

Addressing Recruitment and Retention in VR

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.