



M E M O R A N D U M

To: Governors' Offices

Re: State Workforce Development System Partnership with Vocational Rehabilitation Services to Address the Needs of People with Disabilities Impacted by COVID-19

From: National Governors Association

Date: August 26, 2020

SUMMARY

This memo describes ways that state Vocational Rehabilitation services (VR) programs are collaborating with state workforce development agencies and with state and local workforce development boards in response to COVID-19. Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) [authorizes](#) the state VR program as a critical partner to the state workforce development system. VR provides vocational and rehabilitative services to individuals with disabilities to help them prepare for and maintain employment. The effects of COVID-19 on the health system and economy has devastated states, necessitating joint efforts across workforce, human services, and economic development to address its effects on the workforce. Fortunately, in many states, the partnerships established through WIOA have prepared these systems to quickly respond in a coordinated and effective way. The information provided below is drawn from information submitted by 26 state VR program administrators in partnership with the [Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation](#).

EXAMPLES OF PARTNERSHIP ACTIVITIES ACROSS STATE VR AND WORKFORCE PROGRAMS

The following lists six ways state VR and workforce programs can and do coordinate and leverage each other's resources to address the effects of COVID-19 on the workforce with disabilities in both the short- and long-term:

- 1. Regular coordination meetings.** VR administrators, state workforce development boards, workforce agencies and other key workforce development stakeholders have consistent, systematic lines of communication that allow them to regularly coordinate service delivery and ensure overall strategic alignment.
 - **Arizona** local workforce development board chairs and staff actively coordinate with other state staff (including VR administrators) about their joint COVID-19 support efforts and service provision.
 - Staff from the **Connecticut** Department of Aging and Disability Services Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind are active participants in monthly virtual coordination meetings with partners from Workforce Alliance, the Regional Workforce Investment Board of South-Central Connecticut.
 - **Maine's** Department of Labor Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired conducts joint planning sessions with the workforce system, joint development of messaging, and joint response activities to ensure that people with disabilities have full access to information and services.
 - **Michigan's** Director of the Bureau of Services for Blind Persons at the Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity joined the Governor's Education Task Force, which

includes representatives from key workforce development and education entities, to represent the interests of blind and visually-impaired learners.

- **Mississippi's** Department of Rehabilitation Services director is in regular communications with the director of Employment Security and director of the Community College Board (and current chairperson of the state workforce development board) to ensure an open line of communication and to promote coordination of response services and other activities related to supporting employment and training opportunities for people with disabilities across those entities.
 - **Missouri's** Office of Workforce Development holds weekly calls that include workforce boards, the State Workforce Development Board and WIOA partners (including VR) to provide one another with updates on operations and identify opportunities for coordination of services. There is time for questions and discussion, to ensure meaningful connections are made between service offerings for people with disabilities across programs.
 - The **Texas** Workforce Commission (TWC) consists of all six core WIOA programs, which includes VR. The six division directors communicate regularly to share guidance they are giving their respective systems to align key messages and strategies where appropriate. The TWC Workforce Division hosts twice weekly calls with workforce board executive directors and the Vocational Rehabilitation Division is invited to provide updates on their response, ask and answer questions, and coordinate response efforts as needed to ensure that workforce boards are engaged in promoting work and training opportunities for people with disabilities.
 - The **Utah** State Office of Rehabilitation director is a member of the State Workforce Development Board and senior management team at the Department of Workforce Services. The two systems participate in the same meetings and discussions on COVID-19 response planning. The VR staff work with board staff to set agendas, provide presentations, and share relevant information.
 - The **Virginia** Department for Ageing and Rehabilitative Services Assistant Commissioner responsible for the Division of Rehabilitative Services acts as an executive staff member to the Virginia Board of Workforce Development. This team has been meeting twice weekly during COVID-19 crisis discussing and coordinating relevant activities with the work of each local workforce board area.
2. **Open sharing of resources with the public and across program partners.** VR programs and agencies have platforms through which they are able to disseminate relevant information with participants, others who may be eligible for services and other entities operate in coordination or that serve similar populations.
- **Connecticut's** Department of Aging and Disability Services serves clients in coordination with American Job Centers/One Stops. Together they have transitioned in-person services to online workshops and virtual conference meetings and created accessible online job fairs and programs including participating in weekly virtual orientations, job clubs, workshops and individual conference calls with career counselors. Clients can also access a series of videos on YouTube that were developed by the American Job Centers on topics such as how to register and access training services, develop a resume, search for a career and prepare for participation in a job fair.
 - **Delaware's** Division for the Visually Impaired shares resources with WIOA partners to ensure all their consumers stay informed and have access to needed resources. They try to keep an open line of communication.

- **Iowa's** Vocational Rehabilitation Services works closely with the state workforce board to coordinate referrals, service delivery, outreach and resource development in areas where they are co-located and otherwise partner. This partnership and sharing of planning and resources is due their Unified Planning Approach which incents and structures collaboration across WIOA core partners.
 - **Missouri's** Office of Workforce Development provides written updates along with materials to distribute to American Job Center staff and workforce partner staff such as information on filing for UI benefits, steps to take in layoffs and how to protect health and retirement benefits after layoffs. This information sharing ensures consistency in services and access to information across sites.
 - **Oregon's** Commission for the Blind participates in information sharing about unemployment insurance and other resources that can be shared with VR consumers who have experienced job loss to help connect people to services and employment opportunities.
3. **Connection of customers to essential service jobs.** VR agencies ensure their own access to up-to-date information about jobs that are immediately available, especially those that are deemed essential, so they are able to quickly match those they serve with positions for which they are qualified.
- **Illinois** Department of Rehabilitation Services sends out job leads for the essential service employers that are still operating, attempting to place job seekers with disabilities into those companies' openings.
 - **Indiana's** Commissioners of the Department of Workforce Development and the Family and Social Services Administration are coordinating to educate job seekers on job opportunities that are available through the pandemic. One significant hiring need in the state is for front line staff that work with people with disabilities.
 - **Michigan** Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, Employment and Training Division, Rehabilitation Services signed the Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency Memorandum of Understanding, a formal MOU that expedites the dissemination of active job leads to participants. It also includes the organization of a virtual job fair for major employers in immediate need of talent of all abilities, such as Amazon and Walmart.
 - **Michigan's** Rehabilitation Services Field Divisions and Business Network Division developed rapid response plans for job seekers and workers with disabilities in businesses and industries that have been, or are expected to be, impacted by COVID-19.
 - **Ohio's** VR agency, Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities, is in regular contact with the Governor's Office of Workforce Transformation to identify the urgent hiring needs of essential businesses like supermarkets, pharmacies, distribution centers, and healthcare employers. They created an Urgent Jobs list to promote this information to VR staff and job developers to assist participants with disabilities in obtaining employment. They update the list on a weekly basis and distribute it through their [website](#).
 - **Virginia** local workforce boards are asked to use their Business Solutions Team to coordinate and refer qualified candidates to businesses seeking to fill open positions. Together the workforce development programs (including VR) are collaborating to support major business needs as grocery stores, major supply warehouses, and restaurant food preparation to respond to the COVID-19 needs of their communities. The

Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services has staff members on all the Business Solutions Teams in the Commonwealth.

4. **Coordination of referrals.** Coordinate across agencies to refer individuals to all programs and benefits they are eligible for to ensure all individuals are aware of their options and can receive the maximum level of support.
 - **Illinois:** While American Job Centers have closed temporarily, referrals can still be made to VR through direct linkage.
 - **Michigan** Rehabilitation Services' Unemployment Insurance Administration MOU established expedited referral of UI recipients to both workforce development and MRS.
 - **Oklahoma's** Department of Rehabilitation Services makes appropriate referrals providing information and advice regarding the most suitable services available to assist individuals and following established internal protocol for processing incoming referrals to the Vocational Rehabilitation program from other entities.
5. **Cross-Staffing to Support Partner Programs.** Coordinate with other programs and agencies to ensure consistent staff capacity in agencies experiencing higher than normal levels of demand to maintain consistent service delivery.
 - **Maine's** VR staff assists with answering unemployment insurance calls. The time spent answering the calls is cost-allocated to the VR program.
 - **New Hampshire's** Department of Education Vocational Rehabilitation has trained and temporarily repositioned staff to help process unemployment insurance claims, as part of an effort to increase overall staffing capacity to manage the influx of new claims during the pandemic.
 - **Wyoming** WIOA Title I, III, and IV programs are all administered by the Department of Workforce Services, which helps facilitate strong and frequent collaboration to serve job seekers while allowing staff to telework as much as possible. For example, if a VR staff person is teleworking, then a Title I and III Employment and Training staff person is in the office to answer phones and help with walk-in traffic.
6. **Cost-Sharing.** Coordinate across agencies and programs to identify opportunities to share the costs incurred due to COVID-19 response efforts to minimize the cost burden to any one entity.
 - **Virginia** Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services has assigned staff to each local Workforce Development Board. Staff work in American Job Centers in the Commonwealth to facilitate cost-sharing for expenses related to COVID-19 like deep cleaning of offices and purchases of necessary supplies. During COVID-19, the department and all other WIOA partner agencies are sharing costs for additional expenses incurred to minimize disruptions in delivery and ensure safe operations.

Additional resources are available via the [Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation](#).

For questions regarding information contained in this memo, please contact the following NGA Center for Best Practices staff:

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