

# **The Future of Vocational Rehabilitation**

**Recorded March 8, 2024**

DR. KEN HERGENRATHER: Greetings and good afternoon, everyone. Coming to you live from Washington, D.C. I'm Dr. Ken Hergenrather, the co-director of the Center for Rehabilitation Counseling, Research, and Education. And with Dr. Maureen McGuire-Kuletz, on behalf of the George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling, the Graduate School of Education and Human Development, the Department of Counseling and Human Development, and the GW Center for Innovative Training, we welcome you to the 24th Annual GW Rehabilitation Counseling Symposium.

We're honored to have Dante Allen, the commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration, to be with us today. We believe we have a really exciting, actually, an awesome agenda today. Commissioner Allen is going to discuss the foundations of vocational rehabilitation. Doctor Ryan Watkins is going to address AI-myth busting. Doctor Robert Froelich is going to address how the CRQ Code of ethics is related to your career satisfaction. And Doctor McGuire-Kuletz and I are going to address counseling, supervision, and the GW counselor supervisor role.

And what I'd like to do is I'd like to take a brief moment to introduce some of our faculty for our George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education. I'd like to introduce Doctor McGuire-Kuletz. Would you like to say a few words?

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: I just want to welcome everybody and thank you so much for joining us today. We have a very exciting program. We feel and we hope that you come away energized and with a lot of new additional information.

DR. KEN HERGENRATHER: Thank you. And Doctor Robert Froehlich, would you like to say a few words to the audience?

DR. ROBERT FROEHLICH: I sure would. Hey, it is so lovely to see so many familiar names and some new names too. Thanks for making time to be with us today. And we look forward to talking with you on all sorts of topics that were just outlined. Thanks for being here.

DR. KEN HERGENRATHER: And I would turn this back to you, Dr. McGuire-Kuletz.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: OK. I am so honored to be able to introduce commissioner Dante Allen. In December, the US Department of Education welcomed commissioner Allen after the US Senate confirmed him as the commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration and the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. In his role as RSA commissioner, Mr. Allen will oversee an administration that provides leadership and resources to assist state and other agencies in providing vocational rehabilitation and other services to individuals with disabilities to maximize their employment, independence, and integration into the community and competitive labor markets.

Prior to his role as RSA commissioner, Mr. Allen served as the executive director for CalABEL, California's Qualified Federal ABEL Act Accounts and Investments Program for people with disabilities. Prior to that, he served as a communications leader in the public and private sectors, including roles as a senior communications officer and the California Department of Public Health's Office of Health Equity and Kaiser Permanente as a communications director for the organization's senior operation executive.

I would like to add that Mr. Allen, sorry, commissioner Allen, is a former recipient of Vocational Rehabilitation Services from California VR. Commissioner Allen, I turn it over to you.

DANTE ALLE: Thank you, Dr. Maguire. It's my pleasure to be here. And so happy to have been invited to attend. I've heard fantastic things about this event. So to hear that you're 24 years in is both rewarding, and it explains a lot about how great of an event this is. As it was explained in my introduction, I have been personally a recipient of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, but I want to take it a little further back.

Throughout my life, whether it's professional or personal, I have worked to demonstrate that living a life with a disability doesn't have to limit what we can aspire to be. It was about three decades ago when I was going to seek my first job and the California Department of Rehabilitation told me that they could help. And I was excited. And, believe me, every aspect of that has been a life changer, so much so that today I am honored to have been nominated by President Biden confirmed to the US Senate this past December to serve as commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

That's something that definitely would not have been possible had it not been for my experience with vocational rehab all those years ago. I'm thankful for this important opportunity to join forces with you all as we work to redefine what it means to be a working individual with the disability. Just to give you some context, RSA is a component of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services in the US Department of Education.

RSA is tasked with implementing various parts of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended by Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, as well as the Randolph-Sheppard. To do this work, RSA administers comprehensive systems of vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, and independent living services for older individuals who are blind. The systems provide related services, training, and advocacy to maximize the employment, independence, and integration of individuals with disabilities in their communities.

Altogether, RSA administers approximately $4 billion annually in federal funding to support these systems. We have a staff of 62 employees who carry out this work. And under my leadership, all of us will keep individuals with disabilities at the very forefront of everything that we do. RSA provides leadership, resources, and discretionary investments to assist states and other agencies in providing and supporting VR services.

We do this to maximize employment, independence, and integration into the community and the competitive labor market. Individuals with disabilities must experience equity in the workforce and every aspect of our society to take their rightful place as first class citizens who lead purposeful lives. In that regard, just enough is not enough. RSA programs must prepare individuals with disabilities for fulfilling careers that grow our economy, and empower individuals with disabilities to realize their dreams rather than settling for just entry level jobs or mundane jobs where they repeat the same functions over and over again.

Every, including individuals with disabilities, aspire to a life's work that builds a sense of personal value, financial equity, and greater independence. If RSA programs do not add value to the lives of those we serve, then quite frankly we are wasting our time and resources. We must raise our expectations, leave behind status quo, and deliver on the nation's promise of economic security, equal opportunity, and independence for Americans with disabilities.

Now, to accomplish this, I've set some priorities within RSA which talk about how we will approach our work. On that first priority is we will build true partnerships with other federal agencies and stakeholders, including agencies and their coalitions, to promote earlier and deeper engagement, and highlight best practices to achieve the best possible outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Will also elevate community expectations for competitive integrated employment by showcasing success stories for individuals with disabilities.

I personally believe that vocational rehabilitation has gotten a bad rap. So often we're talking about what is not being done or how much money is not being used, but we're seldom talking about the lives that are being changed. And I want to make a difference in that regard. We'll also encourage integration of assistive technology and artificial intelligence tools to fuel competitive, integrated employment in the 21st century for individuals with disabilities.

I'm so excited about your agenda today and to hear Dr. Watkins presentation and learn more about how we can better leverage ever-improving artificial intelligence resources in our work. But the one thing I was asked to talk about today is the future of VR. In my view, next generation VR programs will be organizations that are grounded by 4 pillars. VR programs will be person centered, highly connected and visible, data informed, and VR counselor focused.

These pillars represent a departure from a conventional or historical approaches to VR services. They move us toward a more modern mindset that embraces the future of the American workplace, the critical importance of achieving competitive integrated employment, and the career aspirations of the individuals concerned. First, VR programs must be person centered. Embracing the unique aspects of each individual, we serve their vocational aspirations and honoring informed choice the program will elevate opportunities for individuals with disabilities for employment, from entry level to career focused, competitive, integrated employment.

By raising our expectations, we can raise the expectations and enhance the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. By becoming efficient and responsive to our VR Program participants, we can improve the perception of the program through meaningful engagement with our customers. We must approach our service provision policies and procedures in a way that maximizes the VR experience for those we serve and fully meets or exceeds their expectations.

We have to take our foot off the brakes and promote policies and practices that don't limit the possibilities or services for our participants. With advanced technology and AI, our ability to leverage current and future assistive technology virtually every career field is open to individuals with disabilities, and we must use these tools to level the playing field and bring equity to employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Finally, we must understand and embrace the current workplace trends.

Dr. McGuire-Kuletz was talking about the last time my predecessor, the former commissioner was here, was just before the COVID pandemic. Now, we know that just a few years ago, everything changed about the workplace. It's difficult to overstate the importance of telework today or even the ability for us to gather together in remote locations and meetings like this one that we're having today. But because of those changes, we've been exposed to lots and lots of other opportunities that are frankly making the workplace more accessible to individuals with disabilities.

We see more mobility in employment than in years past. Many employees tend not to remain in a single job for extended periods of time. No longer are they staying 20, 30, even 40 years in the same employment. Employees are drawn to new opportunities, to challenges to their careers that may not have existed when they first started working. We as participants are no different in this regard. As a field, we must remain mindful of this and adapt to their career plans and visions.

The second pillar, VR programs must also be highly connected and visible. Partnerships will be key to our future success. We know that the road to competitive integrated employment doesn't begin and end at high school. Career dreams and goals, and ambitions take root at different points in an individual's life. We know that achievement of these dreams, that the achievement of competitive integrated employment is typically not the result of one program, but the result of the support of a constellation of workforce and workforce adjacent programs.

Bearing this in mind, VR programs must build meaningful collaborations and partner with high schools, including career and technical employment programs. Community rehabilitation programs, state rural rehabilitation councils, and independent commissions, centers for Independent living, assistive technology programs, local business and other employers, workforce partners, including local board and state boards, developmental disability programs, universities that prepare students for careers in VR.

For too long, the VR Program has been a best kept secret. Well, it's my job to change that. VR programs also have to be data. Data tells a story, and it can inform what we do. It tells us who we are serving and who needs to be served to establish and advance equitable service delivery. Data helps us to know which services work and which do not, helping us to invest our resources in the best ways possible to assist our program participants in achieving and maximizing quality employment outcomes.

Data helps us to evaluate which education and programs, and training programs, we support. And data can showcase the success of the program to employers, legislators, stakeholders, and, of course, those individuals with disabilities. We can use data to advocate for resources and non-federal match to leverage full federal funding for the program. At the state level, VR programs cannot afford to continue relinquishing portions of their federal grants.

The final, the fourth pier, VR programs must be counselor focused. Qualified VR counselors are foundational to the success of the VR program. And we support efforts and strategies that will ensure competitive pay and benefits, address recruitment and retention. We must guard against a shrinking supply of VR counselors in the public VR program and work with states to ensure counselors have advancement opportunities and scale growth in the field.

We must support professional development for VR counselors. We have to prioritize the engagement of VR counselors with their clients, and cement the relationships that can be built through the guidance and counseling, a primary function of their jobs. RSA can help states develop strategies that assist VR counselors in balancing the requirements for documentation and reporting under the Rehabilitation Act, with their primary responsibilities to the individuals they serve.

VR programs cannot be data informed without input from counselors. More to the point, the data that VR counselors provide are essential in ensuring that VR programs measure the effectiveness of the services they provide. VR counselors and the data make continuous improvement possible. At the federal level, RSA works to improve data collection practices to ensure they are administratively minimal and programmatically useful as possible.

In this day and time, VR counselors must be flexible in performing and know that not all activities will take place at the VR office. At times, VR counselors can work virtually from their homes. At other times, they may work in their communities and workforce centers, or even travel to an individual's home, given the available technology. We regularly see VR agencies directing their counselors to where the work is to where they can connect with clients.

For example, VR counselors who work for the Indiana Bureau of Rehabilitation Services are in the field full time. This sends the right message to clients and potential clients that VR counselors are proactively reaching out to serve those individuals where they are. In closing, at the US Department of Education, we embrace Secretary Cardona's commitment to raise the bar for individuals with disabilities as we advance competitive integrated employment.

I'd like to echo the words of Mary Switzer, the first director of the Federal Vocational Rehabilitation System. She said we cannot accomplish our mission for individuals with disabilities. Sorry about that. There's construction going on in my office. But we cannot simply accomplish our mission for individuals with disabilities by doing more in the same way. It calls for the minds and the experience, and the courageous determination of many people and many places to produce and use the improvements we will need.

Those words said more than 60 years ago are still as valid today as they ever were. We must drive the change to meet the challenges of our incredibly important mission. As RSA commissioner, I'm seeking positive transformation through collaboration with our grantees and stakeholders. As an individual with the disability, RSA work and success of the program is personal. I want to make the program the Premier program of choice for individuals with disabilities and I look forward to partnering with you all to make that happen. Thank you very much.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: Thank you so much, commissioner. We really appreciate it. Do you have a moment for-- Do you have a few minutes? We have a couple things that came up in the chat if I could bring them up.

DANTE ALLE: Absolutely.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: OK. First of all, somebody made the comment about what an amazing journey that you had had getting to where you are now. And I echo that. It's quite amazing. Several people talked about the fact that they are RSA scholars, and they're in counseling because they were RSA scholars, and asked about the future of funding for RSA scholars, especially in light of WIOA's reducing of qualifications for counselors. Can you talk about that at all?

DANTE ALLE: I can. And the one thing that I want to assure the audience is that we stand deeply committed to understanding the importance and technical proficiency around being a VR counselor. That said, we know that the communities that we serve and the ways that we are serving them are expanding, and that the limited community of VR counselors can be a challenge for reaching all that we need to serve, and being able to serve them in the ways that will lead to those competitive integrated employment.

So we have to have some flexibility in expanding the team, if you will, of people who will work to serve those individuals. A lot of the requirements, for instance, that we look for in complying with WIOA, those things don't have to be done by the VR counselor, the documentation. Those things can be supported through the help of others.

But we do recognize that the counselor is an integral piece of the connective tissue, and so they will continue to play an important role.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: OK. Thank you. And I'm just going to read this one, because I think it was put together very eloquently. Does RSA have any plans to help vocational rehabilitation programs market and promote the profession to attract and retain talent? The person who wrote it said they fear that the profession will evolve into something that we won't be able to recognize filled with professionals from non related fields.

DANTE ALLE: Yes. An excellent question. And I think that, as I said in one of my priorities, really looking at the bad rap that vocational rehab in general, RSA in particular, has received because of the challenges that we've had in shifting and redefining this work to reach as many people as possible. And so telling the stories, both the collective stories and the individual stories of the lives that are being changed, will be an essential part of what we're doing.

We are currently partnering with the National Organization, CSA VR, in order to work with those rehab centers and directors. And one of their priorities is that very thing of marketing programs. And that's something that because of state and federal dollars, the term marketing is often seen as a bad word, but we can certainly provide in helping to educate and show the impact that we're having.

We need to encourage individuals, even those who may think that they don't have the opportunity to enter the workforce or that it may not be for them. We need to encourage those individuals to let them know that if this is something you want, we can certainly provide a pathway for you to get there.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: Another one kind of going in a different direction said, they hope that RSA was collecting data and reaching out to underserved populations, and specifically individuals who have been formerly incarcerated. Can you talk at all about that?

DANTE ALLE: Absolutely. And so I can say that is a commitment of RSA, and not only in our discretionary grants, we are directly targeting underserved communities. We are working with other federal agencies to partner with those who were formerly incarcerated. And so that's something that I'd like to continue during my time as commissioner.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: OK. It was interesting. As someone just made a comment, as someone who went through state VR to return to work, it's sad that I make less working as a VR counselor than I did receiving SSDI disability retirement. How can we better address that?

DANTE ALLE: It's going to require commitment, commitment from all of us to continue to communicate the importance of the work that's being done by VR counselors across the country, continuing to share that this is a very technically skilled professional that required-- again, I apologize for the construction going on around me. It's a little random and when it happens--

But we have to maintain that commitment and really encourage vocational rehabilitation agencies to look and dig as deep as they can with their state legislatures to help expand the pay for those professions.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: And the next one is something I'm very familiar with, was the increased need for mental health services and the fact that the country is in a mental health crisis, certainly post COVID. And I would add my comment, and we're certainly seeing that among pre-employment transition students who are coming into the system, who have not only a disability, but have been, because of the abrupt turnaround to online, which was not always their best way of learning, to those being behind now. Any thoughts you have about how to better serve or address, or anything RSA is looking at in regards to that?

DANTE ALLE: I would say that we definitely share a similar commitment. Secretary Cardona has made that a central part of the Department of Education in general. More specifically, RSA is focusing both through our formulary grants and through our discretionary grants on ways to support financially efforts to address mental health as we work with individuals to seek competitive employment.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: OK. Great. I think that's it for the questions that I have so far, commissioner. I want to thank you again so much for coming. I guess my final request from you is we have RSA former scholars at this Zoom meeting. We have RSA current scholars on this meeting, which is exciting. And any kind of words of guidance or things that people entering the field should be thinking about or focused on?

DANTE ALLE: I think this idea of partnerships is the key. I really would encourage you all to take me very seriously when I say that my highest priority is expanding the engagement with the partners that we currently have, and even expanding our idea of who can be our partners going forward. And so the better that you can get at working with others, meeting individuals with disabilities where they are, rather than expecting them to show up in a VR agency, will do very well for the individuals that you serve.

In that regard, I will extend the offer. Those who want to reach out to me directly, those who want to engage in a conversation with me, my commitment to partnerships is real. So please, please, do reach out. Don't assume that I'm too busy or looking in other directions. I really do. I really am seeking input and help from any partners that I can get. Thank you.

DR. MAUREEN MCGUIRE-KULETZ: That's interesting. Just as an aside, it's interesting you mentioned partnerships. We had somebody who happens to be a grad of GW who said, I've been partnering with local transportation training groups funded by other grants. People love having new partners and getting to help people to go to work. So thank you very much, commissioner. I'm going to turn this back over to you, Dr. Hergenrather.

DR. KEN HERGENRATHER: Thank you, Dr. McGuire-Kuletz.