

Addressing Recruitment and Retention in VR

Introductions

Narrator: The following is a video symposium that alternates between static shots of participants in their offices.

Liam Kearney (LK): All right. Hello, everyone, and welcome to this amazing webinar CSAVR is doing in collaboration with YesLMS, the VR Development Group, and the VRTAC-QM. My name is Liam with YesLMS. I just wanted to let everyone know that throughout today's presentation, we will be posting some helpful articles in the chat as well as instructions on how to complete your survey and obtain your CRC for this session. We still have folks joining us, so we'll continue periodically throughout this session to post these helpful reminders in the chat. But I just want to thank you all for joining us today, and I'm going to turn things over to the CEO of YesLMS, Linda Hedenblad, for her introduction of today.

Linda Hedenblad (LH): Thank you, Liam, and it's really great that everybody is able to make it today. I am Linda from YesLMS, and we started this learning management system with one goal in mind, and that's to make a dent in digital equality. We really believe in accessibility for everyone, which is why we built YesLMS. We're partnered with our sister agency, which is the VR Development Group, and that's our content creator where we create classes and other content for the field of vocational rehabilitation and others who work with people with disabilities. Today, we're really very excited not only for the subject matter, but to be partnering with CSAVR and the VRTAC-QM through George Washington University. I'm going to turn it over here to Steve Wooderson, who's going to say hello.

Steve Wooderson (SW): Thanks, Linda. Well, I'm really pleased to welcome you to this first of a second series of three free webinars during this program here where Linda, our friends at YesLMS, have partnered with us to develop virtual opportunities for really our profession to rally around a number of national strategic priorities. For those of you who don't know, I'm Steve with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, and we're the membership organization for all the public VR agencies across the country. A couple of years ago, we announced three national strategic priorities, recruitment and retention of VR professionals, redesign and streamline internal processes, and increase public awareness of VR services. Today's topic is directly related to the first of those three priorities addressing recruitment and retention in VR. Just for reference, the Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management at San Diego State University pulled data from VR agencies' 2022 state plans, and found then of those reporting, there was a 14.2 percent counselor and a 14.9 support staff vacancy rate nationally. You know, staff retention in our field faces several unique challenges. So in today's session, we'll explore the issues of recruiting and retaining qualified employees, and be sharing some best practices to address this issue.

SW: So leading the discussion today will be John Walsh from George Washington University, Ron Vessell, Special Consultant with CSAVR, and then a great panel of state VR directors who

will share firsthand experiences, highlighting some of the challenges they faced and strategies that have yielded some successes. Theresa Koleszar from Indiana, Dee Torgerson from Minnesota and Melinda Fruendt from Oklahoma. I'll pass this over to our colleague, John Walsh.

John Walsh (JW): All right. Thank you, Steve. And I greatly appreciate the introductory comments by both Linda and Steve to kick this off. We greatly appreciate the opportunity being part of this collaboration with YesLMS and CSAVR, to share relevant training to a really important topic that's impacting our field right now, which is addressing recruitment and retention issues in your organization. So we're going to spend a little time talking about some of the findings that we were able to gather through some national research and some research that was done within our own field. And then as Steve mentioned, we're also going to be chatting with three directors that have implemented some practices that have really turned the corner for recruitment and retention in their organization. Before we get started, let's do some introductions. So my name is John Walsh. My pronouns are he, him. I'm a white male born at the tail end of the baby boomer generation. I'm wearing a lavender dress shirt. I'm also wearing black-rimmed glasses and a bluetooth headset. My Zoom background is virtual, and it is a blue with the George Washington University logo. I'm presenting out of my home office just outside of Philadelphia, PA. As Steve mentioned, I have the privilege of working at The George Washington University and have the pleasure of serving as the project director for the Center for Innovative Training in Vocational Rehabilitation. I'm also part of the VRTAC for quality management, and that's the hat I'm wearing today to talk about some of the work we're doing in this space. Ron and I, and with our colleagues, Carol Pankow, Missy Diehl, and Crystal Garry, have done some work around recruitment and retention to try to develop resources in order to help folks in the public VR sector. So I'm going to turn it over to my partner in crime in this endeavor, Ron, to allow him to introduce himself.

Ron Vessell (RV): Thanks, John. Ron Vessell here. As mentioned, I'm the CSAVR representative to the TAC-QM, and we've been working on this for a while. I suppose I should say I'm an older white guy with a gray beard and a bald head, and a blue shirt. And so, Theresa, would you like to introduce yourself?

Theresa Koleszar (TK): Hello, greetings from Indiana. I'm Theresa Koleszar, Director of the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services here in the Hoosier State. And I am, I guess I'm middle-aged now. So I'm a middle-aged white woman with shorter length brown hair, wearing a blue jacket. And I will go ahead and toss it over to Dee.

Dee Torgerson (DT): Hello, Dee Torgerson. Welcome from Minnesota. And I am a white female with blonde medium-length wavy hair. I was also born, I'm the last of the baby boomers, born in the last year of the baby boomers. And I'm wearing a dark blue shirt with a flower dark blue scarf. And I will send it over to you, Melinda from Oklahoma.

Melinda Fruendt (MF): Hello, I'm Melinda Fruendt from the great state of Oklahoma. And I apologize for my voice today, but we have a lot of tree pollen. So my apologies for that. I am a white woman with blonde, very spiky hair. I have on a pink jacket today. And in my background, you'll notice a sign that says "Farm" because I'm working from my house today. So I'm very happy to be a part of this panel today. Thank you.

JW: And we're just thrilled to have these three leaders join us today to share some of the practical experiences they've gone through in their organization to make a difference around recruitment and retention issues.

Context

John Walsh (JW): So let's get the presentation started by taking a look first at some learning objectives. So what we're going to do, Ron and I are going to spend a little time talking about some of the things we found that are promising practices around recruitment and retention. So we're going to specifically look at some of the key takeaways from a pilot project that we conducted through the VR Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management in collaboration with the Operations and Personnel Committee of CSAVR. So we'll be looking at some of the findings from that. We'll also be looking at some of the promising practices about retaining your current staff that oftentimes link to improving your recruitment strategies to attract those new candidates. We're also going to share resources that you can access to assist you in implementing practices around retaining valued staff and attracting those candidates to fill vacancies when they occur. Last but not least, as I said, we're fortunate to have three directors join us, and they're going to talk about their journey to improve recruitment and retention in their organizations. Now, you're going to see that the directors are kind of at different phases of their journey, and each journey is slightly different. So keep that in mind when you listen on some of the practices that they've implemented. The other piece of this is we like to keep this session interactive. So I already noticed there is a pretty active chat going on. So if you have questions as we go through the presentation, please feel free to put it in chat. We'll be monitoring it, and we're going to actually take little kind of pauses in the presentation after each of the sections to actually answer some of those questions. And then at the very end, we're also going to leave a little space to answer those questions we couldn't get to. If you don't feel comfortable asking a question in general chat, send me a direct message, and I'd be happy to ask on behalf of a friend.

JW: So in this first section, Ron and I are going to do a bit of presentation that's going to give you kind of some of the groundwork for what we're going to talk later with the directors. So let's start really globally. And when I mean that, I mean let's look at some of the results from what the Gallup organization have found. Many folks are familiar that the Gallup organization conducts an annual employee engagement survey. And they issue a report called The State of the Global Workplace. And what that really looks at is a measure of employee engagement. And I'm going to talk a little bit more about what that means, what employee engagement means. But in a time where many organizations are finding it difficult to retain staff or recruit new staff, it's really critical to understand this concept of employee engagement. So part of the Gallup survey that they do globally, they ask the question, to what extent are you currently looking for a different job than the one you have now? So 48% of the respondents to that question stated they're watching or actively seeking a new job. One of two employees are open to leaving their organization. So you could see this is not an issue that is only unique to the public VR system.

JW: So a key takeaway that has consistently emerged from the Gallup survey, and again, they do this on an annual basis. A key takeaway is, if you want to improve your organizational performance, change the way your people are managed. Now, you probably heard the old

adage, employees don't quit jobs, they quit their managers. And I think there's some truth to that. And I think the survey backs it up. When you look at recruiters, they often hear from the recruits, the reason they're seeking a new job is often linked to their direct supervisor. And some of the issues that can emerge are managers struggle to, fail to kind of foster, teamwork, to keep staff members engaged, to provide that needed feedback and coaching that contribute to the employee's growth. Throughout this kind of, throughout this presentation, you're going to hear employee engagement arise again and again as a central theme.

JW: So let's take a closer look at some of the results of the most recent 2023 Gallup state of the global workplace. So when you look globally, 23% of the respondents to the survey report that they're thriving at work, they're engaged. Now, when we look at the statistics in the United States, that's a little better, it's 31%. So these employees find their work meaningful, they feel connected to the team and their organization, they feel a sense of pride of the work they do, and they take ownership on their performance. They go the extra mile for the teammates and the customers. So let's look at the other end of the spectrum. For those that are actively engaged, or if you will, loud quitting, 18% of respondents globally and 17% in the United States, these are folks that may take active actions that directly harm the organization. They could undercut its goals, they can oppose its leadership. At some point along the way, the trust between the employee and the employer was severely broken. Or perhaps the employee has been woefully mismatched to a role, causing a constant crisis. But oftentimes, when folks are actively disengaged, those are the folks that could be real morale killers in an organization. And that could be very detrimental to your corporate culture, organizational culture. Now, if we look at the middle group, about 59% globally, 52% in the United States, are respondents that are not engaged. They're not actively out of the game, but they're not in the game either. Sometimes we hear the term quiet quitting being used. These are employees, they fill a seat, but they're watching the clock. They'll put effort in, but they're really not psychologically connected to the work they're doing. They oftentimes can feel minimally productive. And honestly, more likely, they have feelings of being stressed or burned out than those that are actively engaged in the workplace. They often feel disconnected and just kind of divorced from the main purpose of the organization. So here's an interesting statistic. So we talked about that middle group, right? So the quiet quitters, if you will, that's 59% of the respondents. When Gallup asked additional questions about what would you change about your workplace to make it better, 85% of that group, which comprises the majority of employees that responded to the survey, their responses were related to engagement or culture, pay and benefits, and wellbeing or work-life balance issues. So I want you to notice that the top response, 41% is related to engagement, feeling connected to the organization or the sense of organizational culture. Pay and benefits comes in second at 28%. And then lastly, at 16% is the issue of wellbeing or work-life balance. So although pay is listed as an important factor, and it is, I mean, we want to have livable compensation for folks that they could support their family, they can support themselves.

JW: But I want you to notice how much organizational culture, feeling engaged, and having a sense of wellbeing are such critical factors that emerge from these surveys. And it's consistent throughout the years. There hasn't been much change in that factor for a number of time.

JW: So what are some of the themes that emerge from some of the open-ended questions from this survey? Folks want to get recognized for their contributions. They want managers that are approachable and are open to discussion. Folks want to feel a greater sense of

autonomy to stimulate everyone's creativity. Folks want to learn more things. They want to have a chance to grow professionally. Folks want to be respected. They want to also be given a fair chance for promotions, those kinds of opportunities for advancements. They want clear goals. And they want stronger guidance from their management team.

JW: Now, we're going to link this directly to the public VR system, because Dr. Jim Herbert from Penn State University also did some work, some survey work directly with state VR agencies and kind of look for those congruencies when we go through that data.

Takeaways for Leaders

John Walsh (JW): All right. So let's cut to, oops, sorry, I'm having some slide difficulties. Let's look at some key takeaways for leaders that the Gallup organization proposes based on the results of their survey. So one, in today's typical organization, most employees are neither engaged nor actively disengaged. All right. We saw that from the data. Two, employee engagement does not necessarily mean happiness. If we're only measuring employee contentment, you're missing a key component of engagement. True engagement means that the folks that work at your organization are psychologically present to do the work. They understand what to do. They have what they need to do the job. And they have a supportive manager and a supportive team in order to do that. They know the why. Why does the work matter? And they are work ready. The work may be hard. They may have a difficult day. They may go home exhausted at night. But they know what they did in that day was meaningful, and they felt engaged in what they were doing. Gallup would contend that quiet, quitting employees are your organization's kind of low-hanging fruit for leveraging additional productivity gains, of getting more work done within your organization. These are the folks that are ready to be inspired and motivated if they're coached in the right way. When we look globally at the average, there's about one engaged employee per every one actively disengaged employee. Right? So that's from the data I gave you originally. When Gallup looks at their exceptional workplace awards, the ratio is 18 to 1. So 18 engaged to 1 actively disengaged. You could see that's a pretty dramatic difference, isn't it? That workplace is going to feel really different when you have that many folks engaged and that many folks pulling all in the same direction.

JW: The other piece that Gallup consistently has shared through their survey work is the manager's linchpin for engagement. 70% of team engagement is attributable to the manager. But we're also finding that managers that are living in a tougher time to manage with all the rapid changes in the workplace are also quiet quitting too. And one of the things we have to look at is your management team have the tools and resources they need to keep folks engaged and to build a great team. So as I mentioned, managers are getting squeezed as well. And the changes to the workplace have hit managers especially hard. In the 2023 results from the Gallup survey, managers are more likely than non-managers to be disengaged, to be burned out, to be job hunting. They were also likely to feel like their organization doesn't care about their well-being or they're struggling with a work-life balance. And many of you have probably seen that in your organization where direct-line supervisors and managers are wearing multiple hats, covering caseloads, doing the managerial work, supporting teams. Managers are feeling squeezed. And this is bad news for organizations because if the managers are feeling squeezed, this is going to trickle down to their work teams. Managers serve as that critical connector for team collaboration and effectiveness. And as I said, accounting for 70% of

the variance around employee engagement. So what we certainly need is managers need more training and support to lead effectively in today's new work environment riddled with all kind of new expectations, including the emergence of hybrid work as a reality of the modern workplace. So given that reality, it's really time that leaders optimize this hybrid workplace. And this means doing things like creating a compelling workplace value proposition, empowering teams to collaborate more effectively. And that includes in-person and if they're working remotely. We may want to look at revising our performance management systems and also training managers how to be a great hybrid coach.

JW: The other thing Gallup folks pointed out is, you know, hybrid culture can be great if done right. Hybrid work offers the advantages of a more flexible work environment while also posing some unique challenges. In terms of advantages, hybrid workers have higher engagement. They feel an overall sense of better well-being. And typically, they have lower turnover risk as compared to fully on-site workers. And it's also good for business too, right? Leaders and managers tend to recognize these benefits and report that hybrid work has reduced burn out, improved retention, and expanded talent pools in their organization. And you've probably seen that, right? If you're hiring new candidates, oftentimes they ask, "What are your policies around hybrid work?" And we've heard from some organizations that where they did not have that policy of incorporating hybrid work, that sometimes they lost candidates just based on that response. So that's a key piece too, is we want to focus on what we're doing in a hybrid workplace.

JW: All right, so what are some of the challenges for employees that work in a hybrid environment? Oftentimes, they feel there's lack of resources of equipment. If you're not doing it right, you could feel disconnected from an organizational culture. If you're not intentional about how you collaborate with your hybrid teams, you can feel disconnected. And it could impair relationships with your coworkers. And sometimes you have to come up with new communication protocols when you work in a hybrid environment. When you talk to organizations, they have some similar findings. They also are worried about, "Well, our communication is going to decrease. We're going to have less collaboration. We're going to have culture problems." And I know many managers worry about, "I'm worried about our productivity going low. How do I really monitor performance when someone's working from home?" But we have to address that. We have to look at ways that doesn't require everyone to be in the office while still being productive and achieving the outcomes we want. Last but not least, there's also worry that we'll decrease creativity or innovation because we don't kind of have that cross-team interaction. Again, I think we can find ways to tackle that. But I think we have to be intentional and give some thought how we're going to approach it.

Pilot Project

John Walsh (JW): All right. So that's kind of a global picture. That's some of the global research that is occurring by the Gallup organization that kind of sets the stage. Let's go down a little bit more locally in our own space within the public VR system. In response to this crisis, we at the VR Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management launched a pilot project in fiscal year 2022 in collaborations with the Operations and Personnel Committee of CSAVR. And in this pilot project, we worked with four state VR agencies in developing customized strategy to address the unique issues of recruitment and retention within their organizations. As a matter of fact, today, one of the directors from an agency in the pilot project, Melinda from Oklahoma,

has joined us today to talk about some of the things they've implemented within their organization. So I'm going to go through this pretty quickly.

JW: We basically had a framework in this pilot project that looked at using a guided assessment to really gather information about the current state of the organization. This was through, we sent out an extensive guided assessment tool. We gathered key documents from the organization to learn about attrition rates, compensation, how people classify different roles within their organization. We looked at parts of the state plan. And then we did a few live sessions with the leadership team of these organizations to gather this information. Based on that guided assessment, we then developed a work plan. The first thing we did, though, is we took the results of what we heard in that assessment. We gathered again with the leadership team of the organization and said, "Did we hear this correctly? Are we getting this correct?" And once we were on the same page of identifying some of the root causes related to recruitment and retention issues, then we proceeded to create a customized work plan for each of the agencies. We then, our team, then provided coaching. And then we also set up evaluation standards to measure how we're making progress and what are some of the outcomes we had hoped to achieve.

JW: So, the guided assessment tool that we developed for QM is available to anyone. On the slide I have up currently, in the upper right-hand corner, it says the VRTAC-QM guided assessment tool that actually contains a URL that will take you to a Microsoft Word document. And you could utilize that tool yourself if you wanted to do some assessment around recruitment and retention issues within your organization. There are so many factors we looked at. We looked at the political environment. We did an environmental scan, the organization of the designated state agency and the designated state unit. What were some of the issues with the collective bargaining units? What were your relationships with the universities, with rehab counseling programs in your state? What are some of your practices around salary and classifications, current recruitment and retention practices? Are you doing some creative staffing practices, caseload sizes? What are your advancement opportunities? How are you using modern technology? Location, including remote work. Do you do any streamlining of your processes or do you have any mechanisms in place to do that? Do you have staff recognition? What's your leadership training look like? How do you deal with input and feedback from your staff and what does your overall culture look like within your organization?

JW: So I'm going to cut to the chase to this. When we looked at these four states and gathered the data and developed work plans, there were a couple of recommendations that emerged from this pilot project. First of all, it's important to dedicate resources, both internally to your organization and externally, really to that recruitment process. Some people, they dedicated to bring on a full-time recruitment staff person that that was their full-time job, is just getting out there and doing that recruitment piece. If you don't have a hybrid work policy, I'd really advise you to look at it. It seems to be a pretty critical factor right now. Now, I also get the point that not every state entity can do hybrid work based on the direction from the governor or the current administration. I totally get that. But it's one of those pieces that we have to look at and want to provide convincing evidence that perhaps it's time to start taking a look at it. We also know that many states struggle with salary or compensation plans not being competitive. Do you have a plan that you would implement in order to change that situation, including gathering data about what folks in similar positions are making within the state, both in the

nonprofit and the public sector? Maybe it's a time to review your position requirements and update them where needed. Some of them can be impediments to bringing folks on. The other piece is having that kind of learning organization where there's multiple avenues for professional growth for folks. This seems to be a pretty doable feature within state VR agencies. That can really enhance that employee engagement. The other piece is, are you actually assessing your level of employment engagement? Do you do employee engagement surveys? Or do you do stay interviews where you're trying to assess why people stay? Or why are they considering leaving? Do your managers have meaningful conversation with folks that doesn't necessarily connect with a performance review, but just for checking in, hey, how are you doing? How are things going with your workload? What are some of the resources you need? The other piece is we see that utilizing change teams for process improvement can be a real value added for your organization to improve those processes, both for the internal customer and your external customer to ensure work tasks are as easy as they can be and that we're getting rid of unnecessary work that if we got rid of them, maybe nobody would even notice that they were gone.

JW: We also want to make you aware that based on the pilot project, we developed a really extensive website to pull together resources that you can use, including examples of employee engagement surveys, examples of stay interviews from state agencies that we're using, some books, one called *The Power of Stay Interviews* by Richard Finnegan, which was published by the Society of Human Resource Managers. Easy Read, but will give you a really quick introduction to the whole concept of stay interviews. We also posted the CSAVR salary repository to see what other VR counselors are making at other state agencies. We also performed a national survey to look at what other state VR agencies are doing around recruitment. CSAVR and their human resource professional network sent this out, and we've got a lot of great responses of really some creative things that folks are doing to publish their vacancies, including using various social media platforms. I would highly suggest you check it out to see some of those resources that are there. We also put together a list because we've heard that we're having problems recruiting from universities. We put together a list of CACREP accredited programs and rehabilitation counseling, and we link them with RSA long-term training programs or the RSA scholars programs that provides financial support for individuals to receive their master's degree in and rehabilitation counseling. As a matter of fact, our team at GW just updated this list last month, so it's up to date. Please avail yourself of it. We've also given you examples of what other state agencies are doing to increase recruitment and retention, including the use of stay bonuses, and we've also compiled a list of some relevant articles that will help you in your journey. Now, to access these resources, we've embedded a link in this slide. I also put a QR code on the screen so that you can access these resources in that way.

Research

John Walsh (JW): Now, I want to turn this over to Ron, who's going to review some of the research performed by our colleague Dr. Jim Herbert from Penn State University that has some direct linkages to state VR agencies.

Ron Vessell (RV): Thanks, John. Let me begin by saying that I would recommend, highly recommend, that if you get a chance to look at the VRTAC-QM website at the bottom of the cover of the first page of the website, you'll see Manager Minutes, and Carol Pankow does a

good job of having a conversation about some important topics. And last summer, she had two sessions in June and July with Dr. Jim Herbert about the results of his research. Now, I'm briefly going to go over some of the highlights of the research because we want to leave plenty of time to get to our friends from the three states of Indiana, Minnesota, and Oklahoma.

RV: So we want to do that, but let me just briefly highlight some of the findings that Jim had in his research with vocational rehabilitation programs and directors. His research was in two phases, and it was at first an online survey, an online survey that 40 directors and or their designees answered. And then the second phase was actual telephone interviews with half of those directors. So let's go to the next slide. Okay, so for a phase one, as I said, that was the online surveys. And quite simply, it said, found that reasons why counselors leave or remain and if they leave, what employment settings they pursued. They looked at strategies used to retain counselors and their perceived effectiveness, impact of pandemic on counselor vacancy rates, and current counselor salary levels. Okay, and so those were some of the things focusing on the, that came up in the first phase of the online surveys as important items on the recruitment side.

RV: Now, on the second phase, okay, phase two, next slide. Okay, so there were really top the top three reasons for counselors leaving, no surprises here. Low salaries was the first one mentioned by the directors. Two, excessive paperwork or the administrative burden, if you will, I know we don't deal with as much paper as we used to, but we tend to still call it paperwork. And three, the insufficient career or promotional opportunities. So the idea of developing and growing was an important reason, or their lack of feeling that they were growing and had opportunities for development were part of the three reasons for counselors leaving. Also, no surprises. We had the top three reasons why counselors stayed. One is they felt a commitment to the agency's work and mission. Secondly, they found the job inherently rewarding. They love their work. And third, they valued the employment benefits. Oftentimes, state agencies have good pension and health care and things like that, even though the pay may be lower than other places.

RV: Okay. Now the top strategies to retain counselors, obviously focus on improving benefits in terms of some of those things we just mentioned. Maybe adding tuition reimbursement and some things other than retirement and health insurance. Maybe there's some other things in terms of tuition leave and so forth. Training and development options, enhancing those, considering flexible work hours, improving the job posting system. Okay. And a lot of that had to do with using other forms of job posting, having to use social media, and all of the different kinds of systems that are out there, LinkedIn, Indeed, Workplace, Workplace, etc. Okay. Remote work was also a top strategy. You know, John didn't mention it. Gallup says that, you know, if you don't offer some form, some form of remote work, you're going to have difficulty recruiting those millennials and generation Z-ers that are coming on to the workplace right now. They just kind of expect it. Okay. Investing in equipment, training, and software that supports the agency mission and vision, which helps a lot with that, what we call the administrative burden or paperwork on the last slide. Okay. I'll just kind of pass over this one a little bit. There is some human resource practices that were mentioned. Okay. And you can see what those are there, but I'm going to kind of skip over that one in the sake of time. And let's go to the impact of the pandemic. Okay. The directors were questioned about the impact of the pandemic, kind of before and after. In comparing the counselor vacancies prior to pandemic, 54% of the directors said that it was much higher or higher. 46% said about the same or less

than before. Okay. State VR agencies, I'm going to ask whether they thought they would be in full capacity by 2024. 56% said absolutely confident or confident. 44% somewhat or not confident. Okay. Dr. Herbert was also collecting some average salary information. And you see the average salaries there. That master's level counselor in the middle was \$45,748. And a number of states I know have very hard and many have made progress in moving that forward.

RV: Okay. Now we got phase two. Okay. Now there are some recruitment recommendations. Re-evaluate how the job listings are posted. We mentioned the use of social media sites a minute ago. Examine the job postings for consistency of information. You know, our friends at North Carolina have done a good job of just kind of rethinking how those postings look and how they're presented. And it's not nearly as dull, drab and bureaucratic looking as they have been in the past for many of us. Where possible, reduce bureaucracy or procedural aspects. That whole process, in terms of what the counselors are using is one of the reasons for people leaving. We saw that in one of the earlier slides. And in a way, those of us who have been around a while know that that's always been an issue. However, it seems to have gotten much worse. Okay. Re-establish or in some cases establish a strong professional relationship with graduate school training programs. Sometimes that word relationship is lost. And we just need to make sure that we're working on those relationships. Consider allocating some portion of staff training specifically for paid internships. That seems to be a popular and helpful choice these days.

RV: And the next one. Just about 10 retention recommendations. Examine the salary structure. Second, opportunities to access clients directly. Okay. Different methods of doing that. Third, reducing caseload size. Four, modifying caseload practices, processes, if you will. Re-examine counselor career ladder structure wherever you can. Six, promote within the agency. Offer greater flexibility using remote work and flexible schedules. Allow part-time work where possible. Provide opportunities for continual staff training. That need for growth and feeling like they're growing is really important. Particularly with the younger workforce. Implement the use of stay or exit interviews that are intended to assess and improve the climate. Okay. In summary of those 10, you've got two dealing with salary, three dealing with caseloads, two with work schedules, and three with the work climate.

RV: And finally, the recommended strategies from the research team at Penn State with Dr. Herbert and his colleagues. Implement greater use of phased retirement and part-time work options. They also mentioned the part-time work options like the work schedules, hybrid, part-time, etc. Facilitate greater use of affinity groups. Create job rotation opportunities. And work towards a four-day 32-hour work schedule. That was one of their recommendations. And Jim Herbert, if he were here, would say maybe he was thinking pie in the sky when he made that last one on the four-day work week. But nevertheless, Jim was not afraid to think outside the box on that one. John Walsh and I were putting this presentation together. We kind of chuckled and asked each other, I wonder under what governor that would happen. But that was the more practical side.

Indiana

Ron Vessell (RV): I'm going to suggest that we go straight to Theresa Koleszar from Indiana. Theresa.

Theresa Koleszar (TK): Thank you, Ron. All right. Well, thanks for all that great information. I'm happy to say I think we've been able to check a lot of those boxes in Indiana. So if you go to the next slide, I'm just going to briefly paint a picture for you of where we were about eight to ten years ago. I know that seems a long ways off, but our journey was very long. However, I think it was very successful. So hopefully you'll find something here useful. So back around eight or nine years ago, we had extremely high staff turnover, and particularly with our VR counselors, over 50%. So over half of our counselor positions were turning over at least once in a year, if not a couple of times. So very, very, very challenging, as you all know. And recruitment was possibly even more difficult. Finding qualified candidates was very challenging. We found that we were posting and then reposting the same position multiple times just to try to get a qualified candidate. And there were probably times we just hired the best option that was available and may not have ultimately been that great fit. So we really, really, really were struggling in that area. We also had then very high caseload sizes in some parts of the state. Those were averaging 150 or more participants per counselor, obviously way too high. That became even more of a challenge after WIOA was passed and all of the additional responsibilities that fall on counselors due to that. We have referrals that were, some growth in our referrals. So we were not able to really stop that train or slow that train down while we figured out our staffing. And it was really taking a long time for new referrals to even get an application appointment, which was really problematic. While we didn't have a formal waitlist at the time, we really kind of in effect did because it was taking a long time for people to get their intake and application appointment. Of course, we were struggling with timeliness standards around eligibility, IPE. We had some outdated processes. Again, this was back eight to 10 years ago, very manual burden, burdensome billing processes, a very old case management system that just wasn't very well aligned with the work that we were doing and where we were trying to meet people where they were in different community settings.

TK: So due to all of those staffing deficits or resource deficits and staffing, as well as a little bit of fiscal, this was around the time pre-employment transition services was coming out and the need to shift to that 15% of dollars. We made the very difficult decision and got the support of our leadership to enter into an order of selection in August of 2017, closing two of our three priority categories. Next slide. We then continued down a path of implementing a variety of strategies. We had already implemented several strategies, even leading up to that point, but obviously it was just not enough. We were not getting that traction. So we continue to do this today to constantly look at the assignment of our counties to our field offices, our positions to our field offices, and based on the ebb and flow that we all naturally see of new referrals coming in, we continue to make adjustments there. We continue again to shift positions and more often counties or coverage areas between offices just based on how that ebb and flow is going. I don't think we'll ever not be doing that, but that always makes, you know, that can make a big impact. It also helps with some equity and people feeling like, you know, one office or one staff isn't always taking a higher burden than maybe another staff. So it also has an impact on that work culture. We created VR case coordinators. Some states call these, I think, rehab techs or different levels of maybe counselor positions. Our case coordinators were really designed to take some of the process-oriented tasks off of the counselor's plates. So dealing more with some of the billing, tracking down medical records, helping really facilitate people moving through the process so that our counselors could really focus more on the customer engagement and being counselors and providing that vocational guidance.

TK: We also created working lead counselors. We knew we were always going to have some degree of turnover, and that really does, you all know this, that really puts a burden on local offices. If you're fully staffed, maybe things are going really well, but as soon as one or two counselor positions turn over, it's not like you get a new counselor in the door the next day or the next month even, right? So someone has to cover that vacant caseload while that hiring process is happening. And if an office is only experiencing one vacancy, maybe that's doable once you start experiencing two and three, much less doable. So the initial idea with these working leads is that they would be able to go to those offices with the highest need based on, again, the number of vacancies and really try to cover those cases, at least in part, if not in full, so that that added burden wasn't going to those staff who were still here. Now, I'll talk a little bit about where our working leads are today, not to spoil the climax here of my presentation, but we have much improved our retention rate. And so now we've really shifted the role of our working leads to be more of trainers and mentors with our new staff, which again, still takes some of the burden off of the seasoned counselors and the local supervisor who are still very involved in training and onboarding new staff. But again, a lot of that can shift to that working lead to take on some of that training and still pop in to cover some cases.

TK: We also revised our training and onboarding process and just improved people's opportunity to access professional development. You know, the training process for a VR counselor can be very extensive and for good reason. And we really tried to rework that and continue to refine that. We have a wonderful, robust training team and training process that we'd love to. We're always happy to share information about that. That's another topic for another time. But we really tried to weed out the stuff that maybe wasn't as relevant and really hone in that training and spend some energy really making sure we had a good robust training process that was not just online modules, not just a week of training, and then you're on your own, but really folds in some mentoring, a lot of shadowing, a lot of meeting with different seasoned counselors who do really well at certain aspects of the job to pick up those best practices.

TK: We also, probably the biggest shift is that we revised our VR counselor positions to two designated roles, if you will. So historically, including my days as a counselor, one counselor did the whole thing, right, from intake to closure and everything in between. And we know there's a lot in between. We made a shift, again, about eight or nine years ago, where we decided that we were going to pilot and try this out and take some of our staff and move them into an intake eligibility role. And that's what they did. And then the other counselors moved them into a caseload counselor role. So development of the IPE, individual plan for employment, and forward. We piloted it to see if that would work. I myself had some concerns about it as a former counselor. The pilot was great. We ended up rolling it out. We took about a year or so to roll it out across all of our 19 different field locations, and we've been going strong ever since.

TK: We also took some time to make sure we were doing some staff recognition. And that doesn't always have to be grand gestures. While we do financial spot bonuses on a quarterly basis, there's also a lot of other ways we all know that to recognize our staff. And it could be something as simple as acknowledging their great work in a staff meeting or bringing something to a director's attention or a team lead's attention and then that team lead reaching out personally and saying, thank you for doing the work that you do. One quick example, I try to read our customer satisfaction surveys at least three or four times a year. I try to grab a

chunk of those that have come into me and review those. And if a participant has specifically named a counselor and something excellent that they've done, I will send an email to that counselor, CC their supervisor, their region manager, and just say, I wanted to share this with you. It made my day. I hope it makes yours. Thank you. Thank you for doing what you're doing. Excellent work. And that really, really goes a long way and doesn't have to take a lot of time to do that.

TK: We also did a lot of streamlining of our communication. We were either under communicating or over communicating. That's probably something we will always struggle with because communication is very difficult. It's just difficult, right? But we really tried to sit back, hear some hard feedback, and make some changes in how we get information and the pace that we get information out to our staff. Work culture, right? We didn't talk about work culture a whole lot 10 years ago. We talk a lot about work culture these days, right? So just paying some attention to that. What are our work environments look like? While we have a lot of work to do on some of our work spaces and environments, we've made a lot of progress. We recognize that where people go every day really matters, right? Their conditions, their office conditions, is parking difficult, all of those things. Those are really, really important not just for the folks we're serving, but certainly also for our staff and our teams. Speaking of staff and team, even just shifting some of our terminology, we're a team. It's not us and them. You're not the staff. You're the team, right? You're this office team or this VR team. So thinking of our approach as that team approach. I did office visits along with our field operations director and sat down for one or two hours with every single office, just created a safe space for people to share feedback. And then we had to act on that feedback, right? Providing opportunity for feedback. That's great. It's not good enough, right? We have to then make good on that feedback as it makes sense to do that. People notice that. People see that. That continues to create that trust and that safe space.

TK: So I could go on and on about work culture, but I'll move on, given our time here, and just mention that when we went into the order of selection, we really saw that. Certainly it was unfortunate. We had a lot of grief around that internally and externally, but it did serve as a little bit of a reset button for us, right? It gave us some of that space to slow down the train a little bit so we could fix, and I do mean fix, our foundation. And then we've done some salary adjustments. Not to put that last, but I put it last intentionally because, again, salary adjustments in isolation, you'll get some traction, but salary adjustments in combination with all of these other and probably many other factors. That's really where you'll maximize your efforts. Okay, next slide. So a lot of people are interested in how we went about the salary adjustments. So I'm just going to quickly go through. I said salary adjustments times two. So the first one we did was in fall of 2019, and this was a VR-specific approach. We worked with our state personnel office, and quite frankly, we were able to get traction on this because we were in an order of selection and had a wait list, and there was great desire from our leadership, from our stakeholders, from our state budget agency in helping us to get out of that order of selection as soon as possible. So we were really able to leverage that and say, "We want that too, and here's what we need in order to do that." And of all the things we needed, one of them was certainly to look at our staff salaries. So our state personnel department did a kind of a national review of counselor salaries around the nation, and I think we were third from the bottom in terms of the starting salary and the average salary. So they very quickly saw, based on them doing their own research instead of us coming to them and saying, "Our salaries are too low." They saw it with their own eyes, right? They got that information on their own. They

saw the inequity and the challenge. And the challenge in the past had been with shifting is that our counselor classification was tied to a generic classification that was also used across multiple other state agencies. So you couldn't just change it for us without that classification changing and that salary or that class changing across the whole state. So state personnel was able to break out and create our own unique set of classification and levels just for VR. So when we look at our state of Indiana job classifications, you'll see all these generic ones, and then you'll see VR counselor, VR counselor supervisor, you know, VR counselor, you'll see our specific classifications. And that enabled us to tie then a unique set of salaries to those classifications. So through that, we also created a VR counselor trainee. When people come in new, they come in as a trainee, and then they go through about an eight or nine month initial training process. And as long as they're making satisfactory progress, we have it set up where it's pretty automatic, where they would promote then into a full VR counselor role. And that comes with a salary increase of about at the time, about about a \$4,000 salary increase. We also, in addition to raising that starting salary, of course, we wanted to address salaries of those staff already on board. So every counselor received a salary adjustment in 2019. Based on these changes, that amounted to either that new salary or at least a 10% increase in their current salary. Now that had some compression impact. So then we also had to adjust that kind of trickling up from there. We also had to adjust VR supervisor and region manager salaries as well. All right, next slide.

TK: In 2022, we were very, very fortunate that our state conducted a statewide compensation study, because there was a lot of challenge with retention and recruitment around the state. While we had seen some great improvements in VR, we were kind of unique. Most of the state agencies in Indiana were still seeing a lot of, again, turnover and challenges with, with recruiting folks. So after a study, there was an additional, there was a compensation adjustment for nearly all state positions. So again, not just VR, nearly all state positions in 2022. And that resulted in another very significant salary adjustment for our counselors. It amounted to about a 35 to 40% salary adjustment for our counselors. Also adjusted those positions on up, but not quite as, as to that, to that degree. So that was fantastic. We were able to retain all of the changes we made to our classification and our structure with this. And while previous efforts really helped our retention, they didn't do a ton for recruitment. That all changed in 2022. Our VR office supervisors have reported that the volume and quality of candidates applying for VR counselor positions has just notably, notably changed. And so recruitment has definitely gotten much, much easier for us. Okay.

TK: And then I have one more quick slide. Just a quick takeaways. Where we are today, I pulled the data last week. We are, our turnover is 13%, which means our retention is 87%. We are, we are thrilled with that. It's actually, our turnover has actually been as, as low as 9% over the last few years. So we're, we're pretty pleased there. I mentioned that we were able to leverage being in that order of selection and having that waiting list. That's helped us. We were also able to leverage, hey, we are not meeting these timeliness standards. We have this monitoring in 2017. That raised some issues here. We need to make some improvements here. So definitely while audits and monitoring and making hard decisions like order of selection are difficult, I think there's some opportunity to leverage those things to help get some traction where maybe you otherwise can't get that traction. Repair the foundation. If you're, if you're toying with whether you put your energy behind retention or recruiting, I say retention. You really got to fix the foundation. If you just add more positions or try to reach out to new people but don't fix the ability for people to kind of stay with you, I think that, I think you may be doing it a little bit

backward. So if you can't do both at the same time, you know, fix, fix the, try to address retention first. Again, the multi-prong approach we talked about and share the value of the benefits package in interviews. So the salary right now is much better than it was in the past. But once you add the financial value of the fringe benefits, the paid time off, you know, the fact that we have a 37 and a half hour work week in Indiana versus a 40, that really can add up and show people the value, the financial value of the position. With that, I'm going to turn it over to Dee.

Minnesota

Dee Torgerson (DT): Awesome. Thanks, Theresa. Dee Torgerson, I'm the director with Minnesota General VR. And we have some similarities to Indiana. You'll see some common themes and strategies, but our story is actually quite different from Indiana. You can go on to the next slide. I had been watching as other states were struggling with recruitment and retention issues, like Theresa had mentioned, had been, I think, nearly 10 years that Indiana had been working on it. We didn't have that issue in Minnesota. We were fortunate. We had a lot of strong graduate programs and interns and strong people coming into our agency. And we didn't have, we really didn't have very much turnover. And what happened in our situation, we really had just this perfect storm of factors happened. Certainly, you know, the global pandemic that we went through, we also had a wave of retirements right after that, because of all of the changes that we had to make and adapt to. And I remember working on succession planning, looking at planning for waves of retirement 10 or 15 years ago that really never happened. Well, it did then. It happened after COVID. So we experienced that. One of the most difficult things that we ended up finding ourselves in is we had a, it was a state of Minnesota hiring freeze, and it was fairly long-term. And that really impacted our ability to bring on new people and to have them in the hopper. So we were already really at that time, even pre-COVID, working with a skeletal crew. At the time, we had most of our, we just had one category of services open. We were already on order of selection. And again, that had been long-term also. Then you add, of course, going through the pandemic, and we had overwhelmed and stressed staff. And we did have some people that left for external job opportunities, though that wasn't, there was just another thing that added to the perfect storm that wasn't really the major factor in it. It was just all of these things. And then just a huge demand on our centralized HR function, because we didn't have, we had, you know, small number of staff. We didn't have a lot of changes. We had one HR person who did everything for us. Now we are a unionized agency, midsize agency. At that time, pre, pre, or going through the pandemic, we had around 350 staff. We now have 425 staff, and I'll talk a little bit more about how we got there. So we are a union environment, and we, our DSA does all of our human resource works, or HR is housed in our DSA. Go ahead to the next slide.

DT: And one of the things Theresa talked a little bit about this, too, about multiple strategies. It was really important in Minnesota for us to take a holistic approach. And on my slide here, I have, you know, all of the hands together, and it says all hands on deck. That really what it was, it was, what is what it was all about. When we found ourselves fairly suddenly in a 25% vacancy rate situation, we were at the time, I'm like, we either have to figure this out and make a change quickly, or we were going to end up having to close all categories of services. That was the situation that we were in. And so it definitely was all hands on deck. And, and I knew that just addressing one strategy was not going to, going to be effective. We had to look at multiple strategies. So I'm going to talk through some of these strategies. The first one we're looking at

really is dedicating resources, that is people and money, to this problem. Looking at having expert talent recruitment helping us, looking at our HR processes and streamlining it, caring for culture. There's been a lot of talk about that already. And then, of course, some financial incentives as well. On to the next slide. I dedicated resources. So as I said, our human resources unit is within our DS centralized DSA. And so I did, I knew that we needed some additional people to help. And our DSA, you know, didn't have the funding, wasn't willing to add what we needed to fill in the large hole of vacancies that we had. And so I obtained prior approval from RSA for us to fund two additional centralized HR positions focused solely on hiring and recruitment. Frankly, it was a pretty easy justification to H, or to RSA to explain to them, you know, the situation that we were in and our vacancy rate along with if we don't do something quickly, we're going to have to close all categories of services. So we were able to do that. And then along with that, we needed to change some things internally. So I had a position already that was working with me. And this person was able to shift and learn, take on some additional responsibilities and be a strong liaison to our centralized HR unit. And that really helped in just streamlining communications. We didn't, we really didn't even have a good org chart at the time to keep track of all of our positions, just tracking the vacancies and who goes where, and also managing our internal, we call it a PTR system, personnel transaction system, and really providing relief to with 35 different managers across the state who, you know, perhaps some of them use that system very infrequently. So it just helped us to streamline and work with our HR more effectively. Next slide. Go ahead to the next slide.

DT: Expert talent recruiting was huge. It's been talked about earlier about some of the strategies we hired a person within our centralized HR unit who knew where people go to find jobs. He was doing outreach we had never heard of, for instance, handshake. It's in most of you have probably heard of that by now. And of course, just being at some career fairs and doing outreach to some of the areas and people that we hadn't done before. Next slide. Excelling in HR processes, we did a lot of work around our HR processes, the job postings in the language, it was pretty horrible before. And getting some advice again from our expert talent recruitment person about what is a better way to attract people into this career. We also did some things. Instead of posting like one job for one position in one location, we tried out continuous postings and what we call batch postings where we posted for multiple positions and left them for an extended period of time knowing we were always going to have some positions, for instance, our counselor positions available across the state for a long period of time. That also required us to do a lot of work internally in how we're going to manage that system. But it's been a really, really effective way for us to do those job postings. We did also look at reconsider our minimum qualifications, including degree requirements and we're working already to improve our diversity. We do still require a master's degree for the counselor role, but we've created a pathway into that. And we did also, similar to what Indiana had done, created a new entry-level counselor role. And primarily, many of those folks coming into that role were serving our pre-ETS populations. But some of them also came in just as early counselors or had an interest in moving on and obtaining their degree in counseling. And so we were able to, again, hire more diversity and get them on that pathway. Next slide.

DT: Caring for culture has been a lot of talk about that. That was something we had been working on. And again, we end, it is one of those things that is never done. You always have to continue to care for your culture and it moves and changes. We're fortunate in Minnesota that we have a really strong and well-established telework hybrid work environment. We have a lot of flexibility. Staff love that. Not saying that doesn't come without its challenges because I think

the challenge is still helping people to feel strongly connected to their teams and to others in the agency. We have a DEIA committee that has done some great work with our staff. We launched some new staff engagement models to hear ideas and recommendations from our staff. Invested in a lot of our leadership trainings, you know, going through all of the pandemic and all of these changes and having these great number of vacancies, it was brutal on our managers. And we know we needed to tend to them as well and help uplift them and provide them some strong leadership skills as well. And then, of course, developing clear career pathways. We did a lot of work on that. Next slide.

DT: There were a lot of financial incentives that were already available to us that we didn't necessarily use. For instance, relocation expense reimbursements. We were able to do that in the union contract, but we just never had. And it became apparent to us that this also was a good recruitment tool to recruit talent from across the nation. And so we do now, as we need to, and for some of those difficult to fill positions, we are able to reimburse for relocation expenses. We always reimbursed for graduate level tuition, but it was sort of like this secret within VR. So it's no longer a secret. It is something that we outreach to others about. And we talk with people if we're recruiting them into our agency. Achievement awards. Again, this was something long standing available within the union contract that we just really had never done. These are achievement awards with a financial incentive, a financial bonus attached to them. And we acted last year, we gave out 85 achievement awards the year before that. I think it was nearly 100 achievement awards. So it's been a great way to reward staff who have been working with us for a while. And then Theresa explained as well that they had something similar, but when we're hiring new people, we wanted to bring them in at the best wage possible, a competitive wage. So we were doing that. The problem is years ago, we didn't do that. We had HR and others who started people at the lowest wage. So we had some equity things that we had to sort out. We're actually right now in the process of that. Some of that has been right sized, but it's a big lift, a lot of work, and we're still doing that, but we should be done with that within this year. And then the next slide. And then we had some new incentives with some really good returns on it. We hadn't been paying graduate level interns for many years. We didn't need to do that at one time. We needed to change that because we were not attracting graduate level interns. So we now pay those, all of those internship positions. We also did add in some hiring incentives. It's \$5,000 total, \$2,500 after the person finishes their probation period. And because we do want to reward some of that retention, we pay \$2,500 after two years. And our, you know, typically what we see in the VR world, if we can keep someone around for two years, that they're committed to the work and, and it's more likely that they will stay on long-term. And then for our current employees, we also know that they are the best way to attract and bring in new candidates. And so we pay referral incentives to current employees. If they refer a new employee and they become certified, they get a thousand dollar referral incentive, which has been a great way. Our wages were, I would say they were middle to high range across the, when compared nationally. And we were fortunate that we were able to get some union negotiated raises. This past year, it was five and a half percent. Next year, it'll be four and a half percent. That has absolutely helped us as well. And next slide.

DT: And finally, the result where we're at right now is we're between a five to seven percent vacancy rate. And we really do have strong retention. When, when we were originally looking at how we were going to tackle this problem, I said we have to build a system that is going to be able to function well in the likelihood of what I thought would be just a 10 percent vacancy

rate. I thought that is probably our new normal where we're going to live. And so not saying we won't get there at some point, but I'm super pleased that we've been able to stay, stay below that. And some of this vacancy rate is because we've added some, some newer positions. So, so all in all, it's, it's all of those things together. And we continue to look at all of this and work on it. It's not a problem we will take our eyes away from because we have to have the people in order to do the work, as you all know. That's all. So Melinda from Oklahoma, sending it to you.

Oklahoma

Melinda Fruendt (MF): Okay. Thank you Dee. Real quickly, I did want to indicate that we are our own designated state agency that I'm a director of. And we have two divisions, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and our Division of Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired. We have two division administrators over VR is Mr. Mark Kennison and over Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired is Miss Tracy Brigham. Next slide please.

MF: We have been experiencing all the same key issues as all the other states. Our compensation, you know, we hadn't had pay increases. We have been having state reduction of fringe benefits, which was setting us about 20% below the market value. And we were experiencing key vacancies in our council ranks, recruitment difficulties, and organizational culture. Next slide. Under, we did ask as mentioned by John Walsh earlier, we asked Ron and John to be able to come in a year ago this month of April. And they conducted a one day workshop on organizational change, which was coupled with a part of our leadership retreat. And it was also connected to looking at our agencies culture change initiative. We brought them back in May for two days to talk about organizational change. This second session focused on defining priorities for change, beginning to form guiding teams to facilitate change and for the work of the group on their change vision for the organization. Next slide. In looking at our employee engagement, we, they did provide us training and resources to be able to conduct our own employee engagement surveys, to collect data on a level of employee engagement in the agency, and also to have actionable items to increase retention of staff. Next slide.

MF: Since then, actually, we were in the process during that time of changing our requirements for the VR counselor positions. We have since added the degrees of psychology, behavioral science, marital and family therapy, school counseling or special education, or any counseling related field. Next slide. We are maintaining our CSPD in our state standard, by the way. And then we expended our acceptable certifications and licensures. That now includes an addition to the CRC, the LPC and the CVE and PVE. We have added licensed behavioral practitioner, licensed marriage and family therapist, school counselor certification, and certification in special education. Next slide. We also, we added, with additions to the certifications and licensure, we expanded our opportunity to award a 5% skill-based pay differential to those employees who possess any of these credentials. Next slide. Under that compensation base change, we provided significant pay adjustments over the previous two years. On July 1st of 22, I actually was able to give a 10% pay raise across our entire agency, but on July 1 of 2023, we did another pay increase where the majority of our staff received 10% adjustments, with some receiving higher increases, such as 15%, which went to our VR technicians, our VR immediate supervisors, business enterprise program consultants and technicians. And then I was able to bump up 26% to our VR counselors, assistive technology specialists business liaisons, and there

were a few other one-off type positions. All those these pay increases undoubtedly have had some effect on our recruitment through attraction of greater numbers of applicants.

MF: These gains were offset by somewhat higher turnover, which is due to the number of factors in addition to the pay. Unfortunately or consequently, looking back at July 1 of last year to current time, there has not been a noticeable improvement on our vacancy rate, but this is really not surprising to us because we did expect that we would take at least a year, if not a two-year process, to be able to either regain or obtain new individuals. Next slide. We have put into place a recruitment and outreach coordinator that is dedicated to the two divisions I mentioned, and I will take the time to go over this person's job title and what the expectations are, but this person does supervise by both of our division administrators. Next slide.

MF: And last, I would just like to mention out of the work with John and Ron, our teams out of Voc Rehab and the Services for the Blind have implemented three change teams, and those are recruitment and retention, organizational culture, and process improvement. Back to you, John.

Closing

John Walsh (JW): Thank you, Melinda. Well, I know that we kind of squeezed this right in to the 90 minutes, but I really think there was valuable information that was presented by our three leaders on some of the steps that you can take or your organization can take in order to continue to move the needle around retaining good staff, and as Dee said, if you're retaining the staff, you then, staff within your organization almost become your best recruiters for new staff coming in within your organization.

JW: Again, I think we've gotten to a point where we've almost run out of time, but I do want to acknowledge also that the presentations were with the support of a grant through for the VR Technical Systems Center for Quality Management and also the Center for Innovative Training in VR. Both funded under grants by the US Department of Education, the information contained in here does not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the US Department of ED, and no official endorsement should be inferred, but we appreciate the US Department of Education's support of these type of products that can help our VR community.

JW: We also want to make sure, if you have any questions for us that Ron and myself have, for our email addresses, so if you want to reach out to us, please feel free. You can also access a lot of our resources at the VRTAC-QM.org to get the resources you need for your organization. Again, I apologize that we didn't have time to really take a lot of questions, but we hope that you enjoyed today's presentation and please make sure you fill out the evaluation to give us that great feedback. Steve, I'm going to turn it over to you for any last comments.

Steve Wooderson (SW): All right, John. Well, thank you, John, Ron, our directors. Absolutely impactful and great information and I hope those presenters had a chance to see all the accolades that are being posted in chat. It certainly speaks to a priority for us nationally. So we hope you'll join us for the next two sessions. On Wednesday, May the 29th, we have a session on the value of mentoring programs. Thursday, June the 27th, case work efficiencies, working smarter. All, once again, excellent topics that are directly related to the priorities with a vision

of meeting the evolving needs of our customers. Thank you, very well. Have a great remainder of your day.