

Vocational Rehabilitation

for Postsecondary Programs that Serve Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Purpose

The purpose of the public Vocational Rehabilitation program is to empower individuals with disabilities to maximize employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and inclusion and integration into society. Simply stated, VR provides services to individuals with physical or mental disabilities who need help to qualify for, find, or keep a job that is consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, interests, and informed choice.

Will all high school graduates who have a significant hearing loss be eligible for VR? Most will—but not necessarily. VR is not an entitlement program, it is an eligibility program. This means that the student must meet the federally mandated VR eligibility criteria:

Criterion 1: The individual must have a disability.

Disability is defined in the VR law as a person who—

- has a physical or mental impairment that constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment, and
- can benefit in terms of an employment outcome from VR services.

Criterion 2: The individual requires VR services to prepare for, secure, retain, or regain employment.

How does the eligibility determination process work? Based on an intake interview and assessment, the assigned VR counselor will decide on an individualized basis whether or not an applicant is eligible for VR services.

Will the assigned VR counselor be an expert in the fields of deafness and hearing impairment? Sometimes. Many states have “counselors for the deaf and hard of hearing” who have specialized communication skills as well as in-depth knowledge of the unique psychosocial, educational, and technological needs of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing. However, because of geographic and other reasons, not all persons with hearing loss become assigned to these counselors.

How does a student get referred to VR? Referrals can be made by anyone, including self referrals and referral from postsecondary programs. Therefore, if a student in your program is struggling with vocational issues, or you believe they could otherwise benefit from VR services, have them contact their local VR agency to refer themselves if they wish. One note of caution—it is inappropriate—in fact illegal—to require a student to apply for VR services in order to be accepted by a postsecondary education program.

You can make a student aware of VR and its services, but it is considered discrimination to require students with disabilities to go through VR in order to be eligible for an education.

How are services determined?

After being found eligible for VR services, the student and the VR counselor sit down together to develop an individualized plan for employment, called the IPE. The basic parts of the IPE include:

- individual job goal
- services needed to be successful in that job goal
- process for review of progress toward goal achievement.

This IPE is based on the individual student’s abilities, strengths, priorities, concerns, interests, and resources. Students may require physical aids such as a hearing aid, educational assistance such as vocational training or college, or other services that are necessary for them to achieve employment in their chosen vocation. Other services often provided to eligible students include assessment, employment planning, counseling and guidance, transportation, resume writing and other job seeking skills, job placement assistance, job coaching to learn job tasks and expectations, and follow up to support employment success and satisfaction.

Remember, VR services are individually determined and employment goal based. Two individuals with the same degree and type of hearing loss might be provided very different services depending on their job goal, education, experience, and other factors, including personal preferences.

Does VR sponsor part-time students? States differ in their policies, but generally part-time attendance is permitted only if absolutely necessary and justified.

Does VR pay for all services that are needed and agreed to on the IPE? All similar benefits must be considered before VR money kicks in. In other words, VR is considered the “last dollar.” VR may therefore pay all, part of, or none of the tuition and other services.

Some state VR agencies have an economic need test. In these states the student (or parent if the student is still at home) will be required to fill out an economic need assessment form. Dependent on their available resources, they may be asked to pay all or part of the cost. (Evaluation, counseling and guidance, and job placement services must be provided regardless of the family’s ability to pay.)

Some state VR agencies have maximum spending limits on some services. However, these limits cannot be set so low that the service is not able to be purchased reasonably for that cost.

Who pays for interpreters and CART/C-Print™ services?

Since the passage of ADA this has varied from state to state. Some will pay all—some will pay part—some will pay none of the cost. The 1998 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act mandate that cooperative agreements be developed at the State level between VR and Higher Education. This may help to clarify this long-standing issue, but will continue to vary from one state to another.

Will VR pay for any eligible student who is deaf or hard of hearing to attend the college of his/her choice?

Choice of an appropriate school is the student's. However, in most states there is a policy that if equal programs are available at different schools at different costs, the student must attend the less expensive one or make up the difference. The same policy often applies to in-state vs. out-of-state schools.

Can VR pick up a student who is already enrolled in a postsecondary program and pay tuition retroactively? No. VR cannot pay for any service retroactively. Payment for needed services, tuition or other, cannot begin until after eligibility is determined and an IPE developed and signed by both the student and the VR counselor.

If approved for VR sponsorship, will it automatically continue until graduation is achieved? No. Sponsorship must be reassessed each semester or quarter (depending on the system). The student is required to maintain contact with his/her VR counselor and to keep the counselor up to date on all transcripts, changes in courses or curriculum, financial status, or problems encountered. He/she should not withdraw from a class without the VR counselor's agreement. With justification, a student can change curriculum or degree goal and not lose VR sponsorship. However, the counselor must develop a written amended plan with the student before any significant changes are made in these or other major service areas.

How does VR stay up to date on student information?

Because of confidentiality laws (Family Educational Rights & Privacy Act of 1974—or the Buckley Amendment), a postsecondary institution cannot send transcripts, grades, or other such material to a VR counselor without the student's written consent specific to each document. It is therefore imperative that the school stress to the student that this is the student's responsibility, and is essential for continuing VR sponsorship.

For more information

To locate the VR office nearest you:

- Consult the telephone book under State Government. VR programs may be found under various departments: Education; Labor; Human Services; Rehabilitative Services, etc.
- If you cannot find the telephone book listing, your Regional PEPNet (Postsecondary Education Programs Network) office can help you:

Southern Region

Postsecondary Education Consortium (PEC)
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville – Dunford Hall
Knoxville, TN 37996-4020
(865) 974-0607 (v/t), (865) 974-3522 (Fax)

Northeastern Region

Northeast Technical Assistance Center (NETAC)
Rochester Institute of Technology
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
52 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, NY 14623
(716) 475-6433 (v/t), (716) 475-7660 (Fax)

Midwestern Region

Midwest Center for Postsecondary Outreach (MCPO)
St. Paul Technical College
Marshall Street
St. Paul, MN 55102
(651) 221-1337 (v/t), (651) 221-1416 (Fax)

Western Region

Western Region Outreach Center & Consortia (WROCC)
National Center on Deafness
California State University, Northridge
Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8267
(818) 677-2611 (v/t), (818) 677-4899 (Fax)

Ask your PEPNet office about the NETAC "Connections" workshop that is available to assist VR and postsecondary education staffs at the local level to develop a cooperative working relationship in regards to mutual students/clients who have a hearing loss.

For more information, contact:

Northeast Technical Assistance Center

Rochester Institute of Technology
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
52 Lomb Memorial Drive
Rochester, NY 14623-5604

716-475-6433 (V/TTY)
716-475-7660 (Fax)
Email: netac@rit.edu
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