Improving Vocational Rehabilitation Outcomes for Justice- and/or Foster- Involved Youth with Disabilities:

A Toolkit for Practitioners

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About the Toolkit

This Toolkit provides recommendations for practitioners working with youth with disabilities who are involved with the justice and/or foster care systems ("systems-involved youth") as they transition to employment. This includes youth (ages 14-24) who are currently involved with one or both systems, or who have previous involvement. Our findings and recommendations come from four research activities:

1. A scoping review of promising practices for systems-involved youth with disabilities who are transitioning to employment

2. An analysis of Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) data

3. Focus groups and surveys with service provider professionals and people with lived experience in these systems

4. A scan of state policies aiming to improve service coordination between agencies serving youth involved in multiple systems

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Introduction

Under the Rehabilitation Act, vocational rehabilitation (VR) includes "services…necessary to assist an individual with a disability in preparing for, securing, retaining, advancing in or regaining an employment outcome" (34 C.F.R. § 371.6). Further, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I emphasizes services for youth (ages 16-24) with "barriers to employment" such as disability, current or prior foster system involvement, or previous involvement in the justice system (29 U.S.C. § 3102[24]).

Youth who meet the federal VR definition of "disability" are significantly over-represented in the justice *and* foster care systems, with up to 70% of justice-involved youth and 40-47%

of youth in foster care having some disability. It is also not uncommon for these youth to be involved in both systems: 65% of justice-involved youth had prior involvement in the foster care system.[i]

System-involved youth represent a group that is likely to require vocational guidance, job preparation, job search assistance, and initial job supports, all services that VR and its WIOA and community partners can provide to eligible youth.

> ***Did You Know?*** In 2020, there were 55,905 foster-involved youth aged 16+, and 1,789,360 arrests of people aged 15 to 24.[ii] This large group of potential applicants for VR services is even greater when accounting for those who may be eligible for VR Pre-Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS), starting as early as age 14.

Given the prevalence of disability in justice and foster settings, and the high rates of dual involvement, it is key to acknowledge both experiences when serving these populations. This Toolkit emphasizes the importance of:

1. Early engagement with employment services, training, and wraparound supports

2. Interagency, cross-systems coordination, and

3. Staff cultural competencies in serving these populations.

CONSIDERATIONS IN SERVING SYSTEMS-INVOLVED YOUTH

Accessing Employment Transition Services

Nationwide, systems-involved youth with disabilities access pre-vocational, work-based, and other job supports/services through state VR programs at significantly lower rates.[iii] Not only are systems-involved youth less likely to access VR services, but these groups also have fewer positive outcomes when they do access services.[iv]

> ***Did You Know?*** In 2021, justice-impacted VR clients exited with employment at much lower rates than other VR clients (36% vs. 44.8%). They also had lower rates of Measurable Skills Gains (2.5% vs. 5.4%) and were more likely to exit services (40.4% vs. 31.3%) despite achieving fewer positive outcomes. This indicates higher rates of case closure for negative reasons such as recidivism or loss of contact.[v]

Intersectionality & Multiple System Involvement

Systems-involved youth are also more likely to experience intersecting disadvantage and other WIOA barriers to employment. For example, according to our analysis of RSA data, VR clients with "Ex-Offender" status are significantly more likely to:

- Be low income (73.7% compared to 45.1%)
- Experience homelessness (10.0% to 1.5%)

- Be single parents (12.8% to 4.8%)
- Identify as Black (33.1% to 22.0%) and male (68.8% to 54.0%)
- Have "significant" disabilities (45.2% to 33.0%)
- Have prior foster care system involvement (3.9% to 2.8%)

These intersectional considerations are crucial, as they may be relevant to wraparound service needs, knowing which partner agencies to involve and make referrals to, agency cultural competencies, and more.

Did You Know? "Justice involvement" for WIOA-aged youth can mean many things, including adult corrections, youth detention, or a range of in-community or out-of-community placements (e.g., diversion, alternatives-to-detention, youth camps). Foster placements also take many forms and may be short or long. Justice and foster involved youth also *move between* systems frequently: the average youth detention lasts ≈ 1 month, the median length of foster care involvement is ≈ 1.5 years.[vi]

Intersecting disadvantage and movement between systems are among the biggest challenges in serving systems involved youth. The transitional nature of justice/foster involvement increases the importance of service provider coordination.

Key Research Finding #1

In our survey, frontline and supervisory staff from youth-serving agencies cited "difficulty keeping in contact with systems-involved youth" as a primary challenge (64% "agreed" or "strongly agreed"). The primary sources of this difficulty were:

- The population changes residences frequently (81%)
- The population changes contact information or lacks internet access (81%)
- The population experiences homelessness (80%)
- The population is difficult to reach when moving between placements (e.g., detention facilities, group homes, alternative education settings) (69%)

Youth involved in one or both systems are frequently simultaneously involved in even more systems (e.g., K-12 education, mental health, developmental disability, social services). This speaks to the need to *break down interagency siloes*. Interagency collaboration and coordination can increase touchpoints and help avoid service gaps.

IMPROVING OUTCOMES FOR SYSTEMS-INVOLVED YOUTH

What known evidence-based practices exist for systems involved youth pursuing employment? To answer this question, we did a scoping review of the research.

Key Research Finding #2

Our research identified eight evidence-based practices:

- Interagency coordination, record sharing, and efforts to reduce/avoid service gaps[vii]

- Early community engagement through immediate, long-term, person-centered, and individualized transition planning from a transition specialist[viii]
- Wraparound services tailored to unique challenges experienced by these populations, including improved access to mental health and substance abuse counseling, housing services, benefits planning, etc.[ix]
- Enhanced career preparation and employment supports/services that integrate academic, behavioral/social, and vocational goals[x]
- "Credible messenger" (e.g., peer mentoring and peer support counseling models) and trauma-informed care models of service delivery[xi]
- Family-based services as a routine element of transition planning[xii]
- Youth self-determination and "youth voice"[xiii]
- Disability training for staff from non-disability agencies (e.g., foster care, correctional, parole, courts) and intersectionality training on justice/foster systems for staff in disability agencies[xiv]

Receipt of pre-ETS

One trend that stood out in our analysis of RSA data was that justice-impacted VR clients are dramatically less likely to receive pre-ETS (2.8% vs. 26.2%), despite the fact that these groups experience more gaps in training and education.[xv] While this might stem from issues like age at VR enrollment, it also highlights the importance of interagency coordination to get systems-involved youth engaged in VR services as early as possible.

Many youth with disabilities entering justice settings have not been identified as eligible for special education.[xvi] These youth are unlikely to access employment transition services stemming from an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

Eligibility for pre-ETS is disconnected from IEP determinations, and a requirement exists to provide pre-ETS to "potentially eligible" students, without opening a VR case. Increasing rates of pre-ETS referrals and delivery for systems-involved youth should be a priority. This again highlights the need for coordination between multiple agencies (education, VR, justice, foster care, etc.).

Wraparound Services

Additionally, RSA data confirm the higher level of need for wraparound and "other services," with justice-impacted clients needing transportation services (14.3% vs. 8.8%), housing-related maintenance services (12.6% vs. 7.1%), and diagnosis and disability-specific treatment services (17.5% vs. 9.7%) at higher rates. This, too, highlights the need for greater interagency collaboration and coordination for these populations.[xvii]

These are only the youth that *do* access VR services. Data indicate that many systems-involved youth never reach the point of VR enrollment.

Rapid Engagement

Research strongly suggests that rapid engagement with job training is cost-beneficial for both systems-involved youth and for government programs.[xviii] Systems-involved youth with disabilities who rapidly connect with education, career and technical training, or employment services during the transition to adulthood are less likely to rely on government assistance, less likely to experience justice-system involvement, and more likely to experience a range of positive community adjustment indicators.[xix]

One positive finding from our RSA data analysis was that, nationally, VR currently *is* more likely to rapidly initiate services for systems-involved youth. For instance, the average time from IPE to services for justice-impacted clients was 14 days, compared to 34 days for all other clients. Eligibility determinations were also slightly faster for this group (34 days compared to 39 days). This suggests that VR systems are aware of the need for rapid engagement, when youth are appropriately referred to these systems.

Currently, a very small percentage of referrals to VR come directly from state departments of corrections, juvenile justice, or foster care (<1% according to one analysis).[xx] Intentional efforts by frontline staff can help increase referral rates. State- and agency-level policy can also have a significant impact. As we discuss in the next section, both formal and informal efforts to rectify this problem are crucial to improving youth outcomes.

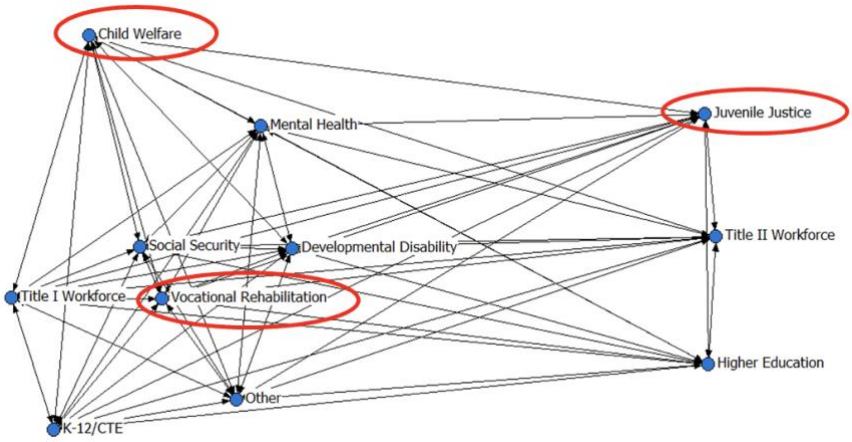
IMPROVING INTERAGENCY COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION

The importance of interagency coordination in serving systems-involved youth cannot be overstated. Terms like "collaboration" are often difficult to define. So what are some of the steps that practitioners, supervisors, and policymakers can take to improve collaborations in a way that leads to meaningful change?

> ***Did You Know?*** U.S. states and territories differ in the specific structure of their VR, corrections, juvenile justice, and foster care systems, and in the ways that those systems interact. This contributes to challenges when it comes to understanding and collaboration between these different systems.

Below, we provide a data-informed diagram of interagency collaboration in the provision of vocational services nationally based on a "levels of collaboration" scale.[xxi] This diagram shows that VR, juvenile justice, and child welfare agencies are currently *far apart* in terms of how effectively they collaborate.

Interagency Collaboration Diagram



Both formal and informal strategies can improve these circumstances. Formal strategies include things like creating memoranda between agencies, establishing shared workspaces, and data sharing and referral policy frameworks. Informal strategies entail efforts by staff and supervisors to build connections with other agencies through activities such as networking, attending cross-training opportunities, and establishing points of contact.

Key Research Finding #3

Our research identified several facilitators of effective collaboration. These include:

- Developing shared goals for serving systems involved youth
- Establishing distinct roles and responsibilities, including "lead agencies" with primary fiscal/resource capabilities and responsibilities
- Developing formal interagency agreements to dictate information, data, and resource sharing, referral processes, etc.
- Respecting, valuing, and understanding other agencies' unique roles, expertise, and service offerings
- Building mutual trust between agency personnel through cross-training opportunities, braided positions, etc.
- Establishing regular, timely communication and points of contact
- Sharing fiscal resources and compensation for collaborators (such as non-profits that partner to provide services).

VR should leverage existing relationships to forge stronger connections with juvenile justice and foster care. State-level foster care and juvenile justice agencies are often highly intertwined, so this could present opportunities for agency "bridges" between VR and justice systems. Another example of a "bridge" agency would be mental health offices that work closely with both the justice and VR systems.

Overcoming Policy Disconnect & Service Gaps

Movement between (and within) systems can create service disruptions. For instance, one reason for VR case closure involves instances where an individual is "no longer available for services due to incarceration or residence in an institutional setting." Different age requirements between systems like corrections and VR can create additional complexities in service delivery and coordination.

To minimize delays in service delivery, agencies should commit to learning about each other's mission, services, and eligibility criteria. Further, they should identify a direct contact person to whom new referrals can be sent for timely processing. Regularly scheduled meetings, such as on a quarterly basis, can help ensure that partnering agencies have current information about services and contact persons.

Our research highlights the fact that some issues with trust between agencies come down to simple challenges related to communicating with and understanding the value of outside agencies.

Key Research Finding #4

Our research illustrates that bridging gaps in understanding between agencies and youth/families is a key objective. According to our survey of practitioners:

- 54% of respondents "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that **"It is difficult to coordinate with other agencies to provide employment services for systems-involved youth."**
- 52% agreed/strongly agreed that **"It is hard to understand eligibility criteria for other agencies."**
- 34% disagreed/strongly disagreed that **"I understand what other agencies do to support systems-involved youth as they pursue employment."**

Many of these challenges were specific to working with non-disability agencies:

- 59% disagreed/strongly disagreed that **"Juvenile justice agencies collaborate frequently with employment agencies serving youth with disabilities."**
- 64% disagreed/strongly disagreed that **"Agencies that serve everyone (e.g., schools, law enforcement) regularly reach out to agencies serving primarily people with disabilities."**

Aligning Eligibility Criteria

Collaborative efforts to educate about various systems and programs should emphasize eligibility requirements. This includes confirming how each defines disability. It takes concerted effort for disability agencies to develop relationships with justice system practitioners. Difficulty finding points of contact at other agencies and ensuring rapid referral and initiation of services were key challenges identified in our research.

Few states have clear directives outlining disability assessments within vocational planning in justice/correctional settings. Similarly, program eligibility requirements differ significantly across systems. Taking steps to ensure that you understand other agencies' eligibility criteria can go a long way, as can policy efforts to clarify when interagency referrals between systems are appropriate.

Considering the overlap of disability and involvement in these systems, one practical policy objective could be increasing the rates of referral from justice and/or foster agencies to VR agencies. It is imperative that justice/foster agencies develop policies that are coordinated with disability-related assessments from other systems. Ideally, these would involve disability-focused agencies (VR, DD, MH, etc.) to draw upon their expertise.

While our research consistently highlights the importance of informal collaboration by frontline staff, some change must happen at the level of state policy and through the efforts of senior administrators within these systems.

> ***Did You Know?*** The term "policy" is often incorrectly thought to only include laws and regulations. In fact, these are only some of the things that make up policy. Every agency, local office, etc. has written guidance or rules that drive daily activities. Even individual employees or groups of employees may develop practices that, over time, become widespread and conventional to a point where they more accurately resemble a type of "policy."

While federal law dictates eligibility standards for VR, states and agencies can make efforts to ensure that state-determined eligibility determination processes (e.g., in the state corrections context) do not contradict or undermine federal requirements.

> ***Did You Know?*** Some states have taken policy steps dictating that VR-eligible individuals may receive VR services while in prison or other out-of-community placements. Some reforms also require coordination between justice/VR systems.
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> **Indiana** has regulations requiring services for VR-eligible individuals who are incarcerated or recently released be coordinated between corrections, parole/probation and VR, and requiring that VR Counselors (VRCs) "participate meaningfully" in the assessment process and priority of services decisions (460 I.A.C. 14-7-9(9)(a)(1)-(3)).
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> **North Carolina** law requires that VR service options be *exhausted* for individuals in detention prior to assigning vocational programming administered by corrections (N.C. Gen. Stat. § 148-26).

Formal Interagency Agreements

At a level below laws and regulations, our research has consistently found that formal memoranda or similar agreements specifying referral procedures between state agencies

are a key first step to avoiding service gaps.[xxii] The theory underlying the use of such agreements is that they will increase interagency coordination between agencies by creating formal pathways for referrals and service delivery.

Key Research Finding #5

Some states have taken steps to require formal memoranda between systems that historically struggle to work together.

For example, in **Idaho**, Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) exist between the Department of Correction and the state VR agency to provide a cooperative delivery of comprehensive services to VR-eligible clients who are reentering the community, including braiding of non-federal funds towards case service expenditures.[xxiii]

Such formal agreements can also emphasize the importance of providing VRCs and Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) with access to justice and/or foster settings, as appropriate.

For instance, in **Iowa**: MOAs were developed that created commitments to having VRCs enter juvenile detention facilities with efforts originally funded solely by the VR system. In creating these new positions, it was observed that some of the services provided within these settings did not fit neatly within VR service offerings, so the effort evolved to emphasize braided positions where staff can also provide services under non-VR type work (e.g., re-entry services for youth who don't fall under VR eligibility so they don't get discharged). This led to a current proposal where five "reentry services navigators" are embedded *within* the juvenile justice system, leveling systems, delivering pre-ETS in the facility and following youth one year after release, and helping with the soft handoff with VR, school district, etc. These are embedded positions, where staff have agency emails, participate in agency trainings, help with information and resource sharing, and have improved access to data.[xxiv]

In our research, participants across agency types indicated they would benefit from more formal partnerships with other agencies, both at state and local levels. In particular, participants indicated a desire for stronger, more formal partnerships between child welfare, juvenile justice agencies, and disability-focused systems.

Similarly, frontline staff indicated the need for more local, interagency, and region-specific cross-trainings meant to facilitate cross-agency understanding and referral processes, build cross-agency "liaisons," and outline information/resource sharing opportunities.

CULTURAL COMPETENCE & YOUTH VOICE

Interagency coordination efforts must consider the complexities that systems-involved youth experience navigating multiple systems. It is not just about how well *agencies* work

together. Youth and families must be meaningfully included in efforts to coordinate services, increase cultural competencies, and reduce bias and service gaps.

Building Trust and Understanding

Policymakers and practitioners should prioritize addressing the lack of trust stemming from youth and families' prior negative experiences with government systems. In this last section, we discuss strategies that can help overcome these challenges.

Key Research Finding #6

Some of the key challenges related to youth voice and self-determination involved such things as: issues of getting youth and families to "trust" government systems and helping youth and families to understand complex systems that are difficult to navigate. Our survey of youth-serving practitioners and youth/families with prior system involvement found that:

- 86% of survey respondents "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that **"Systems-involved youth tend to trust government agencies and personnel."**
- 79% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that **"The use of complicated terminologies (e.g., vocational rehabilitation) make it difficult for youth and families to understand services."**
- 75% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that **"Systems-involved youth had prior negative experiences with service agencies."**
- 57% of service provider respondents disagreed/strongly disagreed that **"Systems-involved youth understand what services my agency provides."**

Information about services and options should be provided in plain language. Agency-specific terminology (e.g., vocational rehabilitation) or jargon (e.g., transition services) is likely to be unfamiliar to youth and families and may be especially confusing to youth who are involved with multiple systems.

Did You Know? Some state agencies have taken steps to make their service offerings easier to understand for youth and families. In one notable example of a state effort to address this, the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation recently renamed itself *HireAbility Vermont*, with the stated goal of better reflecting the agency's function and service offerings.[xxv]

In the context of government services, another key consideration is "systems avoidance," stemming from race-related mistreatment and prior negative interactions with government agencies.[xxvi] To address and alleviate such cultural mistrust, VRCs must learn about and be mindful of the societal power imbalances these groups face, because the inequalities encountered within society can shape their perspectives toward VR services.[xxvii]

Youth Voice, Self Determination, & Trauma-Informed Care

Youth involved with public welfare systems often refuse support from professionals because they feel those professionals have little understanding of their social barriers and lived realities.[xxviii] Failing to consider or resonate with clients' experiences of childhood trauma and/or intergenerational disadvantage can lead to negative counseling experiences—potentially triggering clients' feelings of frustration, powerlessness, dysregulation, and stigma, and further distancing them from counseling services.[xxix]

Counseling frameworks that take affirmative steps to bridge the emotional gap and foster a mutual understanding and respectful environment have proven to be clinically effective.[xxx] These culturally informed approaches aim to facilitate positive self-disclosure, demonstrating to service recipients that it is possible to move from feelings of powerlessness to self-determination, from being a victim to being the hero of one's own life journey.[xxxi]

Practice Recommendation

VRCs and other practitioners should learn and use trauma-informed approaches when working with justice and/or foster-involved youth. Not only have a considerable percentage of youth experienced trauma before entering these systems, but evidence indicates that involvement with these systems is, itself, traumatizing. VRCs should be mindful of the language they use with and about these youth and seek to build rapport through exploring their interests and meeting them where they are at. It is helpful for youth to know what to expect; so, explain the VR process in plain language, and encourage youth to ask questions about anything that is not clear. Find ways to engage youth quickly and meaningfully, as delays in service provision can cause them to lose interest. Finally, let them know that with their consent or the consent of their guardian you will be sharing information about them as needed, such as during counselor supervision meetings or when referring to a CRP.

Training Needs

Another important consideration is **staff cultural competence** in serving systems-involved youth with disabilities. "Cultural competence" is a research-validated concept—although specific names and definitions for the concept vary (e.g., cultural responsiveness, cultural humility).[xxxii]

Did You Know? Cultural competence is commonly defined as "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that come together in a system or agency…enable[ing] the system…to work effectively in cross cultural situations.[xxxiii]

Agency and professional cultural competencies (training, staff diversity, etc.) specific to serving justice- and/or foster- involved youth with diverse disabilities and other intersecting characteristics is considered an important predictor of outcomes.[xxxiv]

Research suggests that many public system VRCs come to the position with "generalist training" that can be applied in various settings, but rarely covers topics specific to justice-

and/or foster- involvement.[xxxv] As a result, VRCs and CRPs may be limited in their ability to serve individuals with multiple stigmatized identities, including those living in disadvantaged communities.[xxxvi]

Similarly, disability-specific training is often lacking for justice and child welfare agencies. Again, this highlights the importance of cross-training and formal agreements outlining assessment, evaluation, and referral processes across agencies.

Cultural competence in a VR context requires unique considerations, and there have been specific models developed that are tailored to ensuring that employment service providers understand and respond to the diverse cultural perspectives and backgrounds of their clients.[xxxvii]

Recent models for multicultural rehabilitation counseling focus not only on client characteristics, but also on bidirectional efforts by providers to understand the role of systems and culture in *shaping* social and political realities, human development considerations, and the counseling profession itself.[xxxviii]

> ***Did You Know?*** Racial and ethnic differences in VR service receipt and outcomes is well documented. [xxxix] Research has found that racial/ethnic minority groups experience lower acceptance rates in applications for services, receive fewer investments in the variety of programs offered, and have less frequent interactions with counselors compared to their White counterparts.[xl]

While race and ethnicity are just two intersectional characteristics among many a person may have, staff training, competence, and representation are demonstrated to have a direct impact on youth outcomes in the VR context.[xli] Concerning justice-involvement, the central role of race in mass incarceration compounds the importance of cultural competency efforts that reflect the intersectional experiences of youth.[xlii]

VR agencies and other youth-serving agencies can benefit from *cross-training* workshops and seminars on topics such as oppressive structural influences (e.g., societal discourses and laws), the unequal distribution of resources (e.g., Medicaid, Medicare, and education), and historical legacies (e.g., colonialism and slavery).[xliii] Such educational programming aims to equip VRCs and their collaborators with a nuanced understanding of the power imbalances among different groups, enabling them to approach their work in a more holistic and culturally responsive manner.

Practice Recommendation

Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRCs) should become familiar with and abide by the standards in Section D., Multicultural Considerations, of the 2023 Code of Professional Ethics for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors. These standards are designed to reduce bias, minimize discrimination, and prevent harm when working with clients from diverse racial, cultural, and ethnic groups. Ethically, CRCs are required to assess and be aware of their own biases and to seek guidance from experienced

colleagues and supervisors when personal biases or lack of knowledge about a particular community may impede effective, just, delivery of services. The guidance found in the CRCC Code is useful for non-CRCs working in VR, including CRPs, as it addresses multicultural concerns more explicitly than some other professional guidelines.

The CRCC Code can also help VRCs grapple with ethical dilemmas they may encounter. VRCs have an ethical obligation to do no harm to the individual and justice professionals such as probation officers are to protect the larger community. These different missions can result in conflicting perspectives of concepts such as "choice."[xliv]

Staff Diversity & "Credible Messengers"

The notion of "representative bureaucracy" suggests that public organizations that are reflective of those they serve demonstrate better outcomes, especially when serving marginalized or underrepresented groups. For example, some VR clients from racially/ethnically minoritized communities have reported greater reluctance to seek help from VR programs staffed primarily by White Americans.[xlv]

Diverse hiring creates opportunities for within-agency learning related to navigating cultural nuance (e.g., nonverbal communication, dialect, self-presentation).[xlvi] Within these multicultural counseling models, staff diversity and representation is a key consideration, as it can: (1) literally increase staff understanding of different lived experiences; and (2) provide clients with access to "credible messengers" who share at least some overlap in lived experience.[xlvii]

Did You Know? According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, nationally there are 28,660 CRPs, and an additional 13,620 VRCs housed within state government agencies.[xlviii] The race/ethnicity demographics for CRPs and VRCs are: 66.4% White, 13.7% Black or African American, 10.8% Hispanic or Latino, and 4.6% "Other."[xlix] Although these might appear proportional to U.S. racial demographics, it is important to note that Black Americans comprise 31.8% of the disabled population despite making up only 12.6% of the total population.[l]

Despite federal regulations under the Rehabilitation Act that require efforts by state agencies to improve disability hiring practices (29 C.F.R. § 1614.203(d)(6)), a recent analysis found that, for state government workforces *generally*, the representation of disability (8.7%) is lower than in the overall population (13.1%) and not significantly better than rates of disability representation in the private sector.[li]

Did You Know? While not specific to VR programs, several states have developed new initiatives to increase the employment of individuals with disabilities within their governmental workforce. Examples of these efforts include:

- Minnesota's accessible applicant portal online job postings and alternative pathways to demonstrating job qualifications for state agencies (Connect 700 program)

- An executive order in Vermont that seeks to employ a representative number of qualified candidates with disabilities within state government
- State law in Maine that gives individuals with disabilities a job retention preference within state agencies
- Ohio's executive-led effort to establish recruitment and retention efforts to increase disability hiring in state government
- Utah's Alternative State Application Program, which seeks to help with the recruitment and hiring process of individuals with disabilities[lii]

Beyond diverse representation of race/ethnicity and disability, hiring people who have experienced justice and/or foster system involvement might also be particularly important. This effort carries its own challenges: such as privacy/disclosure issues, and occupational licensing restrictions in many states that apply to human service professions, especially those professions working directly with vulnerable populations).[liii]

At present, we could not find any data on state-level efforts to *affirmatively* hire people with criminal convictions into relevant counseling roles, although some states are making efforts to *remove* barriers to accessing public employment.[liv]

Practice Recommendation

VR and other service agencies should actively create staffs that reflect the range of demographic characteristics and life experiences of the individuals they serve. This may require outreaching in untraditional settings and ways. For example, VR could build relationships with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic serving institutions (HSIs) by regularly engaging with faculty and students to assist students with practitioner interviews, provide internship opportunities, co-design and deliver training or conference workshops, and conduct collaborative research.

Peer Support Models

The concept of pairing clients with counselors who have similar personal experiences, known as "peer support," was formally developed in the 1990s with the mental health service user movement.[lv] Peer support services have become professionalized and integrated into various fields, such as mental health and trauma-informed care,[lvi] drug abuse,[lvii] and youth justice.[lviii] The peer support model has demonstrated positive impacts across diverse outcome measures, including perceived personal growth and skills development, as well as reductions in negative outcomes such as substance use relapse and recidivism.[lix]

Many VR programs are familiar with this concept and the value of peer-to-peer support through their funding and administrative oversight of centers for independent living (CILs). Within the peer support framework, individuals who navigated personal adversities and gained insights into that process are described as experiential peers (EPs).[lx]

Did You Know? Within a justice system context, the utilization of peers is sometimes called a "credible messenger" approach. Such efforts have proven critical to serving

system-involved youth, given the resistance and vulnerability of this population. VRCs/CRPs with lived experience can provide peer support characterized by constructive self-disclosure, exemplary role modeling, and conditional regard.[lxi]

To provide just one example, recipients with serious mental illnesses report benefits from interacting with EPs, including enhanced feelings of group belonging, self-acceptance, and validation.[lxii] The roles and responsibilities of the EPs include assisting recipients with social skills, combating stigma, serving as a role model, informing recipients about community support systems, assisting recipients in choosing occupations that match their strengths, and, particularly importantly, sharing their recovery stories with effective coping skills.[lxiii]

Practice Recommendation

Boundary setting is an important aspect of the counseling relationship, and it can be challenging to determine when, how, and how much to share when it comes to personal information. Creating opportunities for VRCs/CRPs to practice and receive guidance about this will help them understand when their disclosing personal information may benefit their working relationship with the client. Practicing boundary setting can also help practitioners understand what flexibility they have to contribute time, funding, and other resources, when collaborating with other systems. One way VR agencies can do this is to regularly discuss fictionalized case scenarios during staff meetings and in-service trainings.

Conclusion

There are many issues to consider when working with youth involved in the justice and/or foster care system. Issues such as the high prevalence of disability and trauma within these groups, the disparate treatment of youth with marginalized identities, a lack of staff diversity within VR and other systems, as well as barriers to effective interagency/cross-system collaboration all need to be addressed to improve services and outcomes for these youth. Recommendations for both policy and practice are provided in the hope that VR counselors and other practitioners will feel more confident in their ability to work with system-involved youth. While some of the recommendations may take time to implement, action can be taken now to improve the futures of these youth!

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