Enabling West Virginia’s youth with disabilities to successfully transition from school to work – Part 1

Life is a state of constant transition. We move from infancy to toddler, from childhood to puberty and from adolescence into adulthood. Each transitional phase brings its own set of obstacles. Throughout these transitions, we grow, we learn, we change and we adapt.

The transition from being a high school student to ultimately becoming a responsible, employed adult can be one of the most important and challenging changes we face.

As this transition approaches, students should begin pondering many questions. What do I want to be when I grow up? What skills do I need to perform the job I want? Will I be able to find a job in this field? Do I want to go to college? Am I ready to enter the workforce?

If a student has a disability, there may be additional questions to consider and additional barriers that interfere with a student’s successful transition from school to work.

Appropriate guidance, support and planning can help with this transition. And fortunately in West Virginia, there is a team of professionals in place to assist students with disabilities through this challenging process.

The Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) and West Virginia’s school systems are working hand-in-hand to reach those students who may benefit from vocational rehabilitation services before they graduate. Cooperative agreements with all 55 county school systems and the West Virginia Schools for the Deaf and the Blind lay the foundation for long-standing, productive relationships.

DRS transition counselors are specially trained vocational rehabilitation counselors that work with public high schools throughout West Virginia. These counselors work with special education teachers and coordinators, general education teachers, administrators and principals, guidance counselors, school nurses and school-to-work coordinators.

Transition counselors bring awareness of DRS services into the school systems, which results in referrals to DRS.

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Enabling West Virginia’s youth with disabilities...

Federal laws, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, detail specific responsibilities that public school systems have in identifying students with disabilities and ensuring access to a free, public education.

The IDEA establishes parameters for providing special education or specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability. Students eligible for special education work with the school system to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP), which formally establishes the resources and services that the student will receive.

Students with disabilities, who do not qualify for special education under IDEA, may have a Section 504 Plan with the school system that allows them to receive services, accommodations and modifications in order to access their education.

Federal legislation requires DRS to provide services designed to help people with disabilities address disability-related barriers that prevent them from working. Therefore, DRS typically begins formally working with high school students with disabilities in their junior year. Without the relationships with the school systems, it would be nearly impossible for DRS to identify and reach these students with disabilities.

DRS transition counselors develop relationships with the student and his or her parents, in most cases. It is very important that the counselor maintain contact with the student, but parents are encouraged to be as involved as they would like to be.

DRS Transition Counselor Karen Empfield explained that the parents’ involvement is typically beneficial. “A parent can provide information that the student may not feel comfortable disclosing initially,” said Empfield. “It is also helpful for the student to know that his or her parents support the student’s decision to participate in services from DRS.”

Empfield shares an office at Parkersburg South High School with Community Integration Work Program Community Coordinator Treva Province and she also works with Williamstown High School students. Province coordinates the school-to-work program for special education students in Wood County.

Province works with local businesses to get them to provide opportunities for her students to learn about the world of work. She places students at jobsites where they learn about things that a person will deal with in a work situation, including specific job expectations, work environments and conditions, soft skills required on the jobsite and how to get along with people you don’t necessarily enjoy being around.

Province also refers the majority of her students to Empfield for services through DRS. She’s a huge advocate, encouraging her students to apply for vocational rehabilitation assistance. Through her program, students get to look at the world of work, but DRS provides the necessary vocational rehabilitation services to prepare them for jobs.

Parkersburg South High School Assistant Principal Chuck Crookshanks believes that having a DRS transition counselor located in his school gets more people involved in the process and has increased awareness of options for transitioning students with
disabilities. According to Crookshanks, it’s a big convenience for parents who are attending their child’s IEP meeting to be able to meet with Empfield afterward to learn more about how DRS may be able to help prepare their teen for employment.

Williamstown High School Assistant Principal Randy Edge is also a huge advocate for the strong working relationship between DRS and his school. While Empfield, the DRS transition counselor, is not located in his school, he encourages parents and students to get involved with the program to help them make the transition from school to work.

According to Edge, special education receives a lot of negative feedback. However, Edge believes “this is a positive that more people need to know about. This program does amazing things for our students.”

This is a two-part story. Part 2 will be featured in the next edition of the VocRehab Perspective.
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DRS vocational rehabilitation counselor carried an average caseload of 119 clients.

Maureen McGuire-Kuletz, co-director of The George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education, discussed six key planning questions counselors should address to help manage their caseloads:

1. What has to be done?
2. When should it be done?
3. Who should do it?
4. Where should it be done?
5. What priority should it have?
6. How much time will it require?

Ratcliffe plans on incorporating this material into an orientation for new rehabilitation counselors she hires.

One of the specialized training sessions focused on treatment for individuals with hearing loss. Dr. Samuel Trychin, a licensed psychologist, specializes in treatment for individuals who have hearing loss and their communication partners. He explained that hearing loss can have an enormous effect on one’s life. For adults, it can interfere with the ability to obtain training or an education, as well as the ability to find a job or maintain current employment.

DRS’ rehabilitation counselors for the deaf and hard of hearing learned a variety of communication tactics and strategies to use with their clients. Rehabilitation Program Specialist for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Rachel Gill was grateful for the “opportunity to spend time with nationally recognized leaders in the field of deafness and hearing loss and to share in their wealth of knowledge.”

The road to driver rehabilitation success

The inability to drive can be a significant obstacle on the road to employment.

Imagine yourself as a young adult male living and working in rural West Virginia. Injuries sustained after falling from a tree stand have left you with paraplegia. Wheelchair accessible public transportation in your small town does not exist. How are you going to get to work?

The Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) offers specialized driver rehabilitation services for people with disabilities to help them bypass driving-related barriers so they can ultimately go to work or keep their current job.

DRS employs two certified driver rehabilitation specialists. They have obtained additional certification through the Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists, which is a nonprofit educational and professional organization dedicated to promoting safe, independent mobility for people with disabilities and people who are aging. The additional certification provides training on specific disabilities, adaptive equipment, recovery protocols and retraining and how these factors affect driving.

DRS also has three certified driver instructors who are working toward driver rehabilitation specialist certification. Certified driver rehabilitation specialists provide and directly supervise certified driver instructors in the provision of driver evaluations, vehicle modification evaluations and personal transport evaluations. Driver training services can be provided by both the specialists and instructors.

DRS driver rehabilitation professionals serve people with all types of disabilities in all age ranges. Those disabilities can include learning disabilities; physical disabilities, such as paraplegia, quadriplegia, amputations and progressive
and static neuromuscular disease; traumatic brain injury; stroke; general physical debilitation; dementia and more. In one year, DRS certified driver rehabilitation specialists served people with 46 different disabilities.

Services are individualized to meet the needs of each client. We can look at Joe, the young adult male mentioned earlier, as an example.

Joe met with a certified driver rehabilitation specialist for an initial driving evaluation, which is used to determine the most appropriate course of action for a client relative to the driving task. The driving evaluation may yield a recommendation to continue to operate a motor vehicle, a recommendation for driver education training as a new driver or retraining of an existing driver following an acquired disability or a recommendation to not operate a motor vehicle.

Joe qualified for retraining following his newly acquired disability, but he needed adaptive equipment to be a successful driver. Using vehicles and adaptive equipment owned by DRS, Joe also received a vehicle modification evaluation to determine what vehicle modifications and adaptive equipment would work best for him.

According to Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist Phil Lauerman, “Physical disabilities can be corrected with adaptive equipment in the majority of cases.”

Adaptive equipment for a vehicle can range from very low-tech steering aids, such as a spinner knob to help the driver more easily maneuver the steering wheel or hand controls to operate the accelerator and brake pedals of a vehicle. More high-tech solutions can include electronic controls to operate turn signals, windshield wipers, headlights and the parking brake.

Vehicle modifications allow a person the ability to enter and exit a vehicle while seated in a wheelchair and can include lowering the floor of a vehicle, raising the roof or installing a lift or ramp.

For Lauerman, the most rewarding part of his job is finding the right solution for a person with a physical disability.

In Joe’s case, he preferred driving a pickup truck. Modifications and adaptive equipment for pickups have become more common. After the evaluation, the certified driver rehabilitation specialist prescribed the necessary modifications and adaptive equipment that best suited Joe’s needs for driving.

Due to the nature of his disability, Joe needed hand controls to work the gas and brake, an assistive steering orthotic device and a lift installed in the bed of his truck that would automatically hoist his wheelchair into the truck bed.

Because Joe was a DRS client, his vocational rehabilitation counselor obtained bids on the prescribed adaptive equipment and DRS paid for the modifications to Joe's truck.

Joe received driver training that specifically taught him how to drive using the adaptive equipment. Joe was able to return to work and now drives himself to and from his jobsite.

The majority of people served by DRS driver rehabilitation professionals are DRS clients. However, services are provided to some individuals referred by doctors or entities such as Workers’ Compensation on a fee-for-service basis.

Ultimately, the number one priority of all DRS driver rehabilitation professionals is safety on the roadways. No matter what disability a person has, Lauerman’s philosophy is that if he is going to release a person to operate a motor vehicle, then he should feel comfortable riding in the backseat of the vehicle they are driving.

Mark your calendar!
**2014 West Virginia Diversifying Perspectives Art Contest Exhibition Opening and Reception**
*September 17 at 2 p.m., West Virginia Culture Center*
‘Double trouble’ training opens eyes to deaf-blind disability

If you were to hear the term deaf-blind, you might automatically think of Helen Keller who became an acclaimed writer, educator and advocate despite losing her eyesight and her hearing after an illness in 1882 when she was just 18 months old.

Many have seen the 1962 award-winning movie, The Miracle Worker, which was based on Keller’s autobiography, The Story of My Life. The movie shows the dramatic struggle between Keller and her teacher, Anne Sullivan, who fought to help Keller connect objects with letters Sullivan was spelling into her hands. The breakthrough occurred during an intense scene where Sullivan flushes cold water over Keller’s hand as she spelled out the word water in her other hand. Keller had finally made the connection and enthusiastically demanded to know the names of other objects surrounding her.

You may have watched this movie and considered Keller’s disabilities and situation to be uncommon. However, the term deaf-blind means the coexistence of a significant vision and hearing loss which impacts an individual’s ability to function in areas of daily life including, but not limited to, communication, education, employment and ability to access basic community resources.

The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults is a national rehabilitation program established by Congress in 1967 to serve youth and adults who are deaf-blind. According to the Center’s website, researchers at Mississippi State University estimate that there are more than 1 million adults with combined vision and hearing loss in the United States, with the majority experiencing such disabilities due to aging.

The Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) recently sponsored the training, “Vision and Hearing Loss – Double Trouble,” which was conducted by two trainers from the Helen Keller National Center.

DRS employs many rehabilitation professionals, who specialize in either providing services to individuals who are blind or visually impaired or to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. This training opportunity brought 36 of these rehabilitation professionals from across the state together to learn more about the “double trouble” of having combined vision and hearing loss.

The training was held March 24-26 in Nitro and focused on all aspects of hearing and vision loss.

Cynthia Ingraham and Paige Berry, trainers from the Helen Keller National Center, discussed how people with combined hearing and vision loss often face problems with communication, mobility, frustration, boredom, isolation and loneliness.

Fortunately, a lot has changed since 1882. With advanced technology and increased awareness and education, there are many options and resources to help individuals who are deaf-blind.

The trainers discussed and demonstrated several assistive technology devices that can dramatically improve someone’s life by increasing their ability to communicate and thrive independently. They reviewed the services available for people who are deaf-blind from the Helen Keller National Center. They also offered ideas on other simple solutions that may improve an individual’s daily living circumstances, including labeling techniques for the home that can increase an individual’s ability to more easily identify food products, clothing, appliances and much more.

The training received positive feedback from all those who attended, with many indicating that it was the best training in which they’ve ever participated. “Both of the presenters were so energetic and they have such a passion for the jobs they do and the individuals they serve,” said DRS Blind Services Program Supervisor Kevin Maynus. “This energy was felt and passed on to everyone who attended the training.”
Essay contest promotes awareness of disability history

Martin Luther King Jr., civil rights champion, proclaimed, “Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle.”

The 2013 Disability History Essay Contest provided West Virginia high school seniors with the opportunity to showcase their knowledge of the history of the disability rights movement and the struggles that prompted greater equality for people with disabilities. The essay topic was: “How the disability rights movement has shaped our world.”

The contest was a collaborative effort of the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services, Statewide Independent Living Council, and State Rehabilitation Council, with cooperation from the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts.

Entries were judged by a panel based upon the individual’s knowledge and writing skills. The 2013 winners are:

**State winner**
Alexandria Rundle – East Fairmont High School

**First place winners**
Miriam Cook – Nicholas County High School
Lakyn Dearnell – Tolsia High School
Jenna Mason – Oak Glen High School
Devena Smith – Washington High School
Mandee Studivon – Ripley High School

**Second place winners**
Kelsey Acree – Nicholas County High School
Daniel Benson – Washington High School
Kensey Bergdorf – Ripley High School
Jacob Eastman – Huntington High School
Shelby Sands – Magnolia High School

The following are excerpts from three of the winning entries:

**Alexandria Rundle – East Fairmont High School**
Being an individual with a significant disability at an early age, my first computation was that only the small percentage of people with a disability had any knowledge or even cared about the disability movement… Without the disability rights movement, thousands of individuals, including myself, would not have had the opportunity to live the lives we have today. The movement brought a sense of importance and respect, as well as independence and purpose to our lives. The movement has transformed our lives and our society. It is our time, my time, to ensure the purpose continues.

**Jenna Mason – Oak Glen High School**
There are 54 million Americans with disabilities. Some disabilities, like Down’s syndrome, show up at birth while others, like muscular dystrophy, are progressive and show up later in life. Some are sporadic, like epilepsy, and others are both sporadic and progressive like multiple sclerosis. Some, like my Uncle Jerry’s, are unexpected.

At one time, my Uncle Jerry would have been hidden away. People would have regarded him with pity and some degree of disgust. He would have lived his life as a second class citizen, unable to speak for or take care of himself. However, because of the disability rights movement and to the ADA, my Uncle Jerry has a good job, drives his own van, owns his own house, and was able to complete his master’s degree in occupational safety. He still enjoys hunting and fishing and is a productive member of society. But above all else, he is my hero.

**Miriam Cook – Nicholas County High School**
When he [her cousin with a disability] was born in the 1990s, the work of the Disability Rights Movement had been paving a path more than 30 years before to secure equal opportunities and equal rights for him. Medical professionals immediately networked him and his parents to numerous support groups, early intervention programs, state-of-the-art physical therapy clinics and health care providers. Although the diagnosis of “disability” was difficult at first, my Cousin’s life held numerous options and a more positive outlook. Rather than being ostracized and placed in an institutional setting, his public school inclusion classes built his self-worth. Because of the continuing progression of equal rights legislation in the Disabilities Rights Movement, adaptive technologies, accommodations to his physical environment and positive changes in people’s attitudes afforded my Cousin the pleasure of being accepted and welcomed as a trainer on the high school football team. Before his graduation, focused meetings were held so my Cousin and his parents would be linked to vocational training programs, assisted living housing and funded transportation providers. The Movement has enabled a lifetime of equal opportunities where all persons of disabilities, like my Cousin, can be active and productive participants in their communities.
Did you know?

People first language focuses on the person, rather than defining a person by his or her disability. People first language emphasizes the individuality and equality of people with disabilities and it conveys respect. Below are examples of positive uses of people first language.

**Affirmative phrase:** person with a disability
**Negative phrase:** the disabled; handicapped

**Affirmative phrase:** person with an intellectual, cognitive or developmental disability
**Negative phrase:** retarded

**Affirmative phrase:** person who is blind
**Negative phrase:** the blind

**Affirmative phrase:** person with epilepsy
**Negative phrase:** epileptic

**Affirmative phrase:** person who uses a wheelchair
**Negative phrase:** confined to a wheelchair