretary.) The Tech will be situated in the same office as the Counselor. That Tech will have access to all your case files on the computer. Call the main number for the office and ask for the Tech who works for your particular Counselor.

Ask the Tech for information and for suggestions. If you have an emergency, ask the Tech to call the Counselor for you on the Counselor's cell phone. An emergency should be an emergency that can't wait until the Counselor gets back in the office.

Communication problems are sometimes caused by personality clashes. Sometimes the client has an attitude. Sometimes the Counselor has an attitude, and sometimes both have attitudes. Keep to business. "Has the agency authorized a check to pay my school tuition?"

We can get hung up on the way someone answers our questions rather than what they actually said. If my Counselor tells me that my tuition was paid on February 2, I might not care so much if they were a little snooty in the way they said it. The focus should always be on what you need to get a job and the steps necessary to get there.

It is always nice when we "click" with the person providing our services, but this does not always happen. It's OK as long as our needs are met as far as the agency can provide. The bottom line is that we want a job which will provide a fuller, richer life for us with a little extra cash at the end of the month.