

Vocational Rehabilitation

For people with disabilities

Agency Involved: US Department of Education

The US Department of Education handles federal assistance to public education and enforces US education laws about privacy and civil rights. Within the Dept. of Ed, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) helps people with disabilities live more independently. **The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)** is the division of OSERS which focuses on disability employment and independent living, also called "Vocational Rehabilitation" (often shortened to VR) (The "rehabilitation" part of that name is a remnant of post-World War I veteran disability services.). RSA monitors, advises, and partially funds vocational rehabilitation agencies in each state.

Each state VR agency is run and managed by its state government, not RSA. These agencies help people with significant disabilities find jobs and live more independently in their local community.

Each US state has at least one state VR agency. Some states have a second VR agency specifically for people with blindness and low vision. In addition, some Indian tribal governments/reservations also have VR programs. RSA monitors each of these agencies to make sure they are complying with federal laws and regulations about VR services.

Missouri has two VR agencies: **The Missouri Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)** (part of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) and **Missouri Rehabilitation Services for the Blind (RSB)** (part of the Department of Social Services).

More details available at:

[RSA Webpage on Ed.gov](#)
[Missouri Division of Voc Rehab](#)
[Missouri Rehab Services for the Blind](#)

Summary

A "Successful Employment Outcome" (a job) for a person with a disability has a very specific definition for RSA and state VR agencies: the job must be:

- **Career-based**, meaning the job leads to a path of promotion and increasing job responsibilities.
- **Integrated**, meaning the job is out in the community, the person interacts with the general public the same way anyone without a disability would, and some of the coworkers have no disabilities.
- **Competitive**, meaning the person gets the same pay and benefits as anyone without disabilities would for that job and the job is available to people without disabilities.
- **Appropriate for the person's interests and abilities**, which the person decides in collaboration with their VR counselor.

- **Informed Choice** is important to this process, which means the counselor makes sure the person understands all the options and is a key part of the final decision.

The goal of a VR agency is for the person with a disability (the "client") to acquire and keep a job which meets these requirements. Once the person has found a job and been in it for a period of time (at least 90 days), the agency will officially declare them "placed" and close their file. This is called a "successful closure" or "successful employment outcome". VR agencies provide a very wide range of supports and services to help a person become employed.

If a former VR client later finds themselves in danger of losing a job *because of disability-related issues* or loses a job and has trouble finding a new one (again because of disability-related issues), they can get VR services again. The agency's goal is to successfully close a person's case, but agency staff can always open a new case if more services are needed for one of these two reasons.

Some people confuse the 90-day post-employment time to mean VR services are "time-limited". But in general, a client can get VR services as long as necessary, providing they are actively working toward employment and closure.

Some people mistakenly believe that VR will find a job for them and they just have to show up. VR's role is to help the person find employment through guidance and support, but the person is expected to do much of the work, in partnership with the counselor. A VR counselor may close a client's case and end services if that person does not seem willing to do his or her part.

More details available at:

[Missouri Voc Rehab: You and VR](#)

Specific Benefits

An Overview the Vocational Rehabilitation Process

1. **Eligibility Determination** – During an initial meeting, a VR counselor or staff member will explain the agency's services and policies and begin to collect information from the person to determine if he or she is eligible. The counselor must make the eligibility decision within 60 days of when the person's application is complete.
2. **Vocational Counseling** – Together, the person with a disability and the counselor will explore possible career goals for the person. Medical records and other documentation are important, but the key source of information is close conversations with the client and/or client's family. In some instances, the person's career goal may change later on. This is considered a normal part of the process.
3. **VR Services** – Together the client and counselor choose supports and services the client needs to reach the career goal. Different clients, with different goals, will choose very different services. The set of services and the career goal make up the *Individualized Plan for Employment* (IPE). The IPE is not final until the client signs it to indicate that she or he 1) was an active participant in creating it and 2) agrees with the services, responsibilities, and goal listed in the

plan. This is one way VR agencies make sure clients have a central role deciding on the type of services they receive. The IPE can be revised later if necessary.

4. **Closure** – VR services continue until the person is successfully employed, or until the VR counselor decides employment is not possible for now (for example, because the person is not ready to work, or health issues have come up, or the person is not actively participating, etc.). Closure does NOT mean the person cannot get VR services in the future, but the person would have to start over with application and eligibility determination.

Types of VR Services

VR can help with many different kinds of services, depending on a particular person's career goal and needs. Services can include, but are not limited to:

- **Assessment Services** – These assessments help the counselor (and client) understand the client's abilities, interests, preferences, limitations, and needs better. They are not about eligibility for services, or about ruling out a particular career. The person giving the assessment does not decide which career would be best, only the client and counselor do that. As a team, the counselor and client review evaluation results and develop a realistic employment plan.
- **Counseling and Guidance** – This is any type of counseling support, either with the VR counselor or with a mental health professional, to help the person with the employment process.
- **Job Training and Education** – This covers skill acquisition (including college education) to improve employment potential. It can include specific vocational training courses, classroom training, and on-the-job training among other things. These are some of the most common VR services. There is NO TIME LIMIT on how long the training may take, as long as reasonable progress is being made toward an employment goal. Training options include:
 - Short-Term Vocational Training – this kind of training may last only a few hours or one or two years, depending on the skills involved and the person. This includes local vocational-technical (vo-tech) classes or specialized disability-focused training. VR may cover the cost of the training.
 - College Education – Some career goals require a college degree. When appropriate, VR may pay some of the tuition, but only after the client has already applied for any available financial aid. VR may also cover some or all the cost of school supplies, housing, and basic living. The counselor and client have to agree on a timeline – this is not an open-ended scholarship.
- **Job Placement** – These are services to help the person locate job openings and eventually get hired. It can include specific job hunting skills (such as interviewing and resume writing), plus services from job placement specialists who directly market a client to networks of local employers.

- Supported Employment. This is one of the newer services for the VR system. Ideally, supported employment (the use of an on-site job coach to help a client navigate job tasks and responsibilities) is a temporary transitional support which can be faded out. However, there are individuals who need supported employment on a long-term or semi-permanent basis. Because VR services are focused on successful closure, there must be a cut-off point when the client is securely employed and services are complete. Funding for supported employment services is time limited and support for long term supported employment will have to come from another source.
- Self-Employment Services – Many VR agencies are trying to promote self-employment, but clients need to do a lot of research and documentation (including a viable business plan) to succeed. There are several subtypes of self-employment, including small business ownership, contract work, and equipment ownership.
- **Assistive Technology Services** – Some clients need a special device or equipment to reach their career goal. This may be a special computer, or a specially adapted car, or a specially designed tool, for example. There are assistive technology specialists who can help figure out what might be useful. If it helps the person get a job, VR will often purchase it.
- **Medical Services** – In some instances, specific medical treatment (such as surgery or psychiatric counseling) may increase a person's ability to work. VR is NOT a health care plan for ongoing medical needs, but it will pay for a focused intervention to improve job options.
- **Job Retention** – VR can also help if a person is in danger of losing a job because of issues related to their disability. Services might include anger management, assistive technology, training in appropriate dress and communication, medical or counseling services, transportation options, or support services for independent living.

Financial Needs Test

Some VR agencies may require that clients share some of the cost for certain services unless the person can pass a financial needs test. By federal law, agencies will pay all costs for the following services: diagnostic services; counseling, guidance and referral services; job placement; personal assistance services; and “any auxiliary aid or service,” such as interpreter or reader services. Also, anyone who receives Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits automatically meets any state VR needs test and will not have to share the cost.

More details available at:

[State VR Financial Needs Test Overview](#)

Populations Served (eligibility)

To be eligible for VR services, a person must have a significant disability which makes it difficult for them to get or keep a job, AND be potentially able to get a job with help from the kind of services VR can provide.

Person-Centered Policies

There are several ways in which the VR system works hard to make sure its counselors do not make quick, negative assumptions about a person's potential to work:

- Counselors are to presume that everyone can work. They will only decide someone is "unemployable" if there is clear and convincing evidence. It is not enough for a counselor to be doubtful.
- Counselors are to presume that everyone can benefit from basic VR services, unless there is clear and convincing evidence that they cannot. This includes assessing the person's ability to perform in realistic work settings, not just on standardized tests.

Order of Selection

"Order of Selection" is a declaration that an agency feels it must limit its services because of budget limitations. RSA requires that agencies taking this step must give priority to the clients with the "most significant disabilities". If an agency will have to turn away a significant number of eligible people with disabilities, RSA wants to be sure that the agency will not just serve the "easy", high-functioning applicants.

Each state creates its own definition of "most significant disabilities", but the definition must be an extension of the official definition of "a significant disability", which says the person must:

- Have severe physical or mental impairment which seriously limits one or more functional aspects of working
- Be expected to need multiple VR services over a long time
- Have a disability which causes "substantial functional limitation"

Most of the time, a VR agency will define "most significant disability" as one involving at least three significant functional limitations. Usually, individual VR counselors will decide who meets the definition.

More details available at:

[Rehabilitation Act on Significant Disability](#)

[Cornell University Brief on Order of Selection](#)

[Missouri Voc Rehab Client Service Guide on Eligibility](#)

Definition of Disability

For state VR agencies, a significant disability is one which limits "activities of daily life" and creates barriers to employment. Most of the time, VR agencies require a formal diagnosis from a doctor or psychiatrist confirming this. However, anyone who receives Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits automatically qualifies as having a significant disability.

If a VR counselor believes the diagnosis is wrong or needs more information, they can arrange for an additional medical evaluation, for which VR will pay.

On the other extreme, a VR counselor may decide a person's disability is too significant for them to work or to benefit from VR services. This is a significant step and requires "clear and convincing evidence", that the person cannot work based on assessments in realistic work settings.

More details available at:

[RSA Fact Sheet](#)

Criminal History

Having a criminal history does not exclude a person from getting VR services.

Substance Abuse

Having a history of substance abuse does not exclude a person from getting VR services.

In Missouri (and possibly other states) a person with a diagnosis of substance abuse must have finished or be in a treatment / recovery program. However, if substance abuse is the disability which qualifies the person for VR services, and the person has been sober for a significant period after treatment / recovery, there may be some difficulty saying they have a barrier to employment because of the substance abuse. If substance abuse is a secondary disability, the sobriety period is not a problem.

More details available at:

[Missouri Voc Rehab Client Services Guide on specific disabilities](#)

Application Process

Officially, someone must "refer" a person to VR for services. However, this can be almost anyone: a doctor, a mental health professional, a service agency, a school counselor, or even the person themselves. In practice, the person just needs to contact a local VR office for an initial visit. During the initial visit, a VR counselor or staff member will review VR services and eligibility requirements and collect information from the person to begin an eligibility determination. Once the counselor reviews the information, they may decide to send the person for a medical or vocational evaluation to get more information about the person's disability and potential to benefit from VR services.

More details available at:

[Missouri Voc Rehab Client Services Guide on Intake/Application](#)

Insider Tips/Comments

- **Initial Interview:** If possible, the person should bring documentation of their finances and disability status to the initial VR meeting. This should include:
 - Current medical records documenting their disability or visual condition
 - Details of educational history (high school, any college or vo tech training, etc.). Transcripts would be best. Also include any IEP plan from Special Ed Services.
 - Details of work history (dates, business addresses, responsibilities, reason for leaving)
 - Copy of Social Security Card

- Award letter or documents for any social services benefits they get, including
 - Medicaid, Medicare
 - SSI, SSDI
 - TANF
 - Workers Compensation
 - Private Insurance
- **Client Responsibilities:** It is very important that the person understands the research and other tasks THEY are expected to do during the employment process, and does them on schedule. The responsibilities should be a joint decision of the person/client and the counselor, with both having assignments and timelines.
- **Support Needs:** People with some cognitive disabilities (such as autism, dyslexia, or traumatic brain injury) may have trouble describing situations that cause them trouble, or may believe it is more polite to minimize their challenges. It is important for them to be blunt and clear about their challenges during initial meetings with their VR counselor.
- **Special Case Loads:** Some VR counselors specialize in certain disabilities and are more familiar with the support needs for those. When calling for an initial interview, a person should ask if any counselor has a specialty in their disability.
- **Appeals:** There is an extensive internal appeals process for anyone who believes VR has incorrectly denied them services. RSA requires the agencies to explain it to applicants.
 - The final stage of the internal appeals process is a hearing with an "Impartial Hearing Officer", who knows about VR but is not part of the agency. The hearing does not cost the person anything (unless they choose to hire a lawyer, which they will need to pay for)
 - Every state also has a Protection and Advocacy (P&A) program which specifically helps people with disabilities resolve problems with social service agencies.

Typical Timeline

- The application process starts at the initial interview. Unfortunately, people often have to wait several weeks or more before their scheduled interview.
- State VR agencies require an eligibility determination within 60 days of application.
- If the VR counselor determines the person is eligible, they will schedule interviews to begin more extensive career exploration and start the process of determining a career goal and an *Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE)*. The workload and availability of the counselor, as well as the specific situation of the person/client, will determine how long this process takes. Several meetings may be involved, as well as services such as "job shadowing" and skills testing.

- Once the client obtains a job in his or her chosen career and is not actively using VR services any longer (such as job coaching, etc.) the counselor will keep the client's case open for a set period of time (at least 90 days), checking in with the client periodically to make sure things are OK. Then the counselor will close the case.
- If the person has disability-related problems with employment later on, either with keeping their job or finding a new one, they can apply for VR services again. There is no lifetime limit.

Contact Information

Regional or National:

- [US Department of Ed's RSA web page](#)
- [List of state VR director's offices](#) (Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation)

State:

- [Missouri Vocational Rehabilitation](#)
 - 573-751-3251 / 877-222-8963
- [Missouri Protection and Advocacy](#)
 - 573-659-0678 / 800-392-8667

Local:

- [Missouri VR list of local offices](#)

Web links for Independent research:

- [Missouri VR Online Client Services Guide](#)
- [Rehabilitation Act online](#) (University of Missouri DPS site)

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