

CAC members, Cailin Thompson, Dayna Davis, and Rusty Hawkins sat down over Zoom to interview Ruth Johnson, Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation Services Counselor who specializes in working with people with intellectual disabilities. VR is a statewide resource for people with disabilities and is part of the Department of Human Services.

How do people get Vocational Rehabilitation Services?

People who receive Developmental Disabilities Services tell their Personal Agent or Services Coordinator that they want to work. The PA or SC writes an ISP (Individual Service Plan) goal for a career development plan and makes a referral to VR. You don't need to wait for your annual ISP meeting to make tell your PA or SC you want to work.

Why can't I apply for VR services myself?

Many people will need supported employment services and a job coach after VR services are complete. To access funding for those services, you need to go through DD Services. It's a collaborative effort with DDS.

If you don't have DD Services, can you still get support from VR?

You can, but it's complicated. This usually happens when the families of young people don't want them to have a diagnosis or feel stigmatized by receiving services. We explain the value of these services. They can do their own career exploration, but if it looks like they will need a job coach long-term, they need to get DD Services in order for VR to open a case. In rare cases, a highly individualized plan can be written for extended job coaching services.

What happens once VR services start?

Often clients come to VR and feel they are ready to work right away. They want to start filling out applications. The process isn't that simple and can feel like you're waiting forever, but there are many things that need to happen first.

The referral from your Personal Agent or Services Coordinator to VR can take a month or more before VR is ready to schedule the appointment. Then VR does an intake with you. After the intake, VR determines your eligibility for services, which can take up to 60 days. You meet with your VR counselor to review your eligibility findings and talk about the supports you think you will need. This is also the time for career exploration like taking career interest surveys. This is very individualized and can take 90 days. It includes information about your skills, the supports you need, and your goals. A plan for employment is written next, and once the plan is signed, you'll chose a job developer. We don't rush this process because we want to understand what will help you be successful.

What if I feel my VR counselor doesn't believe in me?

You have the right to be treated with dignity and respect. You can always let your VR counselor know if you think they aren't understanding your skills. You can also request a different counselor.

What else can VR help with?

If you aren't ready for work, we start by talking about what it will take to make you happy as a whole person. Maybe you want to volunteer. In this case, VR can help with the conversation but not the services.

There is tremendous benefit to volunteering before getting a job. It's a benefit that I personally can't quantify. Volunteering is a regular part of my life. It takes me out of my comfort zone, I learn to work with different people, I'm benefiting the community, and I build new skills. I recommend volunteering for everyone. When our clients volunteer, we want them doing more than just busy work. I prefer for them to have opportunities to build skills. We need to show you can do the work you say you want, so volunteer to get experience or take classes if that's appropriate. I never tell someone finding a job will be fast, easy, or exactly what they want when there are multiple barriers, but everyone deserves fulfilling work and can prepare for it.

How can we prevent discrimination when we want to try a new skill?

We face this every day with our clients. You can advocate for yourself, and your team can advocate for you. Changing hearts and minds of employers takes work. Your job developer will educate the employer. We can be creative like with a video resume that shows you can do what you say you can. We can also help you prove your skills through certain tests like typing or computer software knowledge.

You may think your job is about you, but the employer wants to know that the person they are hiring will make them money. Job developers spend time behind the scenes educating employers on how people with intellectual disabilities can benefit their business.

Here's an example. Why should a restaurant hire someone to just wrap silverware? It frees up someone else to work in the kitchen to do a different task. People with different skills can contribute to making the business money. Everyone has a skill that they can contribute.

Sometimes it's family, or neighbors, or a boyfriend who we want to convince we can do a job. We want them to see our skills too. All of us, regardless of

intellectual capacity, have the ability to learn more and do more that benefits ourselves and others.

How has the pandemic affected work for people with disabilities?

The pandemic has been hard for everyone; hard for clients, coworkers, provider agencies, me. We're all in the same storm, but we're not in the same boat. The pandemic affects everyone differently, and everyone's capacity to handle it is different. People with disabilities have a 30% higher chance of getting sick. We rely on employment teams to help us identify which jobs are safest and how we can support clients to be safe in those environments. This can include designing safety protocols for the home too to keep family members safe.

I want to tell you about two clients I had last July. One lived at home with both parents. The other lived at home with one parent. While their parents lost their jobs, my clients were supporting their families. They were very proud and rightfully so. Those families couldn't have made it through as well without those individuals working.

What else is important?

I appreciate people who advocate for themselves. They tell me what they want to do and why. They show me what they've done to build up to what they want. They are active participants in their success. Talking about wanting to work is the first step. Showing you want to work is the second. Wanting something isn't enough. You have to act on it.