

State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies: An Under-Utilized Resource of Homeless and Disabled Veterans

Fact Sheet #3

State Vocational Rehabilitation Programs are a valuable potential resource for reintegration efforts leading to employment outcomes for veterans who are homeless and disabled. This Fact Sheet is drawn from an interview with Mr. James A. Rothrock, who for the last six years has served as the Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services.

What is Vocational Rehabilitation?

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is the State-Federal service delivery system that assists people with disabilities so that they may prepare for, enter, and/or retain mainful employment. There is a Vocational Rehabilitation Agency in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Territories.

Who is Vocational Rehabilitation for?

To be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation services, an individual must:

- ▶ have a physical or mental disability that causes a substantial barrier to getting or keeping a job, and
- ▶ be reasonably expected to reach an employment outcome with the provision of VR services.

What services can a State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency like the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services provide?

Depending on the needs, interests, capabilities and job goal of the individual, a Vocational Rehabilitation agency can provide a number of services. A VR counselor works with each eligible person to develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). The services the VR agency can provide through the IPE may include, but are not limited to:

- ▶ Vocational Counseling
- ▶ Vocational Evaluation/Career Exploration
- ▶ Situational Assessment/Job Development/Job Coaching
- ▶ Physical Rehabilitation
- ▶ Skills Training
- ▶ Job Placement Assistance
- ▶ Assistive Technology



Virginia Commonwealth University



National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

To what extent are veterans who are homeless and disabled currently utilizing services through a State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency?

The Vocational Rehabilitation programs across the United States offer many services that can complement Veterans Administration and Department of Defense services. In Virginia, our Vocational Rehabilitation Program serves approximately 25,000 people each year. Currently however, we are only serving approximately 700 individuals with some record of military service. Interestingly, most are between the age of 45 and 64 and have some form of psychosocial impairments, which may include substance abuse.

What are the factors you see as limiting utilization of VR services by veterans?

Virginia DRS has several VR counselors assigned to VA hospitals that provide vocational rehabilitation to eligible veterans. One of the major problems we have seen is that the veterans from our VA hospitals in Salem, Hampton, or Richmond, do not maintain contact with DRS after they have been discharged from the VA hospital and returned home. The connection between the VA hospitals and the community where veterans return for their reintegration needs to be strengthened. Also, our experience is that veterans are often focused first on receiving their well earned benefits, and they sometimes miss the opportunity to better prepare themselves for work.

What are some specific resources potentially available to veterans with a disability through Vocational Rehabilitation?

Many state VR agencies operate or have agreements with state rehabilitation centers. In Virginia, the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center (WWRC) provides integrated medical and vocational rehabilitation services that could address the comprehensive needs of a veteran with a disability and improve both independence and employability. The Center has a vocational school and medical rehabilitation units. Both offer state-of-the-art equipment and facilities; a professional, committed staff; and highly effective programs, such as:

- ▶ Counseling
- ▶ Vocational Evaluation and Training
- ▶ Medical Rehabilitation Services

- ▶ Post-Secondary Education/Rehabilitation Training Program
- ▶ Independent Living Skills Training
- ▶ Assistive Technology Services

What steps are you taking in Virginia to encourage veterans to utilize Vocational Rehabilitation?

VR programming offers veterans a unique employment-focused resource. We are working with the VA programs in our state on improving our community outreach and education efforts with veterans. We need to coordinate the medical and physical rehabilitation efforts of the VA program with the vocational training and employment resources of the State Vocational Rehabilitation agency. This community outreach and education is particularly important if we are to reach and serve the younger veterans, the Wounded Warriors, who are now returning to their communities.

Are there examples of successful initiatives in Vocational Rehabilitation supporting veterans with a disability in achieving their employment goals?

One of our more successful initiatives in Virginia has been the award of \$200,000 of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) funds to TecAccess, a small business based in Richmond that provides services to both public and private companies on web and information technology access. The unique characteristic of TecAccess has always been their reliance on qualified employees with disabilities. With WIA funding, TecAccess has trained 15 veterans with disabilities; as of this date, half are already successfully working in the IT industry. Our VR program has been of critical importance to these veterans. Our ability to work to assure that their homes and work sites are made accessible has been a critical element in the success of this WIA initiative. We just recently learned that the Virginia Business Magazine has named TecAccess as its "small business of the year" and much of this honor is due to their ability to offer career opportunities to some of our veterans with a disability.

Is there a national directory for State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies?

Contact information for the State Vocational Rehabilitation Agency in each state in the U.S.A. can be found at: <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/cgi-win/TypeQuery.exe?902>

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