

NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT:

**VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION NEEDS
OF VERMONTERS WITH DISABILITIES**

Presented to:
Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation
and
Vermont State Rehabilitation Council

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Introduction

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, mandates the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR), in partnership with the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), to periodically determine the rehabilitation needs of Vermonters with disabilities. Two previous assessments have utilized statewide telephone surveys to conduct quantitative assessments of needs. VR and the SRC made the decision to shift to a qualitative approach for the 2004 needs assessment. The consulting team of Erica Garfin and Judy Dickson were commissioned to conduct the needs assessment using a series of focus groups and a public hearing.

This report describes the design, implementation, and findings of the assessment, which was conducted during September and October 2004.

Focus groups provide a depth and richness of information that surveys cannot provide, including insights about attitudes, opinions, values, and behaviors. As with all qualitative research, the findings are to be viewed as suggestive rather than definitive. Because the participants are not randomly selected and the sample sizes are small, the results are not statistically generalizable to the entire population of Vermonters who have disabilities.

The consultants are grateful to the members of the Advisory Group that provided input and feedback throughout the project: Tom Pombar, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; Addy Smith-Reiman, State Rehabilitation Council Coordinator; and SRC members Peter Grassadonia, Harriet Hall, Sue Powers, and Jon Provencher. We also wish to thank the focus group participants for their enthusiastic participation, for openly sharing their experiences and perceptions, and for the support they provided to one another in the process.

ASSESSMENT DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The design of the assessment called for six focus groups, each of which targeted a discrete audience: adults with developmental disabilities; adults with psychiatric disabilities; Deaf and hard of hearing adults; transition-age youth (cross-disability); and two groups of adults with physical, visual, and learning disabilities, one urban and the other rural. The assessment design also called for a mix of men and women in each group and a mix of individuals who were employed and unemployed.

Recruitment difficulties resulted in the cancellation of the youth group. In its place, input was gathered from five high school students by their VR Transition Counselor. Recruitment of hard of hearing individuals also proved unsuccessful, with the exception of one late-deafened¹ individual.

Recruitment for the groups was coordinated by the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Coordinator. Recruitment of individuals was carried out by a variety of state and non-profit agencies that work with individuals with disabilities and individuals who are Deaf and hard of hearing.

In addition, a widely advertised public hearing was conducted over five Vermont Interactive Television sites² on October 12. Oral and written statements were made by 12 individuals.

In total, 44 individuals participated in five focus groups and the youth input session, including persons with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, visual disabilities, developmental disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, and Deafness. Some individuals identified as having more than one disability. Men and women were almost equally represented (18 women, 21 men). Individuals with a variety of employment histories were represented as well. There was broad geographic representation, including participants from urban and rural settings. Attendance on the date of the focus group sessions was very high, at 95%. Focus group participants were paid a \$40 stipend as an incentive to participate as well as reimbursement for transportation and personal care attendants.

In conducting this type of research it is often challenging to identify potential informants who are outside the service delivery system. Recruitment for these focus groups was no exception. As a result, individuals who were not recipients of vocational services were underrepresented in this sample and a preponderance of participants were

¹ Late-deafened persons are those who are born able to hear and later lose their hearing, either gradually or precipitously.

² Brattleboro, Lyndonville, Randolph Center, Rutland, and Williston

clients of vocational programs including VR, VABIR, and vocational programs serving persons with psychiatric and developmental disabilities.

The following table shows the composition and characteristics of the focus groups and their participants.

Focus Group Composition and Characteristics (primary disabilities of participants are indicated)

Target group	Location	No. of participants	Physical disability	Visual disability	Learning disability	Deaf	Developmental disability	Psychiatric disability
Deaf/hard of hearing	White River Junction	7				6 Deaf 1 Late-deafened		
Developmental disability	Springfield	8					8	
Psychiatric disability	Rutland	7						7
Adults urban (physical, visual, learning disabilities)	Burlington	9	7		1			1
Adults rural (physical, visual, learning disabilities)	Morrisville	8	5	2	1			
Youth 16-25	Burlington	5	-----unknown-----					

The needs assessment was designed to provide information about the following areas of focus that were identified by the Advisory Group:

1. What is the value of work to people with disabilities and what are their aspirations regarding work?
2. Where do people with disabilities get information about employment and specific job opportunities?
3. What supportive assistance do people with disabilities need in order to prepare for and gain employment?
4. What assistance do people with disabilities need to retain jobs?
5. What do people with disabilities understand about the relationship between employment and ongoing eligibility for benefits?
6. What attitudinal factors negatively affect the employment of people with disabilities, including both the attitudes of the individuals themselves and their perceptions of the attitudes of employers, co-workers, and VR counselors?
7. What gets in the way of successful employment for people with disabilities?
8. What solutions do people with disabilities propose to address the problems and needs they have identified?

A discussion guide for the focus group sessions was developed with feedback from the Advisory Group. (*See Appendix*) The focus group sessions were tape recorded with permission from the participants and transcribed verbatim for the consultants' use in conducting a content analysis.

FINDINGS

1. What is the value of work to people with disabilities and what are their aspirations regarding work?

With few exceptions, **participants in all groups placed a very high value on working.** In response to the question, “How important is it to you to be employed?” the great majority of participants described work as very important. The few participants who responded otherwise were individuals whose physical or psychiatric disabilities were so severe that they had come to terms with the fact that work was no longer a realistic goal for them. **While earning money and becoming self-sufficient were important goals for many, equal or greater importance was placed on other reasons for wanting to work.**

The primary reasons for wanting to work were:

- To earn money to support oneself and one’s family, and to be able to do things for other people.
- To reduce dependence on public benefit programs.
- Work is the cultural norm.

Work is very important for me for the same reason that it’s very important to the able-bodied population. And there’s no difference why it’s important, because I have a disability, but also one of the things that makes it important for me is because, quote, unquote, everybody else does it. You know, I work—I grew up in a culture in a family where everybody worked, and I want to be like everybody else as much as possible. So when I work, that’s another way I can be like everybody else.³

- Work provides meaning to life.

I just want to do something that I feel passionate about, something that I can put my all into it and learning and motivating me, because I don’t think we were put on this earth to just sit around and do nothing. So yeah, it’s essential. It gives your life meaning.

I figure to make a person whole you’ve got to have something to do with your life.

- To occupy one’s time, mind, and body; keep active and alleviate boredom.
- To make a contribution to society.
- To get out in the world and meet people.

³ Throughout the report, verbatim quotes from participants appear in italics.

- Work engenders self-esteem, self-confidence, and feeling good about oneself.
- Work helps to structure time and “clear up some of the [psychiatric] illness.”

Several Deaf participants spoke of the value they placed on working at jobs that would improve the lives of Deaf and hard of hearing children and adults.

Working As A Volunteer

Positive value was also placed upon working as a volunteer, particularly as a way to satisfy some of the needs stated above, and to get a job, gain experience, reduce social isolation, learn new skills, add to one’s resume, create references, and meet people with whom one can network when looking for paid employment. Some participants also noted that volunteering does not pay the bills, and that they cannot “afford” to volunteer because of expenses incurred by volunteering, e.g., transportation.

Well, I better feel good about it [volunteering], because that’s about ninety percent of my deal.

2. Where do people with disabilities get information about employment and specific job opportunities?

Participants were asked where they got information about employment-related issues, such as starting a business, employment supports, education and training opportunities, and employment rights. They were also asked how they learned about specific job opportunities.

Information About Employment-Related Issues

For participants who were or had been clients of **Vocational Rehabilitation** (VR), VR counselors were the primary source of information about employment-related issues, with mixed reviews. Some participants also cited the **Vermont Association of Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation** (VABIR) as a resource. Participants with psychiatric and development disabilities also relied heavily upon programs within the Designated Agencies that served them. Some participants also turned to the Internet for information. Notably, very few participants were aware of the Client Assistance Program (CAP). In general, participants were largely unaware of or did not utilize other resources available to the general public.

Information About Specific Job Opportunities

Participants generally used the **same resources as those utilized by the general population to learn about specific job opportunities**. Networking and word of mouth were repeatedly identified in all groups as the most fruitful means of finding a job. It was noted that people with disabilities need instruction in how to network.

The best way to get a job is to get it on your own from a friend--not the newspaper, not DET, but by word of mouth.

Newspapers were used by many, but with limited success. A few participants used the Internet to seek out jobs with specific employers, and noted that this method avoids transportation problems. Several people had turned to the Department of Employment and Training (DET). VABIR had helped several individuals to find jobs.

Deaf participants cited a Deaf e-mail group as a useful place to learn about jobs related to Deafness. Few Deaf participants knew of DET, and those who did stated unequivocally that it provides no access for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing (i.e., inadequate TTY and interpreter support).

3. What supportive assistance do people with disabilities need in order to prepare for and gain employment?

Participants identified a range of assistance and supports that have been or would be helpful to them in preparing for and gaining employment.

Assistance Helpful to Prepare for Employment

One theme that arose was the **need for individualized assessments to assist people in aligning their interests, aptitudes, and abilities**. VR and VABIR were perceived by some to skip over that step in their attempts to put people into jobs. Several participants expressed that VR expected the client to come up with their own job ideas. Along those lines, several participants described courses they had taken through other agencies in Vermont or other states that helped them to: identify their interests, skills, short- and long-term employment goals, and needs for additional education and training; learn to use employment resources; and determine what kind of work they would like to do. A related theme was that, while **VR and VABIR both provide useful assistance, they do not work in concert as well as they might**.

That's what I'm searching for [finding out what they might like to do]. I've gone to Voc Rehab, and they try to shove me right into a job. And okay, yeah, I'd like to be working, but that job ain't going to work. So I'm not going to waste the employer's time, and I'm not going to waste my time.

So basically...when you go to VR they say you come up with an idea, some kind of program, and we'll try and work with you. But sometimes it's hard just to, you know, come up with an idea or a program that is a viable situation, something that makes sense, something that you can probably do. I can come up with a lot of harebrained ideas and, you know, maybe I might be able to convince somebody that, oh, yeah, I can do this...and have them spend a lot of money on me, but still isn't going to work when it gets all done.

My experience with VABIR is they do some job development, but they don't work closely to make sure that the person looking for the job and the job are really appropriate for each other. They say, oh, we found a job for you, but...not knowledgeable about the appropriate work accommodations or the type of job that that person would be appropriate for...a VR counselor could help.

Transportation was identified as a critical need by all groups, both for seeking and maintaining employment. VR had assisted several participants by purchasing, repairing, and maintaining vehicles and buying tires.

Many participants talked about the importance of **computers**, both as aids for themselves (for example, voice-activated software for people with visual disabilities), and as a necessary skill in many jobs. In addition to the computer hardware and software, participants identified the need for training. For training to be effective, participants stressed the need to have a computer at home or access to computers close to home to practice and improve their skills. Lack of funding for computers from VR was seen as a problem.

A number of participants identified the need for **assistance with tasks related to applying for jobs**, specifically preparing resumes⁴ and completing job applications.

It had been helpful for participants with developmental disabilities to have an **advocate to serve as liaison to prospective employers** when they were looking for work.

Participants in several groups had turned to community action agencies and local small business development programs for **help in developing business plans**. They described this as a critical need for those who want to start their own small businesses.

VR had also provided important **assistance in purchasing critical albeit basic tangible items** for individuals, such as shoes, appropriate clothing, and a talking watch. Counselors' budgets were thought to be inadequate to meet the needs of all of their clients.

Communication supports were identified by both hearing and Deaf job seekers. One hearing participant spoke of the **difficulty of job hunting for people who do not have telephones**, and suggested the creation of a "telephone home" that provides individuals with their own voice mail boxes so that they can receive messages from prospective employers.

Deaf participants identified communication issues that make it difficult for them to gain employment. They noted that the cost of a TTY is prohibitive for many individuals, and that employers are generally uninformed about or unwilling to use the TTY Relay Service. The need for interpreters at interviews is essential and, while some people had been helped by VABIR in that regard, others had relied upon family members

⁴ VABIR was identified as a helpful resource for preparing resumes.

to interpret for them. Participants identified employer education about the TTY Relay and about communicating with people who are Deaf and hard of hearing as an important need. Many liked the idea of having a liaison to facilitate or serve as a conduit for communication between employers and prospective employees. Those who had used private employment agencies agreed that those agencies are reluctant to send Deaf candidates out for job as a result of their perception that communication barriers cannot be overcome.

We have to do this incredible amount of education, tell them how to use the Relaythen they don't make contact, and then we're again like explaining how the system works...I think people are hesitant to use it. They're not sure what it is.

...educating them about how to communicate with us...hiring deaf people, how you work with deaf employees. You know, because I think people are afraid. They've had no experience.

One speaker at the public hearing discussed three essential elements of preparation for employment from the perspective of employers:

- Good “soft skills,” such as communication, eye contact, hand shake, appropriate dress, and personal hygiene.
- A quality resume.
- A realistic assessment of the skills the individual brings to the job.

Education and Training

Participants emphatically agreed that **education and training improves their chances** of getting a job, moving to a better job, or becoming self-employed, particularly when it is tied to the needs of the job market and combined with work experience. While funding resources such as VR and the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC)⁵ had been tapped by some participants, **lack of money for education and training** was a barrier to many who would have liked to go on for more education or training. A number of participants had taken courses through a variety of avenues, including Community College of Vermont, Adult Basic Education, technical schools, and online and correspondence courses. One participant with a master's degree noted that his advanced education worked against him, as he was over-qualified for entry-level positions but lacked the experience for jobs at a higher level.

Yeah, education's really good, and it's great to put on a resume. Just going through the process of getting books and stuff for education. It's been really a help. It's kept me out of trouble and it's helped me stay focused on a goal.

I was going to say I think I would love to, but economics is definitely a factor.

As noted above, **computer skills**, including basic computer skills, keyboarding, training on using software (including voice activated software), and access to a place to

⁵ It was reported that VSAC provides financial support for certificate, i.e. non-degree, programs,

practice (e.g., at home or a bank of computers at VR or other adult learning center) were desired by many participants. Computers were also identified as an important resource for taking courses online.⁶ Lack of a computer at home was identified as a barrier by many.

Several participants had been helped by a **small business course** offered by the local community action agency or higher education institution.

Participants in the **Deaf group expressed a strong interest in improving their written English proficiency**, a skill which they characterized as key to satisfactory employment, and particularly for promotion. To their knowledge, there are no English courses designed for Deaf adults.

Yeah, tell me where to go. I've been at seven different colleges trying to figure out how to do my English...I really would like to improve my literacy skills in English. I think English is really, really, powerful in terms of the job search, whatever it is I might want to do.

Transportation and child care were cited as additional barriers to pursuing education and training.

Work Experience

The **need and desire for work experience** was a strong theme across all groups. Participants expressed interest in considering a range of options, including on-the-job training, shadowing at the workplace, buddies (e.g., a new Deaf employee being paired with an experienced employee), and apprenticeships.

Volunteering was enthusiastically promoted by those who had done it, and intriguing to those for whom it was a new concept. It was described as a good way to get training, learn new skills, get a sense of one's capabilities, build a resume, groom references, and start a job on a trial basis. The down sides of volunteering included expense to the volunteer (e.g., transportation costs) and the likely unwillingness of employers to incur expense in providing accommodations to volunteers. A source of funding to defray those expenses similar to that which VR provides for individuals in paid employment (e.g., vehicle maintenance, transportation reimbursement, purchase of shoes and other basic tangibles) and a source of funding or employer incentives to provide accommodations would remove those barriers to volunteering.

I do a lot of volunteer work, but it's to balance out, to get a little more experience. But it doesn't pay the bills.

It's nice helping people, you know you're doing a good deed...but when it came to wearing the car down and stuff [doing volunteer driving] it wasn't, you know, adding up.

⁶ It was also reported that VSAC does not provide support for online courses.

4. What assistance do people with disabilities need to retain jobs?

Participants described a range of services, accommodations, and supports that are necessary for them to retain and advance in their jobs.

Flexible scheduling, including part-time work, was cited most frequently as a critical accommodation for job retention. It was also described as one of the advantages of being self-employed. A companion issue was described by several participants with psychiatric disabilities who had started with a number of hours per week they could handle, only to have hours added on to the point where they had to leave their jobs.

I've noticed when you first start a job they like to give you more and more hours. When you first start it they like to see how many you can do.

A number of participants, especially those with developmental and psychiatric disabilities, spoke of the **need for someone to provide encouragement, to provide information to employers about their situations, and to advocate with their employers** in instances where they are harassed or treated unequally by coworkers and supervisors, and for accommodations, flexible hours, and reasonable work loads.

...then if it's too much [hours] you can talk to your counselor and he can go them and be, like, look, he needs a couple days off here and there to get him rested and stuff.

As well, participants identified the need for a VR counselor or other advisor to provide **assistance in thinking through problems and solutions**. “Job club” support groups were described as helpful in this way, as well as providing opportunities for sharing information. Participants who owned their own businesses reported that they would value opportunities to meet in groups with other small business owners for similar purposes.

Those who run, or aspire to run, their own businesses or contract out their services were vocal about their need for **assistance in maintaining the financial and record-keeping aspects of their businesses**, e.g., a microbusiness course, someone to set up the books, a financial counselor or coach, or someone take over the financial end of the business completely.

I think that's big—it's really deterring me from wanting to work just for myself because of that, and the quarterly taxes and everything. I just need someone with the numbers, someone that could at least set it up for me. That's a part that I don't have. If just one of those agencies could have something like that, it would be fantastic.

Additional critical supports cited for job retention included:

- Job coaches and mentors
- Ongoing training
- Reliable transportation
- Reliable personal care assistance
- Communication skills and learning how to maintain relationships in the workplace
- Physical accommodations and worksite modifications
- Making oneself indispensable/meeting a higher standard than non-disabled employees
- Stable medical benefits to maintain health status
- Communication/interpreter supports for Deaf employees
- Not being the only Deaf employee (i.e., reduce isolation)

5. What do people with disabilities understand about the relationship between employment and ongoing eligibility for benefit?

This line of inquiry revealed that the **potential for losing benefits when one becomes employed was a profound concern and the primary disincentive for participants to seek work.** The concerns were echoed by participants who contemplated self-employment. Responses to questions also revealed **widespread lack of information, misconceptions, and lack of awareness of resources** to help them understand the relationship between benefits and employment.

So who's going to look at a job that doesn't have health insurance, pays you minimum wage, and then you lost Medicaid as well as SSI. ...There has to be some balance, something to make it feel like it's worthwhile.

Concerns and disincentives

The **loss of health insurance was the primary concern across all groups.** The link between health insurance and employment was extremely problematic for participants, and there was a universal feeling that the potential loss of medical benefits (i.e., Medicaid, VHAP, Medicare) was a disincentive to working. Variations on this theme were fears that the employer's health insurance might have caps on coverage or be inadequate to pay for their extraordinary health care bills, and that their earnings would be too low to pay medical bills in jobs where no insurance was provided. Payment for medications was cited as a particular concern. Waiting periods for coverage and exclusions of pre-existing conditions were cited as additional concerns.

I'm just thinking of VHAP in general. If I was to work too many hours, than I may not be qualified to get VHAP. But the job that I'm working at may not pay enough to cover my medicine. So it's a balance of finding the right income and getting the insurance to cover your medicines.

Loss of income supports was not as big an issue as loss of health insurance for most participants because they anticipated that employment income would offset the loss of income supports (e.g., SSI, SSDI, fuel assistance). However, the loss of income resulting from going to work in a minimum wage job was regarded by most participants as “not worth it.” Downward adjustments to housing subsidies were also cited as an issue.

If I work at all I lose all my benefits: medical, the disability, the food stamps, the fuel assistance. I really don't care about the fuel assistance and the food stamps or the SSDI, because if I'm working I'll make up for that. But the medical, I certainly would not make up for it because it would take six months to two years to be qualified under a medical plan with an employer. and I'm on such medications that are extremely expensive, but without those medications I will die. The medical insurance is the most important.

Additional disincentives were identified. For some, **work had jeopardized their eligibility for benefit programs** because they had been unable to stay in a job and lost their benefits in the process of having gone back to work. Others feared they would not be hired because of the drain on employers (e.g., the perception that employer health insurance premiums would increase as a result of their high level of claims).

I had to work six months or something for a trial basis, and after that they took me right off the disability, and I was just earning money on my own. And then when I had a breakdown I had a whole year or so before I could get back on the program.

Seeking Help and Information About the Impact of Work on Benefits

Participants universally characterized **eligibility for benefits as complex and confusing**. Participants had little knowledge of work incentives.

I did go to benefits counselors for awhile and I have a good rapport with the one I've been seeing....So now I've gotten to the point where I believe that like it's impossible for me as a highly intelligent person to understand the system, so I'm just living now where I read what they tell me, and if the money goes up, that's great. I'm not going to do anything. If the money goes down, then I'll find out who to call and find out why it's going down. But I'm at the point where I don't try to understand it any more, because they explain the same thing over to me like six times, and I still don't get it. [from a person with a college degree]

Although the majority of participants in our sample were or had been VR clients, relatively **few of them were aware of or had used VR benefits counselors**. Those who had used them described them as knowledgeable and helpful. There also appeared to be the belief by at least one participant that the act of talking to a benefits counselor might result in loss of benefits. None of the Deaf participants knew of the benefits counseling program.

I'm trying to think. I think they're [benefits counselors] associated with VR, because he stops by the office He either works for Social Security or the Department of Employment and Training.

You want to know something? That a scary thought to approach a benefits counselor about your benefits and be that honest with another person, and the fact that you may lose your benefits. So the whole process itself is scary. Because I depend on my medication....I'm going to be on it for the rest of my life. And if I didn't have insurance I don't know how I could ever afford it. [from a person with a psychiatric disability]

While some participants stated that they contact **Social Security (SSA) for information about income supports**, they also noted that SSA does not provide enough information up front about how much they can earn. Deaf participants noted that it is hard for them to understand the written letters they receive from SSA and suggested that a graphic representation might be preferable.

There's no real communication. They're [Social Security Administration] not clear in their expectations of us, so often we don't know how much we can earn before we have to report it, or how much we can earn within a certain month, or when it'll stop or when it'll decrease. And then suddenly you're out there working and you get a notification of overpayment.

6. What attitudinal factors negatively affect the employment of people with disabilities, including both the attitudes of the individuals themselves, and their perceptions of the attitudes of employers, co-workers, and VR counselors?

Attitudes of Employers, Co-Workers, and Employment Counselors

Across groups, **participants perceived discrimination both in the workplace and in hiring**. A consistent theme was that of **being treated differently** than non-disabled workers and **being isolated** in both the business and social aspects of work. Communication problems and isolation were particularly acute for Deaf participants, including the perceived unwillingness of employers to provide interpreters for meetings and being shut off from general information about things going on in the workplace. Participants with developmental disabilities also cited problems that arose from not being given adequate information about how to do their jobs.

I was in a job for three years that were the most miserable years of my life. I just didn't get treated as equal as an employee. And now where I volunteer I do. Just treated me as part of the staff. [from a person with a developmental disability]

Really alone. The whole environment where I'm the only Deaf person. It's very isolated for me. No communication. I have no idea what's going on. Everyone else is in the flow and I'm left out.

If you don't get the update that everybody else gets, if you're not kept on the same page with everybody else, it does affect your job, because you don't feel like you are on an equal par with other people.

There was also a shared belief that some employers and private employment agencies hold stereotypes and make **assumptions about the capabilities and limitations of employees with disabilities**. A related issue was that hiring people with disabilities is costly and that, in part because of employer assumptions about their ability to do the job, they are unwilling to make the investment.

When they see someone who is disabled, they see someone who in their opinion is less capable of doing the job than someone they would desire to have do the job. And they may not say it in plain English, but their actions and attitudes come out that show you that they really don't appreciate you as much as they appreciate a non-disabled worker.

It's just basic business. You have to make a person that's handicapped be a good enough deal financially for them to want to ignore all the other candidates and bring them on board.

Participants with psychiatric disabilities spoke of stigma in the workplace, and many agreed that they are misunderstood and feared by their co-workers.

Participants also reported **some positive experiences with employers and co-workers** that they generally characterized as feeling they had been supported, accepted, treated as equals and in a friendly manner, and given constructive feedback and reports on their progress.

Problems with VR counselors again surfaced in response to this question. These included not working with individuals to establish realistic employment goals and not making good matches between individuals and specific jobs. A number of participants perceived that some counselors attempt to channel all clients into a few existing job openings.

Attitudes of Individuals with Disabilities

Participants agreed that their own attitudes can make a difference to their experience as workers, both positively and negatively.

They spoke about “getting in their own way” by **insisting on being independent** and not asking for help, or shunning work incentives and supports. They also acknowledged the importance of giving VR counselors and VABIR helpers the

information they need to help their clients achieve successful employment outcomes, and described this as a skill they need to learn.

I can definitely relate in looking for jobs, you know, the independent thing and want to not use a whole lot of help but yet needing it.

I tend to be a kind of person that can't say no, and because of my issues I do have limited stamina, and it's hard for me to say, well, you know, I've committed to this, but I can't go the distance. And this is a very difficult situation because I don't want to let people down because I've said okay, I'm going to do this, and then I can't complete it because I just physically cannot do it. And that causes stress...

Participants also described feeling that they need to push themselves, work harder, and **do better than non-disabled people in order to prove their worth.**

Participants spoke of **emotional issues** that get in their way, including anger at having encountered many barriers to employment over time, losing self-confidence after being unemployed, depression, and resentment that incentives may be required for an employer to hire them.

For me...it's difficult...working and then—bam! can't work. And that transition is really difficult. And it's really hard for me to see myself now as with the limitations I have. Someone will say something and I'm thinking of the [person's name] that used to be able to do all this and that.

I had this kind of funny feeling because I think that what the arrangement they had was that the state was kind of paying half of my salary, and the company paid the other half in order to hire me. And it felt weird to me that they had to be convinced to hire me by getting some kind of an inducement to do that. Like they couldn't just hire me on my own? It had to be kind of a semi-bribe or something to make it worthwhile? I mean, what's wrong with me? I loved the job and they really depended on me, but I still had in the back of my mind that I had got hired in a different way than everybody else had.

7. What gets in the way of successful employment for people with disabilities?

Additional barriers to successful employment that have not been noted previously are:

- Difficulty of getting entry-level positions when physically unable to do manual work.
- Reluctance to relocate and move away from supportive Deaf community.
- Lack social skills to interact with co-workers and customers.

8. What solutions do people with disabilities propose to address the problems and needs they have identified?

At the end of each session, participants were given an opportunity to name one solution that might make a difference. Their responses included:

- DET and VR working together as a team.
- Better systems so earnings do not affect benefits, especially health insurance.
- VR and VABIR proactive about talking to employers prior to interviews.
- Seminars on networking.
- VR counselors go to the worksite at start of a new job to educate the employer, smooth out problems.
- More funding for community-based organizations that support people with disabilities.
- Hire more than one Deaf person to reduce isolation and lead to job retention.
- Educate employers about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities and breaking down stereotypes.
- Ongoing training for people once they are employed.
- Educate people with disabilities about their rights and available services.
- Incentives for employers.
- Change VR counselors until you “find a team that works for you.”
- Expansion of the “Choices” program

Findings Related to Youth and Transition

When recruitment for a focus group with young people proved unsuccessful, a VR Transition Counselor posed the assessment research questions to five (5) high school students. She summarized their responses as follows:

Services and supports needed to prepare for and gain employment:

- Completing job applications.
- Practicing for interviews, accompanying them to interviews.
- Identifying job openings.

Services and supports to retain and be successful in jobs:

- Learning to communicate with employers and co-workers “so we don’t get into arguments.”

Assistance to make the transition from school to employment, or from school to further education and training:

- Finding independent housing.
- Identifying schools and training programs to match their interests and needs.
- Getting a job.
- Setting up supportive services at post-secondary school.

Attitudinal factors:

- Employer reluctance to hire someone who brings a support worker to the job.

Barriers to successful employment:

- Bad job market.
- Lack of work experience.

In addition, several citizens offered input at the public hearing about young people making the transition from school to work, or from school to further education and training. Two speakers addressed the need for young people to have opportunities to gain work experience. One of those speakers stated that there is a need to provide summer employment opportunities as well as funding to support those opportunities, particularly funding for interpreters for Deaf youth. The other suggested that work opportunities be made available to students in their junior and senior years in high school. Two speakers addressed the importance of transition counselors, including the need for more transition counselors in schools around the state and the desire to see transition services begin as early as the freshman year in high school.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Value of Work

Participants in all groups placed a very high value on working. While earning money and becoming self-sufficient were important goals for many participants, equal or greater importance was placed on other reasons for wanting to work, including meeting the cultural norm, increasing self-esteem, making a contribution to society, alleviating boredom, and getting out into the world. Positive value was also placed upon working as a volunteer as a way to satisfy some of those needs.

Information about employment-related issues and specific job opportunities

Primary resources for information about employment-related issues were VR, VABIR, and employment programs of agencies serving individuals with psychiatric and developmental disabilities. In general, participants were largely unaware of or did not utilize other resources available to the general public. Participants generally used the same resources as those utilized by the general population to learn about specific job opportunities. Networking and word of mouth were universally acknowledged to be the most fruitful means of finding a job.

Assistance to prepare for and gain employment

The need for individualized assessments to assist individuals in aligning their interests, aptitudes, and abilities was identified as a critical and often neglected step in getting a job. Many participants turned to VR and VABIR for assistance in getting jobs, however the two agencies were perceived not to work in concert as well as they might.

Transportation, computers, assistance with tasks related to applying for jobs, having a liaison to prospective employers, assistance in purchasing basic tangible items (e.g., shoes, clothing), and assistance with developing small business plans were also identified as important needs. The need for communication supports was a theme, particularly telephone access for hearing job-seekers and, for Deaf individuals, subsidies to purchase TTYs, a source of payment for interpreters at job interviews, and employer education about using the TTY Relay.

Education and training

Participants emphatically agreed that education and training improves their chances of getting a job, moving to a better job, or becoming self-employed. Lack of money for education and training was a barrier to many who would have liked to further their education and training. Computer skills were desired by many participants (with lack of access to home computers viewed as a barrier), as were small business courses. Deaf participants expressed a strong interest in improving their English proficiency.

Work experience

The need and desire for work experience was a strong theme across all groups, and participants were open to considering a range of options to gain that experience. Volunteering was seen as an excellent way to gain work experience, especially if funds were available to defray both costs incurred by volunteers and the cost to employers of providing accommodations to volunteers.

Job retention

Flexible scheduling, including part-time employment, was cited most frequently as a critical accommodation for job retention and advancement. Advocates, reliable personal care assistance, ongoing counseling and training, job coaches or mentors, reliable transportation, physical accommodations and worksite modifications, stable medical benefits, and peer support groups were identified as important supports as well. For individuals who are Deaf, communication/interpreter support and the opportunity to work with other Deaf employees was key. Assistance in maintaining the financial and record-keeping aspects of their businesses was the most important need for participants who were or aspired to be self-employed.

Working and eligibility for benefits

The potential for losing benefits when one becomes employed was identified as a profound concern and the primary disincentive for participants to seek work. The loss of health insurance was the primary concern across all groups. Participants demonstrated widespread lack of information, misconceptions, and lack of awareness of resources to help them understand the relationship between benefits and employment. Few participants were aware of or had used VR benefits counselors.

Attitudinal factors

Participants perceived discrimination both in the workplace and in hiring. A consistent theme across groups was that of being treated differently than non-disabled workers and being isolated in both the business and social aspects of work. Communication problems and isolation were particularly acute for Deaf participants. Participants across all groups believed that employers make assumptions about the capabilities and limitations of employees with disabilities. VR counselors were described as frequently not being thorough in their efforts to help clients identify realistic goals and in making good matches between individuals and specific jobs.

Participants agreed that their own attitudes, including shunning assistance because of a stubborn insistence on being independent, pushing themselves to do better than non-disabled employees, and negative emotions such as anger and resentment, can make a difference to their experience as workers.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative assessment revealed that individuals with disabilities and Deaf individuals want to work. Fear of losing benefits, especially health insurance, was identified as the primary disincentive to working. Lack of coordinated resources to provide information and assistance, including individualized assessments and job placement, ongoing training and counseling, and easily-accessed benefits counseling, also hampers the ability to get and retain jobs. Employer and co-worker attitudes, lack of work experience, and inadequate funding for education and training, communication supports, transportation, basic needs, and other accommodations are also substantial barriers to successful employment for individuals with disabilities and Deaf individuals.

APPENDIX

2004 VR Needs Assessment

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Let's start by introducing ourselves. Why don't we go around the table and each say a little bit about ourselves. Please tell us your first name or name you like to be called by, what town you live in, and what your disability is. Also, tell us what your job is if you're currently working, or your most recent job if you've been able to work since the onset of your disability. *Start with volunteer.*

TURN TAPE ON NOW

I'M GOING TO START BY ASKING SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT HOW YOU GET INFORMATION ABOUT EMPLOYMENT. [RQ2]

2. If you were searching for a job, how would you find out about specific job opportunities? What do you think is the most effective way to learn about jobs you're interested in?
probe: - aware of any programs or organizations that provide job info?
 - Internet
 - generic resources- DET/Job Centers/private employment services
 - family, friends
 - networking
3. If you want information about employment issues that affect you, where would you go to find that information? This might include information about things like education and training, employment supports, starting your own business, or your employment rights as a person with a disability. Where would you look? Who would you ask?
probe: -friends and family
 - Internet / use computer
 - library
 - read about it? where?
 - disability organization or support group
 - VR , DBVI, Farm Family, DET/Job Centers
 - Social Security
 - legal advocacy organizations (VTP&A, DLP)
 - Human Rights Commission

- Have those of you who have looked for information about jobs and employment been able to get the information you need?

If yes, was it useful? If no, why not?

NEXT I'M GOING TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT ASSISTANCE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MIGHT NEED TO GET JOBS. IN ALL OF THE QUESTIONS WE'LL BE ASKING, WHEN I USE THE WORDS "JOBS" AND "WORK" AND "EMPLOYMENT," THAT ALSO REFERS TO WORKING FOR YOURSELF OR BEING SELF-EMPLOYED. [RQ3]

4. What kind of assistance or support has been helpful to you, or would be helpful, in getting ready for employment and getting a job or preparing to be self-employed?
5. Some people tell us that getting more education or training improves their chances of getting a good job or a better job than they have right now, or becoming self-employed. What do you think about that?

-For those of you who have gotten more education or training, what has been helpful? Not helpful?

-Would any of you like to get more education – or plan to get more training or education? What kind?

-Would it be possible for you to go to school or get other training? If not, why?
*probe: -can't afford books & tuition (if someone else paid, could they go?)
-need to keep working at current job to pay bills
-need personal care, child care to be able to go
- need transportation*

6. Some people have told us that they need more experience before they can get a good job. Are there ways you can think of that would help people with disabilities get work experience?

*probe: -have someone with you on the job to show you how to do the job
-have a mentor
-work as an apprentice (learn on the job)*

- Do you think that working as a **volunteer** might provide experience that would help you get a job?

NOW I HAVE A QUESTION ABOUT WHAT ASSISTANCE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES MIGHT NEED TO STAY IN THEIR JOBS. [RQ4]

7. Once a person with a disability **gets** a job or becomes self-employed, what kinds of assistance or support do you think might help them stay in their job? adjust to new jobs or solve problems that come up?

probe: -employee assistance program

-accommodations/assistive technology

-job coach/mentor

-flexible scheduling or part-time options

-small business supports

-for those who have worked: what's been helpful?

-for those who worked but not working now, anything could have helped them stay in job?

NOW I'M GOING TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTINUED ELIGIBILITY FOR BENEFIT PROGRAMS AFTER PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES GO TO WORK. [RQ5]

8. Some people with disabilities tell us they're concerned that if they work they will lose their benefits, such as SSI, SSDI, Medicare, and Medicaid. What is your understanding about whether working affects the benefits you can receive?

probe for different ideas

9. Where would you go for help or information about the impact that working would have on your benefits?

probe: -friends and family

-Internet / use computer

-library

-read about it? where?

-disability organization or support group

-VR , DBVI, Farm Family, DET/Job Centers

-Social Security

-legal advocacy organizations (VTP&A, DLP)

-PATH

I'D LIKE TO SPEND SOME TIME NOW TALKING ABOUT HOW ATTITUDES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO THE EMPLOYMENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES, BOTH POSITIVELY AND NEGATIVELY. [RQ6]

10. First, I'd like to hear from those of you who have had or know of positive experiences with employers and co-workers. What is it about their attitudes or behavior that contributed to a good employment experience for you or other people with disabilities?

11. Have the attitudes of other people—including employers, co-workers, and employment counselors—ever made it difficult for you to find or keep a job, or work as many hours as you'd like?

probe: -reluctance / unwillingness to make accommodations
-over-protectiveness/patronizing
-assumptions about ability to do the job
-negative comments
-social isolation in workplace
-perceived discrimination?
-psychiatric disability>>stigma

12. How do you think that the attitudes of individuals with disabilities affect their employment? In what way? Positively? Negatively?

probe: - not take advantage of work incentives
-not take advantage of counseling
-low expectations for lifestyle, have learned to live with less, aim low
-fear of failure/lack of self-confidence

NEXT I'M GOING TO ASK SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT VALUE WORK HAS FOR YOU AND ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL GOALS. [RQ 1]

13. How important is it to you to be employed? Is it very important, somewhat important, or not very important? Why? What do you want to get from working? (round robin)

probe: -use talents and expertise
-self-esteem
-independently earn income and pay "own way"
-do work that's meaningful to me
- make a contribution to society
-get off benefits, not have to answer to government bureaucracy
-sense of purpose / reason to get up in morning / emotional well-being
-stimulation, learning new things
-social aspects, get out in the world
-stay in shape mentally / physically
-down sides or negative aspects to working?

- Do you think that doing volunteer work or working part time could provide any of those things for you?

14. Looking ahead 5-10 years, what would your employment goals be? (round robin)

probe: -getting employment in certain field
-stay in current job
-current employer with promotion
-different work altogether
-part time / full time
-self-employment or start own business
-don't have any employment goals
-not work

-not sure

WE'VE JUST GOT A COUPLE OF QUESTIONS LEFT. THESE ARE ABOUT PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS. [RQ7, 8]

15. Why do you think so many people with disabilities are not employed?

- What (other) kinds of things make it hard for people with disabilities to be employed successfully?

probe: -transportation

-personal care assistance

-unstable family situations, lack of support system

-other responsibilities

-inadequate supports for self-employment

-lack of skills / training / education

-inaccessible workplaces

-lack of accommodations

-fear

-depression

16. Take a minute to think about the problems and needs we've talked about today. What one solution can you think of that might make a difference? What has worked for you or for someone you know? *Like to hear from everyone.*

probe: -individual solutions they may have some control over vs. needing systemic solution or intervention by advocacy group

17. Are there any questions we didn't ask you that we should have?