

“Using Consumer Input to Guide Strategic Program Planning and Development”
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Abstract This paper describes how one state agency has designed and structured a proven approach to systematically conduct an annual assessment of consumer satisfaction with the outcomes of their VR program. Now entering its fifth year, the annual Alabama Deaf Consumer Outcome Satisfaction Study has surveyed all 2,521 Deaf and hard of hearing consumers closed in Status 26 and is utilizing the collective feedback from 1,543 respondents (61%) and stakeholder forums held across the state every three years to inform and guide development of an improved statewide VR service delivery program.

Annual Survey of Deaf Consumer Outcome Satisfaction

For Vocational Rehabilitation to effectively serve consumers who are Deaf, Deaf-Blind, Hard of Hearing or Late-Deafened requires unique and specialized services and staff. Consumer input and strategic planning are vital to producing effective service outcomes. The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (ADRS) conducts a programmatic series of stakeholder forums in five key cities across the state every three years in order to obtain consumer input and feedback regarding their satisfaction with VR services.

Beginning in 2007, ADRS made a commitment to conduct an annual survey of 100% of all consumers with hearing losses who were closed in Status 26. These combined approaches to assessing consumer satisfaction with their VR outcomes has been used to analyze feedback from completed interviews with 1,543 (representing 61% of the total cohort of 2,521) consumers whose cases were closed over the four-year period (N=626 in FY2007; N=754 in FY2008, N=628 in FY2009 & N=531 in FY2010) to guide and shape constructive changes in service delivery practices. This proven process can be replicated and used by other state agencies to create a “grassroots” planning and development process leading to better outcomes for both the agency and the consumer.

Methodology of the ADRS Consumer Outcome Satisfaction Study

The Annual ADRS Consumer Satisfaction Survey collects information about demographic characteristics of consumer respondents; Consumer ratings of satisfaction with their Counselor; Consumer satisfaction with rehabilitation services received; Consumer employment and earnings outcomes; Consumer feelings about life and future prospects after VR; Consumer reports of major benefits they received; and Consumer suggestions for VR program improvements.

Five strategies are employed to collect outcome satisfaction data from consumers. These include mailed questionnaires, online questionnaires; telephone interviews; Video Phone (VP) interviews using ASL; and face-to-face interviews using ASL.

The consumer outcome satisfaction findings provides the State VR program with an evidence-based database from which to design and conduct a comprehensive approach to statewide strategic planning. It helps program staff serving deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing and late-deafened individuals address and answer the strategic questions of:

Where are we?

Where do we want to be?

How do we get there?

How can we measure consumer outcome satisfaction?

How can we use consumer input to guide strategic planning?

Satisfaction with Counselor and VR Team: FY 2007 - 2010

Ratings by 1,543 consumers' of their satisfaction with ADRS staff during four-year period of FY 2007 - 2010 consistently generated highly satisfied ratings with only nominal 1-3 percent variation in over all consumer ratings in eight of ten areas. Consumer ratings show high levels of satisfaction with quality of the counseling relationship and RCDs' knowledge, skills and abilities in area of hearing loss and deafness. We found that 90% or more of respondents were satisfied or highly satisfied on 8 of 10 statements. The highest level of Satisfaction (7 items) included: VR staff was easy to work with (92%); VR staff respected me (94%); VR staff Knew how to work w/Deaf & hard of hearing (90%); VR staff had a positive attitude toward me (92%); VR staff asked me about my needs (94%); VR staff asked about my work interests and needs (93%) and VR staff encouraged me and supported me (92%).

The two least satisfying ratings over the three-year period were items such as: Staff did everything they could to help me keep or find a job (80%) and Staff quickly returned my phone calls (TDD, VP, E-mail, or IM) (82%).

Consumer Satisfaction with the VR Services they received in FY 2007 - 2010

Ratings of 1,543 consumers' satisfaction with the VR services they received over the four-year period reflect year-to-year fluctuations in ratings of satisfaction they gave to the ten primary VR service areas rated: In 2007, only one service area was rated as satisfactory by 90% or more of respondents (VR guidance & counseling); In 2008, 2009 and 2010 by way of contrast, 90% or more of the consumers rated 7 of 10 VR services as satisfactory (e.g., assessment & testing, vocational rehabilitation guidance & counseling, job coaching & OJT, job readiness training, training on use of hearing aids or other ALDS, work accommodations or assistive technology, and other services as satisfactory those three years.

Lowest percent of consumer satisfaction reported for all four years was for "Job Search Assistance" and "College, Technical or University Training."

Overall Satisfaction with Program Outcomes

Over 95 percent indicated they were "Satisfied or Completely Satisfied" overall with their VR program and would recommend the VR program to their family and friends. Approximately 90 percent indicated that VR helped them find or keep their current job and 74 percent reported they now have a better (or more secure) job than before their VR program. Overall, 86 percent indicated they felt better about their future than they did before their VR program and 87 percent reported feeling more independent because of their VR program.

How did ADRS help you the most?

Combining consumer responses across the four-year period we found that consumer respondents identified 358 important benefits of how and in what ways ADRS most helped them. Most of the major benefits can be grouped into ten different categories which are listed below.

- **EQUIPMENT: 708** cited the equipment they received such as hearing aids, alarms and work tools as a major benefit they received from ADRS.

- **FINANCIAL: 223** cited importance of financial assistance for purchase of hearing aids, college tuition, or equipment they otherwise could not have afforded. **INCREASED INDEPENDENCE: 218** cited benefits of better hearing and communication at work, social life and home via personal hearing aids enhanced feelings of independence.
- **IMPROVED FEELINGS ABOUT SELF: 150** felt much more confident, with greater self-esteem & feeling of dignity regarding themselves & improved life prospects.
- **PLACEMENT, JOB COACHING, ON-JOB SUPPORTS: 135** workers singled out extra support from the job coaches and DSS teams in obtaining & retaining their job.
- **COUNSELING & SUPPORT FROM RCD: 158** cited benefit of caring, compassionate counseling support & encouragement from their counselors and DSS teams as among the most important benefit they received from their VR program.
- **ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY: 115** pointed to assistive technologies & devices or services as a key benefit.
- **EMPLOYMENT: 137** pointed to help in obtaining or retaining their job as a major benefit.
- **COLLEGE OR OTHER TRAINING: 96** reported college, career, or on-the-job training as major benefit.
- **DID NOT RECEIVE BENEFITS: 36** did not think they received the quality & kind of help needed. Many in this group were looking for VR help to obtain better paying jobs with benefits and career track opportunities.

Program Improvement Recommendations

- A combination of 752 ADRS consumers provided 677 recommendations for ways and means that ADRS might improve VR service delivery to consumers with hearing loss. Major suggestions could be broadly grouped into 9 different categories
- **IMPROVE SPECIFIC SERVICES: 52** consumers cited need to improve intake and eligibility determination, assessment & fitting of equipment, school to work transition, transportation to & from work and post-closure assistance and quicker help for displaced workers.
- **EMPLOYMENT OR JOB-RELATED: 108** consumers suggested expanding ADRS' employment or job-related program to include an emphasis on development of more better-paying entry level career track jobs with growth potential and longer follow-up.
- **RCD ACCESS: 75** consumers believe RCDs have too many on their caseloads or are overworked and suggested that ADRS should consider hiring additional RCDs in order to provide more timely and comprehensive services in the various VR offices.
- **MORE TIMELY SERVICE: 73** suggested that the VR staff need to make more timely responses to consumer contacts & also be timelier in procuring & providing services & equipment.
- **FUNDING LEVELS: 54** respondents recommended ADRS advocate for more federal/state VR funds so that consumers are not denied needed equipment and services because of funding.
- **NEED FOR MORE DSS STAFF: 59** pointed to shortage of key direct-service support staff such as job coaches, job developers and interpreters. ADRS is encouraged to hire more of these key staff in order to expand/improve job development and placement services and outcome.
- **MORE EFFECTIVE COUNSELING: 21** asked that VR counselors be more attentive to and responsive to consumers' needs during each step of the VR process. RCDs are not as available and accessible as needed and there are too many long delays and long gaps in service between steps in the process.

- **DEVELOP BETTER QUALITY IN HEARING AIDS & SERVICES:** 35 consumers suggested that VR needs to explore ways and means that contracts and purchases from hearing aid vendors could stipulate that vendors provide extended warranties for service, repairs and consultation.
- **MORE PUBLICITY FOR VR PROGRAM:** 38 people believe that too many consumers with a hearing loss are NOT aware of ADRS' outstanding rehabilitation services program; they suggest that more and better information about the program should be made available to the public so that other disabled individuals can learn about and obtain the rehabilitation services they need.

Programmatic Recommendations made by Consumer Respondents

1. Use more and better statewide public spot announcements and related marketing strategies to let more people with disabilities and their families know what services ADRS offers and increase public awareness of services and locations.
2. Employ sufficient RCD and DSS staff to assure that satellite offices are provided a more frequent and consistent schedule of coverage to reduce long waiting periods.
3. Ensure that Deaf and hard of hearing caseloads do not become so large that VR staff do not have sufficient time for timely and productive interaction with consumers to ensure that counseling and guidance and related VR services are provided.
4. Consider expanding the DSS teams by adding more interpreters and job coaches to assist more consumers make job applications, interview for and obtain jobs and to have ongoing follow along workplace assistance during their first weeks and months on job.
5. Schedule regular follow-up contacts for an extended period (i.e., 6-12 months) following the 90-day closure date to ensure that consumers maintain their new employment and living situations.
6. Generate a wider, more comprehensive system of job development and career tracks so that consumers have a more appropriate range of jobs and career opportunities to consider beyond entry level jobs that offer neither benefits nor career track possibilities.
7. Provide information, materials and training for consumers and their employers and coworkers that describes cost-effective ways and means to better accommodate workers with hearing loss in the workplace.
8. Encourage and advocate for vendors of hearing aids and assistive listening devices to provide better standard of care and quality assurance backed by 12-month warranties covering equipment, testing, fitting, training and follow along services for VR consumers fitted with hearing aids & ALDS.
9. Improve the infrastructure of the regional VR offices by: allocating more time and effort for office support staff to deal with daily telephone, mail and related contacts by consumers with communication problems, and by emphasizing use of regional job development and placement teams to develop better array of job and career options available for employment of consumers served by ADRS.