

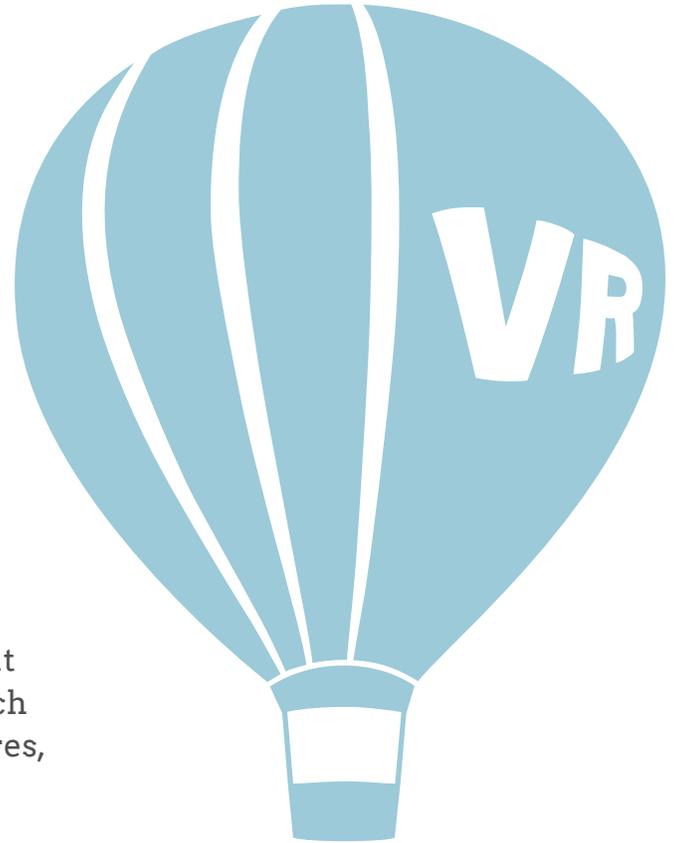
**GETTING THE  
MOST OUT OF  
VR**



**VOCATIONAL  
REHABILITATION**

## Suggested Citation

Sowers, J., & Scavera, A.(2014). Getting the Most out of Vocational Rehabilitation. Portland, OR: Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures, Portland State University.



# Getting the Most out of Vocational Rehabilitation

As a young adult you may want to take training or educational classes in order to obtain the type of job or career that you would like to have. If you do, you know that it can be very expensive to pay for a training program, books, perhaps equipment or tools required by the program, and transportation to get to the program.

Like most young adults, you may find it challenging to pay for the things that you need to go to school and get a job. You may

have some money in the bank and you may have a part-time entry level job that can help with these expenses. Perhaps your family can help a little to pay for these things. Pell grants, other grants, and educational loans can help pay for school.

Or maybe you have finished your training or education and want to go to work. You may need equipment or tools required by the job you want. For example, someone who wishes to get a job working with cars

may need a set of car repair tools. You may also need help to be successful in finding the type of job that you want. This could include help writing a resume, locating employers who are hiring, preparing for interviews, and negotiating with employers for accommodations.

Another important resource for people with disabilities, including those with mental health challenges, is their state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. VR agencies have helped many young adults with mental health conditions to pursue their career goals. However, some people have found it challenging to access VR services. Sometimes this happens because the VR counselor (the person who can support you

in finding a job) and client are not on the same page.

The purpose of this Tip Sheet is to help you get the most out of your VR experience. The more you know about how VR works and the more you know about what your goals are, how you want to achieve them, and the assistance that you would like from VR, the better able you will be to both get what you want from VR and to be successful in achieving your goals. This will be “Win-Win” for you and your VR counselor! Your counselor wants to see you succeed.

# Vocational Rehabilitation

## What is Vocational Rehabilitation?

VR is a federally funded agency that is available in every state to help people with disabilities prepare for and obtain jobs. In big cities there may be several VR offices, whereas in rural areas there may only be one office that serves many counties. You can find out more about the VR offices in your state by searching online using the name of your state followed by “vocational rehabilitation” (Example: “Oregon vocational rehabilitation”). The federal website URL for finding the VR program in your state is: [http://wdcrobcopl01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org\\_list.cfm?category\\_cd=SVR](http://wdcrobcopl01.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm?category_cd=SVR)

## What Kind of Services Can You Get from VR?

VR can help pay for the following:

1. A job search agency that will help you find a job. This may include help with resume writing, filling out applications, and interviewing. The job search agency may also help you to obtain an interview, negotiate with your employer for accommodations, and get assistance and support for you while you learn a new job.
2. Education and training necessary to reach your career goal. This can include tuition, books, and fees.

3. Work tools or equipment and uniforms that are required in order for you to get the type of career or job you want.
4. Bus passes and sometimes car repairs that will enable you to get to work.
5. Expenses and supports related to starting a small business.

These are the basic types of services all VR agencies can provide for their clients. VR emphasizes providing services that will help people to obtain jobs as quickly as possible. These services include job search assistance and related items such as getting necessary tools and equipment, and bus passes. Some state VR agencies are more willing than others to help pay for people to obtain additional education and training, and to

help people who are interested in starting a business. Different VR offices in the same state and even counselors in the same office can vary in terms of their willingness to consider funding different types of services. Sometimes this can depend on the location of the agency. For example, a VR office located in a rural location with few businesses and jobs may be more willing to fund self-employment assistance than an office in an urban location where there are many job opportunities. VR counselors may be more or less likely to fund a service based on the prior success of clients who have used this service in the past. For example, if past clients who received VR support to start a business have not been successful, a VR counselor may be hesitant to help fund future clients who wish to start a business.

## Are You Eligible to Get Vocational Rehabilitation Services?

How much money you have does not determine your eligibility for VR services. You are eligible to receive VR services if:

1. You have a disability;
2. Your disability is significant enough that it creates barriers to obtaining and being successful in a job;
3. Your employment barriers can be overcome through VR services.

The first step toward obtaining VR services is typically to attend a group or individual orientation to learn more about how VR works and to complete an application. After completing the application, the next

## Kristy's Story

*My name is Kristy and I have been a Vocational Rehabilitation, or VR, consumer for about a year and a half. I love animals and thought that a job working with them might be a good match for me. My VR counselor paid an agency to do a work assessment with me at a dog grooming company. I really liked the work, but I realized that to be successful as a groomer you have to work very, very fast...*

step will be to meet with a counselor to determine your actual eligibility for services. The counselor will ask you to provide documentation of your disability, and will ask for documentation from schools and other places where your disability was evaluated. If you have not been formally diagnosed with a disability or these diagnoses are not recent, the VR counselor may schedule you to meet with a disability evaluator. (If you receive SSI or SSDI, you are “presumed eligible” for VR.)

The next step in the eligibility process is to determine if your disability is significant enough that you need VR services. Your VR counselor will make this determination based on difficulties that you have had in getting and keeping employment. In most cases, VR will not provide assistance to you if you are currently employed or if you have



recently left a job because you simply wanted a better paying job. VR may also be unwilling to fund you if you do not experience a fairly significant disability and likely could obtain a job without VR's assistance.

Finally, a VR counselor will decide to provide services based on his or her evaluation of whether VR services will help you to achieve employment success. In order to decide this, a counselor may ask you to go through a number of assessments of your skills, abilities, and work readiness. These assessments may include paper and pencil assessments and they may include "work trials" in which you may be placed at a location to perform a number of tasks for several days or weeks in order to demonstrate your skills and abilities. In particular, work-related skills are assessed

including such things as attendance, punctuality, and willingness to take direction and feedback. Based on these assessments, a VR counselor may determine that you are not currently "employable" or work-ready. If this determination is made, it is important that you understand that it does not actually mean that you are unemployable, but rather that the counselor has decided that the services offered by VR are not of the type or amount to help you to become successfully employed. VR as an agency is judged by its success in helping people it funds to become successfully employed. This means that VR will be more likely to use their limited resources to assist individuals who are more likely to obtain employment with its assistance than those who may need different or more assistance than it can provide.

# Preparing for Your Meeting

After your orientation, a VR counselor will be selected to work with you. In most cases, the selection is made based on counselor schedules and caseloads. However, you have the right to choose the counselor with whom you wish to work. Ask people you know who have used VR services about their experiences with their counselors. Ask staff people who have helped people to get VR services if they have any recommendations for which counselors are the most effective and supportive, particularly of the type of goal you have chosen.

The most important thing that you can do before your first meeting with a VR

counselor is to know your job goal and the services that you want from VR to help you reach that goal. In fact, it is best if you do not attempt to seek VR services until you have identified a job goal and the services that you want and need to reach your goal. In a prior Tip Sheet, *What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up*, we provided guidance on how to go about identifying your job goal, and the assistance that you need and want to achieve it. That Tip Sheet is online at <http://pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pb-What-Do-You-Want-To-Be.pdf>

Following are the key steps to identify your job goal as well as the services that you want

to ask VR to help you with:

1. Figure out your strengths and interests. Get help from friends, family, and any staff you are working with to help you do this.
2. Identify jobs that might be a good fit with your interests and strengths. Again get help from your friends, family, school career counselors, neighbors, and others who have ideas about jobs that might be a good fit for you.
3. Do research online to learn more about each of your job ideas. Check out your state's One-Stop, WorkSource, or

*...I prefer to spend time with dogs as a way to relax and decided that being a groomer was not what I wanted to do for a living. However, I really didn't have clue what other type of job would be a good fit for me. Fortunately, I had the chance to get help from the Career Visions Project at Portland State University.\* Career Visions taught me how to determine my strengths, interests, and work preferences as a way to figure out another job goal...*

*\*This document is one of a pair (see page 10 for a hyperlink to the first document) that offers tips from the Career Visions project. – Ed.*

*...I knew that I really liked helping other people in the same way that I had gotten help as a teenager and young adult with mental health challenges. I also recognized that I had a gift for helping people who are upset and feeling overwhelmed. Career Visions introduced me to a career field, Peer Support, that I didn't know existed. I learned a little about this type of job by looking at job openings on the web. Then Career Visions taught me how to ask for informational interviews. Following what I learned, I conducted an interview with a professional Peer Support Specialist at a company where I later volunteered...*

Employment office websites. They often have information about how many openings there will be, pay ranges, and education requirements for lots of different jobs. The job opening projection information will be very important to VR counselors since they can only support job goals for which you will probably be able to get a job. You should also keep in mind that VR will probably not pay for a lot of education or training. VR may pay for short-term certificate programs at a college or technical training program, but VR will not usually pay for a college degree program. However, you might select a job goal that VR can pay for that will help get you to your

*Kristy enjoyed helping people and giving advice.*





longer term goal. For example, a person who wanted to be a nurse might ask VR to pay for Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) training. By doing this the person might be able to get experience and earn money that will facilitate getting into and paying for nursing school.

4. Do several informational interviews for the job or jobs in which you are most interested. An informational interview is a meeting where you ask questions, get career advice, and get information from someone in the field you are interested in.
5. Using the information that you have gathered, choose the job or career goal that you want to pursue.
6. Identify the steps that you will take to pursue your career or job goal and the assistance that

you need to achieve your plan. Your steps may include getting a certificate or other training. Make sure that you research the certificate and training programs in your area and the costs involved in each. Choose the one that you want to attend and find out the amount of money that you want to ask VR to help with. If the amount of the training is a few thousand dollars or less VR may well pay for the full amount—if you have done your research and planning in order to make a good case with your counselor. Another step in your plan may be to get an entry-level job in the area in which you are interested to help with your longer-term job search. Make sure that you ask your counselor to allow you to interview a number of different job developers (people who

*...The volunteer work helped me to learn more about peer supports. Based on these experiences, I decided that I would like to attend Peer Support Specialist training to help me to decide for sure if this career was a good match for me and to provide the training I needed to be able to get a job. With the help of Career Visions, I came up with a plan [see pages 20-23] to present to my VR counselor...*

*...The plan included explaining the steps that I had taken to decide that a Peer Support Specialist job was a good match for me. The plan also detailed how I wanted VR to help me in order to pursue this type of job. I asked my counselor to cover the \$500 cost for a 5-day Peer Support Specialist training and then to hire a job developer who would help me to get a job if the training went well. My VR counselor was so impressed with all of the work that I had done to come up with the plan that she agreed to it...*

work with employers to facilitate job placement) with whom VR contracts so that you can make sure to choose the one who will respect your wishes during the job search process. If you need equipment or tools to go to school or to obtain a job, make sure that you include costs for what you want in your written plan.

On pages 20-23 of this document, we included the written plan that Kristy, a Career Visions participant (see sidebars for Kristy's story of how she worked with VR to successfully achieve her career goal), took to VR to obtain what she wanted.

# Your Rights and Responsibilities

## What Are Your Basic Rights?

You have the right to appeal or challenge decisions that you feel are not in your best interest. The Client Assistance Program (CAP) can help you if you have applied to VR or are already a client. To find CAP in your state, go to <http://www.icdri.org/legal/CAP.htm>. If you are not satisfied with the service you are receiving, speak up. You may feel uncomfortable or nervous but it is important for you to get the help you deserve.

## And What About Your Responsibilities?

- \* Get organized!
- \* Show up on time for all your appointments.
- \* If you need to cancel, contact your counselor ASAP.
- \* If you say you are going to do something, it is your responsibility to do it.
- \* Remember to seek out the support and help you need to be successful.

*...I had to get up much earlier than I was used to in order to make it to the all-day training. It was also hard for me to be in a small room with a lot of people all day. I asked my instructor for some accommodations, including sitting close to the door and taking short breaks when I started to feel anxious. My final project was a video and presentation about how peers can support each other. My instructors were so impressed with how I handled myself during the training that they offered me a job giving telephone peer support. I took the job and am now working part-time. Of course, when I told my VR counselor about this, she was thrilled. ■*

- \* If VR pay for services for you, you should make the most out of those services and use them to the best of your ability.
- \* Do your very best in any classes or training programs that VR pays for.
- \* If VR pays for a job developer to help you find a job, meet with the job developer regularly and be an active and motivated partner in the process.

If you do these things, your VR counselor or future VR counselors will be more likely to support your goals and to provide you with assistance.



# Kristy's Career Planning Summary for Vocat

1

I completed a work assessment at a dog grooming business. I liked it, but it was determined that I was not fast enough to be competitive.

2

With assistance from the Career Visions Project I completed a career planning self-evaluation during which I wrote down my strengths, interests, and work preferences.

3

*Career Planning Activities...*

# ional Rehabilitation

Through self-evaluation I identified people-helping as a job area that I wanted to explore. I researched a number of these types of jobs through the Oregon Labor Market Information Systems (OLMIS) website, including jobs supporting people with disabilities. Through this research I learned about a growing job area in Oregon called Peer Support Specialist. I then conducted an informational interview with staff at the Mental Health America of Oregon (MHAO) organization in Portland.

4

I asked the MHAO staff if I could do some volunteer work with them. Soon I will begin working with their Young Adult Outreach Project Coordinator to distribute information about the Affordable Care Act.

## *...Peer Support Specialists Job Outlook...*

1

Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) has made a commitment to increasing the number of peers who are employed by organizations that serve people with mental health conditions such as community mental health agencies as well as other agencies where these individuals frequently seek assistance, including emergency rooms. Oregon DHS has developed standards for individuals to be trained and certified in peer supports.

2

I have conducted several searches on Craigslist and other job search websites and found a number of Peer Support Specialist openings in the Greater Portland Area.

1

I would like to attend a Peer Support Specialist training. MHAO recommended the Intentional Peer Support Training (IPS). An IPS training will be held in Portland March 24-28. The cost is \$500 for the training. The registration deadline was March 17, but the IPS Director indicated that she will hold one slot open for me.

2

I will begin and continue to volunteer with MHAO in the area of peer supports.

3

I would like assistance from a job developer to obtain a Peer Support Specialist job and/or a job working at a group home or providing one-to-one supports to people with mental health and/or developmental disabilities.

*...Next Steps*

## Produced By



Research and Training  
Center for Pathways to  
Positive Futures, Portland  
State University.

[www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu](http://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu)

## Funded By

This publication was developed with funding from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, United States Department of Education, and the Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (NIDRR grant H133B090019). The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the funding agencies.

