

## Navigating the Vocational Rehabilitation, or VR System

:07

Hi, I'm Anne Steverson, and I work at The National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, also known as the NRTC, at Mississippi State University.

(Image description: Screenshot of the NRTC website's "Home" page.)

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We created this video in response to feedback from the many people who are visually impaired who participated in our research projects. Our goal is to help you better understand the Vocational Rehabilitation program and its array of services. Links to websites or services mentioned in this video are also provided in the description below the video.

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To begin: What is Vocational Rehabilitation, or VR?

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The term "rehabilitation" might make you think of drug rehabilitation programs or addiction treatment. However, Vocational Rehabilitation is quite different. VR is designed to work with people with physical or mental disabilities, which can include those recovering from substance abuse. However, most people receiving services from state VR programs are people with physical disabilities, including visual and hearing impairments.

1:22

The primary goal of the VR program is to aid people with disabilities in preparing for work, finding or keeping a job, or moving up in their jobs. VR providers understand that many people with disabilities need help adjusting to their visual impairment.

(Image description: Man sitting at a desk looking at a computer screen with zoomed-in text.)

1:41

VR services include helping with that adjustment. Services may include psychological and emotional support and practical support to promote independence, such as learning new ways to travel safely or managing daily activities with accommodations for visual impairment.

2:01

One of the things that makes VR different from other job training and employment services is its comprehensive approach. VR considers your overall needs, including adjustment to visual impairment, living independently in your home, training requirements, vocational goals, and your economic future.

2:24

VR is funded and regulated by federal and state governments. This means that each state must follow standard federal guidelines, but also that each state has some flexibility in how it runs its' programs. Because of this, you may hear about some differences in how things are done in one state as opposed to how they are done in another. Also, if you apply for VR in one state, and then move to another state, you will have to apply again in that state because VR does not transfer your case.

(Image description: Colorful wooden game with curved channels that move throughout it and have different colored balls within them.)

3:01

Preparing for employment may include many services to help someone be ready to work and can include things like assistance attending college or getting vocational training. Getting a degree or other training can be a part of your rehabilitation program and can increase the number of jobs you qualify for.

3:22

In some states, one VR agency serves people with any disability. Other states have separate agencies – one that serves people with blindness or low vision and one that serves people with other disabilities. If your state has one agency, it might have a separate division for people with visual impairments.

(Image description: Screenshot of the CASVR website.)

3:45

Agencies may have names like “Services for the Blind,” but they serve all people with significant visual impairments. In most states, you do not need to be legally blind or totally blind to receive services. So, do not be discouraged if the agency’s name seems to suggest it is only for people who are totally blind; you can get help from them.

4:10

You may feel as if you are not ready to work now and may wonder if you will ever be ready to work. It can be overwhelming to consider employment when you are dealing with a visual impairment and potentially other medical issues. Remember that VR helps people adjust to a disability and can help you adjust to visual impairment at your own pace.

4:34

Sometimes VR works with people for a long time to help them adjust to a visual impairment and help the person prepare to work. It's normal to have doubts about your ability to work, but many find that as they adjust to their visual impairment, confidence in their ability to work increases. Try to have an open mind about the possibility of employment. As you learn to do things in a new way, and as you become accustomed to your visual impairment, you may find yourself interested in doing more things, including going to work.

5:13

Be mindful that VR services are provided to support employment. Telling a VR counselor or other service provider that you are not interested in work may cause you to miss the opportunity to receive services that might change your mind about employment. You won't know how you will do at work unless you receive the services you need and see how well you do.

5:40

Having a reasonable employment goal is part of the plan you must develop to get VR services. A VR counselor will help you identify an employment goal you both believe is appropriate. That goal can include getting the necessary training or education.

6:00

Remember that there are alternatives to a traditional job. You do not have to work a traditional 40-hour work week with an employer.

6:10

Think about whether you might like to work remotely, in self-employment, or part-time. These options may appear more manageable and appealing, but still leave the door open to other work arrangements in the future. These options have many attractions, such as flexibility, but there are limits to each type as well. For example, while remote work may relieve you from transportation problems, it might not provide you with the social contact you get by going to a central workplace. And, while self-employment allows you to set your schedule, most self-employed people work longer hours than people who work for others and must be responsible for paying quarterly taxes.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "Remote work, self-employment, part-time work, and Business Enterprise Program.")

7:02

A VR counselor can also help you find part-time work. Part-time employment can be a great way to use the new skills you learn, provide you with an opportunity to socialize with others, and supplement your income. The contacts you make through part-time employment may be helpful if you decide to move to full-time work in the future.

7:26

VR also offers opportunities for people with visual impairments to be trained and employed through the Business Enterprise Program, commonly called BEP. Participants become licensed as vendors through their state VR programs and are then assigned to a vending facility in a public building. Vending facilities range in size and are operated as independent businesses. Training takes at least 8 weeks and includes instruction about how to handle food safely. Your VR counselor can give you information about BEP and discuss it with you.

8:13

So, how do you know if you're eligible for VR services?

8:18

VR agencies must have documentation that you have a disability that interferes with your potential or current employment. You may be asked to provide records from your doctors to confirm your disability. If you receive Social Security Disability or Supplemental Security Income benefits, you are presumed eligible for VR services, but you may have to show that you are receiving those benefits.

8:49

If you are receiving Social Security benefits and are concerned that if you work, you might lose money, VR can provide you with benefits counseling. A benefits counselor can help you figure out how income from working might impact your benefits or how to maintain your benefits while working.

9:12

When applying for VR services, you must be served within certain time periods. You should expect to be told whether you are eligible for services within 60 days of submitting your application and have a plan in place within 90 days of being accepted for services. Always feel free to contact the VR office and ask about the status of your application or address other questions or concerns.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "VR Timelines: Eligibility determined within 60 days and plan in place 90 days after being accepted for services.")

9:43

I'd also like to mention a few other government programs to help you learn the things you need to adjust to your visual impairment.

9:51

Alternatives to VR might include the Department of Veterans Affairs or VA, if you are a veteran.

10:00

If you are not interested in working and are 55 years or older, you may be referred to the Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) program. The OIB programs, frequently called Independent Living for the Blind, provide people over 55 years of age with skills training to maintain independent living. OIB programs will be helpful but are not as comprehensive as VR services. You may move from the VR program to the OIB program, or the OIB program to VR, and if the state allows, you could be enrolled in both at the same time. Please review our video, "*Accessing Services*," to get more information about OIB programs.

(Image description: Slide that reads, "Eligibility for OIB Program: 55 years of age or older, services will assist in maintaining independence, and not planning to work.")

10:51

If you are under 55 and choose not to think about working now, consider contacting a Center for Independent Living. A VR counselor can help you find one, or you can use the link provided in the description below. Most Centers for Independent Living do not offer comprehensive employment services for people with visual impairments available through VR, but they do provide valuable support.

11:19

If you have private insurance, discuss with your insurance provider the possibility of getting assistance to get the training and support you need.

11:33

Now, getting back to the VR program. Let's talk about what services does VR provide?

11:40

The goal of VR is to prepare people with blindness or low vision to obtain, retain, and advance in employment. On the way, VR provides services the person needs to live independently.

(Image description: A woman with her guide dog is standing facing a man in an office. They are both smiling.)

11:57

VR can provide you with counseling and guidance to help you adjust to your visual impairment and decide what type of work you can and want to do.

12:07

VR can provide training for you in what is referred to as "blindness skills" so that you can learn to take care of your personal needs, manage your home, handle your finances, and travel independently in your community. Some states offer center-based training so that you can receive intensive training and meet others with visual impairments. Other states have teachers who visit your home or job site to provide training, and some states offer both options.

(Image description: Close-up view of a woman holding a green lace shirt on a hanger with one hand as she feels the braille on the shirt's tag.)

12:42

VR can arrange for an evaluation to determine what assistive technology devices and training on those devices will help you to access a training or educational program or to work.

12:58

VR can arrange a low vision evaluation to determine if magnification devices will help you make the most of your remaining vision.

13:08

VR can also fund training or education for you if you need credentials to pursue a specific type of work.

13:17

Continue listening to learn more about how VR works.

13:22

Each person who receives VR services will have an Individual Plan for Employment. This plan will be customized for each person to address their particular needs. It is helpful to talk with other people who have or are receiving VR services to get a general idea of what to expect. But remember, since each plan is individual, you likely will not get exactly the same services as others. You will receive the services that are most appropriate for you.

14:00

Sometimes, people are discouraged about employment because they live in a rural area. This may be because there are few jobs or because transportation is a barrier. You cannot be denied services because you live in a rural or remote area. If your VR counselor suggests that you relocate to improve your employment opportunities, be sure you have a frank discussion about what employment options exist, whether potential employers have openings, and if specific employers are interested in hiring people with visual impairments.

14:40

Many people with and without disabilities relocate for employment, so this is not an unusual situation. However, evaluate your circumstances to determine if relocating is an option for you. VR cannot refuse to provide services if you do not relocate. Discuss potential employment options in your community with your VR counselor. Consider whether remote work is a realistic option for you and discuss this with your VR counselor.

15:13

Transportation options are frequently limited in rural areas, but people in more urban areas may also have transportation barriers. In some cases, VR can assist you with transportation. For example,

(Image description: A woman holding her guide dog walks toward a public transit bus in a parking lot.)

15:30

If you are participating in a training program, VR can pay for your transportation to and from that training.

15:39

If you take a job, VR can help you find transportation to and from work and help you pay for it for a short period after you begin working. VR can help you find alternative transportation options if you are working and lose your transportation.

15:57

Discuss transportation with your VR counselor and ask for help, including how to develop your own transportation network. Remember that you cannot be denied VR services because you do not have transportation.

16:13

The NRTC on Blindness & Low Vision has some resources to assist you in considering alternative transportation. See the link in the description below for more information.

16:28

VR counselors can work with you if you have both visual impairments and other disabilities.

16:35

If you have a hearing loss, ask how your state VR agency handles situations where a person has both hearing and vision loss. VR agencies have counselors who specialize in working with people who are deaf or hard of hearing; those staff usually work with another counselor to support people with hearing and visual impairments.

(Image description: A young girl who has both hearing and vision loss holds the hand of a woman in front of her. They are both smiling.)

16:59

Some agencies will have staff who specialize in working with people with hearing and visual impairments. Agencies may decide who the primary service provider within the agency is based on which disability causes the person to have more limitations. While different states may not handle this the same way, all are available to provide services to people with combined hearing and visual impairments.

17:29

If you have a neurological disability, such as autism spectrum disorder, head injury, epilepsy, or multiple sclerosis, VR can still provide services to you. Make sure your VR counselor knows you have a disability in addition to your visual impairment. Discuss how you can get services to adjust to your visual impairment while accommodating any other disability or chronic illness you have.

(Image description: A man and a woman, both sitting in wheelchairs, are outside in a park with their guide dog.)

17:57

Sometimes, a learning disability interferes with your ability to pursue education and training opportunities to prepare you for work. Work with your VR provider and other

resources to evaluate alternative methods for you to pursue and achieve your training and educational goals. VR cannot refuse to serve you because you do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent.

18:24

Other chronic health conditions, including mental health and substance abuse disorders, may interfere with your ability to get training or employment. VR can provide services to address those barriers to training and employment.

18:42

Regardless of any other health or disability condition you have in addition to your visual impairment, VR must begin with the assumption that you can work. However, you may need additional assessments to determine eligibility.

19:00

VR may also ask that you participate in evaluations to determine your needs. You may also request evaluations. For example,

19:11

People with some vision may need a Low Vision Evaluation. In that evaluation, a low-vision professional will evaluate your needs, demonstrate various magnifiers and how they work, and make recommendations based on your situation. Low-vision professionals may also advise about lighting and contrast or the use of tinted lenses.

(Image description: A woman getting a Low Vision Evaluation in a doctor's office.)

19:36

If you are changing jobs or trying to figure out what work you want to do, a vocational evaluator can work with you to determine your interests, skills, and training needs. The evaluator can make recommendations about what education or training programs might be helpful to you and make suggestions about employment options.

20:01

If you are experiencing depression, anxiety, or other mental health problems, or just need help adjusting to your visual impairment, your VR counselor can get an appropriate professional to evaluate you and make recommendations.

20:21

As a part of adjusting to your visual impairment, VR can provide training for you. This training may include:

20:47

Personal Adjustment Training. VR counselors can arrange training for you in adaptive communication, such as learning to use audio, braille, or magnification; how to use note-taking devices; and how to label and organize items. Personal adjustment training



also includes instruction in daily living skills, such as grocery shopping and meal preparation, cleaning, money identification and management, and time management.

(Image description: Close-up view of a man measuring flour from a container in a kitchen.)

21:03

Everyone needs to be able to get from place to place, and VR can assist with that through Orientation & Mobility Training. O&M Specialists can teach you how to move safely in your home and community. This can include learning to use public transportation independently. O&M Specialists typically are aware of community transportation options.

21:30

Learning to use a white cane will help you travel safely and independently, as well. If you are hesitant about using a white cane, discuss it with an O&M Specialist and others who use it and consider their input. If you participate in Orientation and Mobility training and need a white cane, VR can get one for you.

21:54

You will likely also want to learn how to use a computer, smartphone, or other devices that accommodate your visual impairment. Existing and emerging technology makes using technology much easier for people with visual impairments. You can determine whether audio or magnification best meets your needs and learn how to use devices efficiently. Also, there are numerous apps available to assist you.

(Image description: Close-up view of man using Zoom on his iPhone.)

22:25

It can be challenging for everyone to decide what type of work to pursue, and it can be even more challenging if you must make a job change due to a visual impairment. Your VR counselor and a Vocational Evaluator can help you decide whether you can continue at your current job with workplace modifications.

(Image description: A woman sitting in front of a CCTV Magnifier reading a book.)

22:49

If you need to make a job change, career counseling can help you explore various jobs, learn their requirements and expected salaries, and make decisions about the best path to choose.

23:02

If you have limited work experience, VR staff can arrange job shadowing opportunities for jobs that might interest you. Job shadowing is an opportunity for you to observe and talk with a person performing the job so you can get a better idea of whether it is a good fit for you.

23:23

VR can help you prepare for interviewing by helping you with your interviewing skills. You can also get assistance developing a resume or developing a summary of your experience and references for an employer.

23:40

Going to a new job and learning new tasks can be intimidating. Your VR counselor can help you with this by arranging a trial work experience where you get hands-on opportunities to perform a job. You may also benefit from having a job coach, or someone who works with you for a short period until you feel confident in a job and new skills.

24:05

If the job you want requires additional skills, VR can assist you with identifying and obtaining the appropriate training or educational program.

24:17

VR will expect you to explore all options to fund your education. However, VR can assist you with some college expenses, including tuition, books, assistive technology that enables you to complete your assignments, and other educational expenses related to your visual impairment. Your VR counselor will also work with your college to make sure that you have the necessary accommodations to succeed. Your education must be tied to an employment goal.

24:57

In some cases, VR will assist with funding for a graduate degree or other professional training beyond an undergraduate degree. Typically, you must be able to demonstrate that there is a reasonable expectation that this education will prepare you for a profession that you are willing and able to pursue after it is completed.

25:22

Some training programs do not lead to a degree. For example, you may choose to complete a certification program to get a professional license or certificate. If there is a reasonable expectation that this training will help you become employed or advance in your job, then VR may provide you with financial assistance to pursue it.

25:48

VR counselors know it can be difficult to find a job. When you are ready to go to work, VR providers will help you find a job. They will work with the employer to make sure you have the necessary workplace accommodations, such as computer equipment, to perform the job duties.

26:07

VR counselors may refer you to a specialist within the VR agency or another service provider in your community for additional help finding a job, getting workplace

accommodations, or arranging transportation. Job placement services are individualized to your needs to meet your skills, interests, and abilities.

26:32

If you are working and are diagnosed with a visual impairment, contact your VR office to see if there are services that will help you complete your job tasks more easily or efficiently. If you are employed and are concerned that your job is at risk because of your visual impairment, VR can step in and try to help you keep your job. The VR counselor will work with you and your employer to identify what you need to keep working.

27:01

If you are in a job and believe you are not advancing because of your visual impairment, a VR counselor can work with you, as well. The two of you can evaluate your circumstances and determine what you need to further your career. The VR counselor can assist you in taking the steps necessary to move ahead in your current job or help you find another job where you can advance.

27:30

The VR counselor may ask you to participate in an evaluation to determine what technology and other devices might best help you. Many programs, apps, and devices will help you function in your daily life and job. For example, there is a free device to help you identify money. There are free and fee-based phone apps that link you to sighted people who will tell you what they see on your camera. You can learn to use a magnification program or a screen reader that uses audio to access your computer.

28:11

VR can pay for some equipment and devices to help you get a job or keep your job. Sometimes this includes getting equipment for your home so that you can get ready for work and live independently. However, VR does not typically buy things unrelated to your visual impairment.

28:36

Many people wish they had another person with a visual impairment to advise and support them. Some VR agencies operate mentoring programs, though these programs are more common for youth.

28:48

Some VR agencies have peer support groups, though frequently, those groups are for older people and do not focus on employment. Your VR counselor should be able to help you find others with visual impairments to talk to about your visual issues and other services.

29:09

There are two national groups, with state and some local chapters, of organizations of people with visual impairments, the American Council of the Blind and the National

Federation of the Blind. Your VR counselor can provide you with contact information for these groups, or you can learn about them on the Internet. There may also be local groups or resources that your VR counselor can help you find so you can meet other people with visual impairments.

(Image description 1: Screenshot of ACB's website.)

(Image description 2: Screenshot of NFB's website.)

29:42

Each VR program has a Client Assistance Program, or CAP, to give you information and advice about the VR program and its services. If you have a concern or problem with VR, CAP will advocate for you and represent you to make sure you are treated fairly. You can call the VR office and ask to be referred to CAP. No one should discourage you from contacting CAP, regardless of the reason you might wish to do so. Do not be concerned about any negative consequences of working with CAP. CAP is a free resource for you, and it is there to help.

30:34

VR services are funded with tax dollars. Take advantage of the services available to you. Learn what other services are available as well. There are many opportunities to learn and grow.

30:46

This gives you a brief overview of the VR program. More information is available from your state agency. Do not be shy about advocating for what you need. Keep in mind the differences between vocational rehabilitation and the Independent Living for Older Persons who are Blind programs and think about which is best for you.

31:11

Always discuss your concerns with your VR counselor. Keep an open mind about employment, remembering that if there is any chance at all that you will consider working, the VR program offers many services to support you.

31:28

We hope you find this information helpful as you move forward in your adjustment and rehabilitation.

31:34

If you would like to learn more about the NRTC, please visit our website.

(Image description: Slide that contains contact information for the NRTC.)

List of VR agencies by state: <https://rsa.ed.gov/about/states>

VR agencies by state with agencies for the blind identified:  
<https://www.csavr.org/stateagencydirectory>

Centers for Independent Living: <https://www.ilru.org/projects/cil-net/cil-center-and-association-directory>

Transportation Resources: <https://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/consumers/transportation>

American Council of the Blind: <https://www.acb.org/>

National Federation of the Blind: <https://nfb.org/>

National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision at Mississippi State University: <https://www.blind.msstate.edu/>

Finding Services: A Beginner's Guide to Visual Impairment:  
<https://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/consumers/finding-services>