

## Evaluation of Vocational Rehabilitation Service Models for Deaf-Blind Consumers

### What Were We Trying to Learn?

Individuals with deaf-blindness are much less likely to be employed than the general population. VR agencies use different strategies to work with deaf-blind individuals, but almost no research has been done on these service-delivery models.

We wanted to know how VR agencies work with consumers who are deaf-blind and which strategies were most effective. This study is the first to evaluate the effectiveness of VR service models for consumers who are deaf-blind.

### What Are the Most Important Things We Learned?

We discovered four categories of service-delivery strategies used by VR agencies to work with deaf-blind consumers:

- **Specialist:** VR agencies using this model (35%) employed one or more people whose position was focused on deaf-blindness. Some of these specialized staff were coordinators who worked with counselors and other direct-service staff on all matters related to deaf-blindness. Specialist staff in other agencies were direct-service providers who served only or mainly consumers with deaf-blindness.
- **Professional collaboration:** These VR agencies (24%) used regular collaboration between counselors in different disability areas (blindness and deafness) to serve deaf-blind consumers. Both combined agencies and agencies for the blind use this model. When agencies for the blind use this model, its staff and the general agency in the state work together to meet consumers' unique needs.
- **Specialist plus professional collaboration:** In this model, used by 8% of VR agencies, staff regularly collaborate across agencies/divisions and the agency has a specialized position for deaf-blind services.
- **Miscellaneous:** The remaining 33% of VR agencies do not consistently collaborate or have specialized workers. Instead, these agencies use a variety of strategies for serving deaf-blind consumers, including relying on contractors or deciding who provides services based on consumer needs and preferences.

We found that some service-delivery models were more effective than others. Agencies using the specialist model had the highest percentage of deaf-blind consumers closed with competitive employment, while agencies using a miscellaneous model had the lowest. Deaf-blind consumers served in either the specialist or professional-collaboration models were more likely to be competitively employed compared to those served in a miscellaneous model.

In addition, regardless of the service model used, blind agencies closed a higher percentage of deaf-blind consumers with competitive employment compared to combined agencies.

### Research Takeaway

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies use different strategies to work with consumers who are deaf-blind. Our study found that some models for service delivery, such as employing a specialist in deaf-blindness and promoting collaboration, are more effective than others at improving employment outcomes for deaf-blind consumers.

## How Do These Findings Relate to Me?

- **Explore options for specialized staff with expertise in deaf-blindness.** Specialized staff understand the characteristics, service needs, culture, and communication preferences of people with deaf-blindness. Specialized staff can fill a range of job functions, such as a statewide deaf-blindness coordinator or a rehabilitation counselor focused on deaf-blind consumers.
- **Seek opportunities for collaboration.** We found that cooperation between blind and general agencies can lead to better employment outcomes for consumers with deaf-blindness. Other organizations, such as the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths & Adults, offer valuable resources and training. Interpreters who can facilitate communication with deaf-blind consumers may also be valuable resources.
- **Provide more training and professional development in deaf-blindness for VR counselors.** Historically, VR agencies have struggled to find employees with expertise in deaf-blindness. Currently, there are no rehabilitation personnel-preparation programs specific to deaf-blindness in the United States. Increasing the number of people qualified for deaf-blind-specific positions is essential. In addition, all VR staff who work with deaf-blind consumers could benefit from professional development in this area.

## How Was This Project Carried Out?

We surveyed administrators from all 51 VR agencies in the United States, representing 27 combined agencies and 24 blind agencies. This survey data was combined with data on 2,119 individual deaf-blind VR consumers from the Rehabilitation Services Administration Case Service Report for fiscal years 2013-2015.)

## Learn More

Findings were taken from the following article:

McDonnall, M. C., & Cmar, J. L. (2019). Services for consumers who are deaf-blind: Vocational rehabilitation agency service models utilized and their effectiveness. *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*, 113(1), 19-31.

For more information about this project, visit the project overview page: [Exploration of Secondary Data to Increase our Knowledge About Subpopulations of Individuals who are Blind and Visually Impaired and WIOA Impacts](#).

## Contact Us

Email: [nrtc@colled.msstate.edu](mailto:nrtc@colled.msstate.edu)

Webpage: [blind.msstate.edu](http://blind.msstate.edu) or [ntac.blind.msstate.edu](http://ntac.blind.msstate.edu)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/msu.nrtc/](http://www.facebook.com/msu.nrtc/)

Twitter: [@MSU\\_NRTC](https://twitter.com/MSU_NRTC)



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