

Vocational Rehabilitation

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

Purpose

The public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program provides services to individuals with 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.

Are all secondary and postsecondary students with a significant hearing loss eligible for VR?

No. Many will be, but since VR is based on eligibility, not entitlement, students must meet the federally mandated VR eligibility criteria:

Criterion 1: The individual must have a disability, which 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?

A VR counselor will conduct an intake interview and assessment to determine eligibility.

Will the assigned VR counselor be knowledgeable about deafness and hearing impairment?

Maybe. Some 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. If a student whose primary means of communication is American Sign Language is assigned to a non-signing counselor, he/she is entitled to an interpreter. Of course, appropriate notice of this need must be given prior to the meeting.

How does a student get referred to VR?

Referrals can be made by anyone, including self referrals and referral from secondary or postsecondary programs. Therefore, if a student in your program is struggling with vocational issues, or you believe that the student could otherwise benefit from VR services, have the student contact their local VR agency to refer themselves if they wish.

Students who are still in secondary school can contact VR if those

working with them at the school think it is worthwhile. A student may have a case opened two to three years prior to graduation. At that time, the VR counselor can provide counseling and guidance as the student begins to make postsecondary education decisions and career plans. 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 a college education or other post-secondary training.

How are services determined?

After being found eligible for VR services, the student and the VR counselor together develop an individualized plan for employment (IPE) based on the student’s abilities, strengths, priorities, concerns, interests, and resources. The IPE includes:

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

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 receive 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. Similar benefits

include, but are not limited to, state tuition aid grants, federal Pell Grants, need and merit-based grants/scholarships provided

by postsecondary institutions, and other scholarships and awards presented by private and community groups. Generally speaking, state VR offices do not consider loans (public or private) as a similar benefit. Most state VR offices require clients to demonstrate that they have submitted a request for aid to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) prior to each academic year.

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. Depending 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 "caps" or maximum spending limits on some services. However, these caps 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 the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), this has varied from state to state. Some will pay all, some will pay part, and 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 it 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, most states have 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.

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.

Does VR sponsorship 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.

Some state VR agencies now place limits on how many semesters a degree program might be supported. For example, an agency might make it policy to expect an Associate's Degree to be earned by a full-time student in two traditional academic years with the possibility of two additional semesters being permitted.

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.

The school must stress to the student that this is the student's responsibility, and is essential for continuing VR sponsorship.

It is critical that students identify the services they need and learn to advocate for them independently. An important factor in the growth of the student is understanding that their postsecondary experience will largely be self-directed with additional guidance from the important adults in their lives, including the VR counselor.

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. Visit the PEPNet website at www.pepnet.org to see a listing of Outreach Specialists.

These materials were developed in the course of agreement between the Research to Practice Division, Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education and the PEPNet-Northeast Regional Center at the Rochester Institute of Technology under grant #H326D060004. Additional information about current pepnet 2 project activities and resources can be found at www.pepnet.org. Year of publication: 2005; Revised 2011.



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