

## **THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES AND SERVICE DELIVERY: 2021 STATE OF THE STATES**

*Findings from the Vocational Rehabilitation  
Technical Assistance Center for Quality  
Management National Survey of State  
Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies*

## THE SURVEY

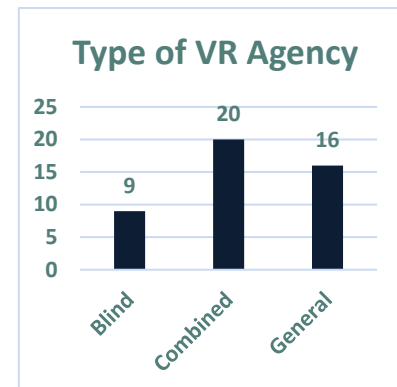
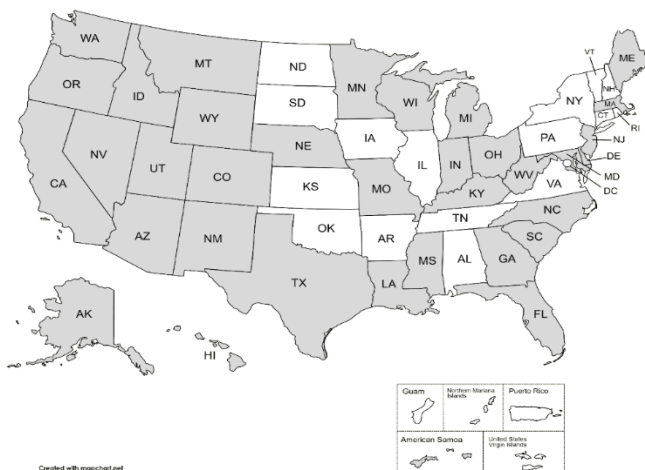
In July and August of 2021, the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM) launched a survey of State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies (SVRAs) regarding the impact of the pandemic on their agencies. The survey was disseminated in collaboration with CSAVR, with reminders sent personally to SVRA Directors from VRTAC-QM staff. Previously, many of the same entities operating and providing technical assistance (TA) under the VRTAC-QM also operated and provided TA as the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center (WINTAC). Under both projects, TA staff compiled resources for agencies to deal with operations and management issues that arose due to the pandemic and associated disruptions in service provision (e.g., shutdowns, needs for quarantine) and provided training and TA directly. Throughout 2021, shifts in the pandemic's course have led to increased variation in state strategies for serving clients. This survey was conducted to determine the impact the pandemic has had -- and continues to have -- on SVRAs, to determine SVRAs' related need for training and TA, and to identify strategies SVRAs have put in place.

## THE SAMPLE

Agency Type	n	%
Blind	9	20
Combined	20	44
General	16	36
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>100</b>

\*2 full responses from DE-G

\*2 full responses from MS-C



## THE FINDINGS

### A. CHANGES MADE TO SERVICE DELIVERY

The survey results indicate that a majority of participants endorsed increased use of technology to virtualize interactions with clients from fairly low-tech (text messaging) to what is now commonly widespread -- the use of videoconferencing to manage staff and work with clients directly. One-third of respondents indicated they decreased use of physical facilities. Only one respondent indicated they did not make any changes.

What changes, if any, did you make to your agency or service delivery system as a result of the pandemic? (Check all that apply.)	Count	%
Increased use of videoconferencing and/or text messaging to communicate with staff	44	98
Increased use of telework for staff	43	96
Increased use of videoconferencing to communicate with consumers	42	93
Increase in the use of virtual appointments with community partners	41	91
Increased ability of consumers to complete the VR process online or remotely	38	84
Development or utilization of online services or training for consumers that were traditionally provided in-person	38	84
Increase in virtual job fairs, virtual internships or virtual work-based learning opportunities	36	80
Implementation of electronic signatures for consumers	33	73
Increased use of text messaging to communicate with consumers	32	71
Increased use of distance technology to work with businesses	28	62
Decrease in physical facilities	16	36
Increased use of social media platforms to communicate with consumers	15	33
Increases or incentives added to the rates paid to service providers	14	31
Other (Please describe.)	8	18
We did not make any changes.	1	2

**"Other" Responses:** In explaining changes captured by the "Other" category (selected by eight respondents), a quarter (two) reflected that they had decreased services and/or purchasing, half (four) noted increased use of technology or virtualization, such as putting their entire application online, preparing guidance on virtual service delivery for providers, reducing desk phone use in lieu of cell phone use, and meeting clients in homes or virtually. One respondent noted providing new services in response to the pandemic (but not what service) and another noted being in the process of studying provider rates.

## B. POSITIVE OUTCOMES/BENEFITS OF CHANGES MADE

A majority of respondents indicated that positive impacts of the pandemic included saving time and money due to diminished travel, increased time for counselors to provide counseling (due to decreased travel), and increased job satisfaction due to telework. Around a third of respondents identified an increase in consumer engagement, parental involvement (for transition-age youth), and decreased physical facilities costs. Fewer respondents identified benefits such as a decrease in "no-shows," an increase in consumer movement through the VR process, improved relationships with vendors, increased consumer satisfaction, or increased business customer satisfaction. Notably, zero respondents endorsed "no positive outcomes or benefits," implying that all SVRAs responding to this survey perceived some benefit to the shifts in services they made in response to the pandemic.

What have been the positive outcomes or benefits of the changes you made to your agency or service delivery system as a result of the pandemic, if you made any changes? (Check all that apply.)	Count	%
Savings in time and cost due to decreased travel for staff	39	87
Increase in staff's job satisfaction due to benefits of telework	33	73
Increase in time for counselors to provide counseling/guidance due to decreased time spent traveling	30	67
Increase in consumer engagement in the VR process due to virtual options	16	36
Increase of parental involvement for transition-age youth as a result of virtual appointments	13	29
Decreased physical facilities costs	13	29
Decrease in no-show rate of consumer appointments	11	24
Other (Please describe.)	8	18
Increase in speed of consumer movement through the VR process due to online access	7	16
Improved relationship with vendors	7	16
Increase in consumer satisfaction with services	6	13
Increased satisfaction among our business customers with our services	4	9
There have been no positive outcomes or benefits.	0	0

**"Other" Responses:** In explaining changes captured by the "Other" category (selected by eight respondents), three respondents indicated they did not have data -- or had not completed collecting data -- to determine impacts. Two respondents reflected lower caseloads as a positive, one noted collaboration with partners in government (and increased awareness by those partners of VR services) as a benefit, and one found value in being able to shift caseloads around the state.

In addition, one respondent noted that they were in the process of determining impacts, but thus far, the evidence was suggesting consumers were split in their appreciation of remote services.

## C. NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF PANDEMIC

All of the survey respondents identified negative impacts from the pandemic. The most frequently cited negative impacts were decreased employment outcomes, decreased applications, and an inability to reach consumers. In addition, more than half of the respondents cited an inability to expend case service dollars and the 15% pre-employment transition services (pre-ETS) reserve as negative impacts. A high proportion of respondents (over a third) also indicated that a decrease in service providers, decrease in ability to effectively serve businesses, turnover, and decrease in quality of staff management/supervision by distance were negative impacts of the pandemic. Fewer respondents noted decreased quality of service delivery or jobsatisfaction.

What have been the negative impacts, if any, on your agency or service delivery system as a result of the pandemic? (Check all that apply.)	Count	%
Decrease in the number of employment outcomes	38	84
Decrease in applications	37	82
Inability to reach consumers that have no connectivity	36	80
Inability to expend case service dollars	30	67
Inability to expend the 15% pre-employment transition services reserve	29	64
Decrease in the number of service providers	20	44
Decrease in the quality of service delivery by providers	16	36
Decreased ability to effectively serve businesses	18	40
Turnover or loss of staff	18	40
Decrease in the quality of management or supervision by distance	14	31
Decrease in the quality of service delivery by VR staff	10	22
Decrease in job satisfaction of staff	7	16
Other (Please describe.)	5	11
There have been no negative impacts.	0	0

**"Other" Responses:** In explaining changes captured by the "Other" category (selected by five respondents), challenges identified included not having enough students to refer to businesses for work experiences, having turnover of provider staff (as distinguished from agency staff), taking longer to expend allotment of funds, and inability to fill vacant staff positions resulting in high caseloads for current staff. One respondent identified less opportunities for certain kinds of staff learning/interpersonal skills that may occur when meeting in-person.

## D. ANTICIPATED PERMANENT CHANGES

All of the respondents to the survey except one felt several changes to service delivery and their agency as a result of the pandemic would continue and become permanent. The most frequently cited include use of videoconferencing, having VR consumers complete the VR processes online, telework or remote work/service delivery, and electronic signatures. More than 40% of respondents indicate that they will increase and expand use of social media and their physical facilities will reduce in either size or number.

What do you anticipate will be the permanent changes, if any, to the way your agency functions or you deliver services as a result of the pandemic? (Check all that apply.)	Count	%
Use of videoconferencing to interact with consumers and partners will continue or expand.	44	98
Use of videoconferencing to interact with vendors and/or businesses will continue or expand.	44	98
The ability of consumers to engage in and complete phases of the VR process online will continue or expand.	40	89
We will continue to use and/or expand online training and service delivery.	40	89
Telework will continue as an option for staff.	37	82
Electronic signatures will continue.	37	82
We will make permanent changes to our policies and procedures that are inclusive of remote work and service delivery.	32	71
Our use of social media will increase or expand.	20	44
We will continue to reduce the size and/or number of our physical facilities and work remotely.	19	42
Other (Please describe.)	3	7
There will be no permanent changes in our agency or our service delivery.	1	2

**"Other" Responses:** In explaining changes captured by the "Other" category (selected by three respondents), one respondent noted that discussions were ongoing to determine which changes to keep, another identified remote work which could help when expanding services in a region (rather than requiring new space), and another identified opening categories of service as a change anticipated to be maintained. Four respondents did not clarify their selection of "Other."

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted VR agencies across the country. The shift to remote service delivery and telework has been both positive and negative for staff and consumers. However the impact is being felt, one conclusion is clear: The manner in which the public VR program is managed and delivers services has been permanently changed. A primary challenge for VR programs moving forward will be to increase access, engagement, and outcomes for consumers within an agency and service delivery system forever altered by the pandemic.