

Addressing Recruitment and Retention in VR

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.