

STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE RURAL VR SERVICE DELIVERY

VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

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>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Good morning and thank you for joining the webinar Strategies for Effective Rural VR Service Delivery. So before I get started I want to thank the E3 Project for inviting me to present about barriers and strategies related to rural VR service delivery. I'm excited to be here.

I'd like to introduce myself. My name is Catherine Ipsen and I've worked at the University of Montana Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities the last 25 years. For the bulk of this time I've done employment related research as part of the Research and Training Center on Disability in Rural Communities or the RTC Rural. I must at this point say that RTC Rural and most of the projects that I've been involved in have been funded by the National Institute on Disability Independent Living and Rehab Research or NIDILR.

So although I've worked in various domains including health and independent living the bulk of my research has focused on employment within the Voc Rehab system. I plan to share some of the VR focused research that I've engaged in over the last 15 years in my presentation today.

This first slide shows a map of the U.S. and in dark green are the rural or noncore counties. And I just wanted to start off showing this just to show you how vast an area that we're talking about particularly in states like Montana, North and South Dakota and so forth down kind of the center of the U.S. there's just this great vast amount of rural areas where service delivery looks different in the VR system just based on these distances.

I also wanted to share some basic demographics about rural places before we got started. So data on the charts on this slide come from the American Community Survey. The micro metro and noncore counties are classified using the Office of Management and Budgeting classifications where metro counties include at least one urban core of 50,000 or more people, micro counties include an urban core of 10,000 to 50,000 people and then noncore counties where this is the focus of our research are counties with an urban core population of less than 10,000 people so there's just not very many services available. They can be characterized by pretty isolated places in certain circumstances.

So what these two charts show, the first shows that the disability rate increases from metro to micro to noncore counties. We've done quite a bit of research on disability in rural places and we know

that the disability rate is higher across all disability types and across all ages. So it's pretty uniform in terms of having a higher rate. It's not just associated with an aging population, etc.

The poverty rate is also higher in noncore counties particularly for people with disabilities. Actually, as this chart shows, 25% of people with disabilities are living at or below the poverty rate. So undoubtedly this group represents a particular need for effective employment programming and much of my resource has really focused on strategies to do this.

So I'm going to set the stage in terms of some of the research that we have engaged in just to learn more about the rural conditions of VR service delivery. So we've done quite a few projects. One is focused on the consumer experience going through the Voc Rehab Program and we call it the premature exit study. It included informant interviews who were consumers who exited the VR Program early.

We did a quantitative perspective longitudinally study. That's a lot of words for simply saying we tracked people coming into the VR Program and followed them along for 18 months. We've done interviews with a random sample of those exits who left for both good and negative reasons. We've done a state Data Project which really focused on RSA911 case records as well as VR informant interviews to learn how services were delivered in rural communities. We've done another small study really focused on rural business development strategies.

So using all of this information we've learned some things about what is driving some of the barriers to services in rural areas. So first I'm going to talk a little bit about the premature exit study. We conducted this study because nearly half of all eligible VR consumers drop out of the program before completing services. Looking at some of the RSA911 data, VR spends approximately 365 million annually to serve these clients who end up dropping out and this is direct costs as opposed to program costs which are kind of captured and hard to quantify on a case basis so that number is likely well below what it actually costs to serve people who drop out.

And we also know from some other research conducted by the research triangle that premature exits are associated with worse employment and economic outcomes. So as I described briefly before in the last slide, we wanted to track consumers as they entered the VR Program and to really quantify and learn about what their experiences were and the things that led to them dropping out of the program or leaving with a successful outcome.

So we collected data over time and we found that almost half of all VR respondents felt that progression through the VR Program was too slow so pacing was a really important aspect to successful case progress. We also found that attachment to the VR Program was associated with the number of client counselor contacts both in person and via phone or email.

I'm going to go to the next slide now and talk about some of the reasons that people told us they had exited the program. So approximately a third said that they left because they were satisfied with the services they received. They got a job. They received the services they desired. They felt that they were finished with the program. Another 35% left for very distinct dissatisfied reasons. They said they weren't getting the services they wanted, that VR stopped contacting them, the process was taking too long or they were having problems with their counselor.

Another third have issues that may or may not be associated with VR programming and these included things like health issues that come up, discouragement with job opportunities in the community, transportation issues and family issues. They didn't want to risk losing benefits. Incarceration was something that impacted some folks and then unsure about their status in the VR Program so there were some aspects where people were confused about whether they were still in the program or not.

These data, as you see on the next slide, are really compounded by the things that we heard from VR informants in terms of their experiences with rural service delivery issues. So one of the things that we learned that was reinforced in the RSA911 data was that it took more time to get to an individualized plan of employment and placement in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. And we know that faster delivery leads to better attachment to the VR Program and so this time to IPE is a barrier for rural people. We also learned that there was less frequent client counselor contact, less access to specialists, fewer vendors and more limited educational and training opportunities.

So I want to talk a little bit about the less frequent client counselor contact. What happens in rural areas is a lot of agencies operate on an itinerant counseling model in rural areas where counselors travel through a specific location on a schedule but it can be a schedule that is pretty spaced out over time. If a counselor is passing through a town and a client doesn't happen to be available on that particular day then they might have to forego a meeting until the next time the counselor is coming through so those kinds of schedules can put delays in the counseling process.

Also access to specialists and vendors was an issue that I want to expand on a little bit more. Many VR Programs as most of the people on the call probably know utilize specialists and vendors to deliver job development services and those sorts of things. On an ongoing basis in urban areas they help -- these people, these vendors and specialists, help the program move forward and services that counselors may not be available or trained to deliver. So this access issue is another delay in the counseling or VR process.

Rural employment issues were another thing that was highlighted in the interviews that while urban areas you can establish a relationship with the business and then place multiple people, it

was much harder to establish these kind of business networks in rural areas. Personal communication was very important if the itinerant counselors weren't in the community or known in the community it was hard to develop these kinds of relationships. Vendors did not serve the rural community so there was no one with the community presence that seemed to be needed to establish business connections.

Harder to access appropriate training for the rural client. They may not have appropriate training in their location, would need to travel to get that training and that was an added barrier. Fewer job opportunities so it was harder to accommodate a client choice. And then another thing that was brought up in some of these interviews was closed doors due to reputation or family history. In rural areas once you burn a bridge it's hard to rebuild it whereas in an urban area you can kind of walk away from one business and walk into another one so that was an issue, a challenge that was highlighted for sure.

So having set the stage of some of the rural barriers, I want to move on to some of our work to develop strategies to improve rural service delivery. For the presentation today, I'm going to talk about three strategies. The first is to increase the use of telecommunications both for a counselor client communication but also to expand economic opportunity. We're going to also look at expanding rural capacity by looking at strategies to improve vendor availability in rural communities and then also expanded economic opportunity in terms of rural business development strategies and also to utilize self-employment more fully as an economic or work outcome.

So first we're going to turn to telecom and social media. We found that alternate methods of communication such as email, text and video really do help keep people engaged in services even if they aren't participating in face to face communication. We also know that alternative methods of job exploration are important and that we have learned that counselors are not very comfortable with these such as using social media to market yourself or to use social media as a strategy for finding employment. And the barriers that counselors have told us about are based on knowledge and capacity, ethics concerns in terms of how to use different technologies appropriately without violating counseling ethical guidelines and lack of telecommunications use policies at the VR Agency.

So we have developed some strategies to help with this including the telecom toolbox and social media policies. I'm going to just give you a tour of these as a way that you might utilize some of these resources in your own agencies.

So first we're going to look at the telecom toolbox and the toolbox has four major sections that can be used to expand services and overcome counselor and consumer reluctance and lack of knowledge using online resources. So the telecom toolbox is really broken into several sections including communication, online career development, ethics and then there's also a blog that has a variety

of articles that focus on different online job development strategies and communication strategies.

So in the communication area we really go over the use of email, text, video conferencing and instant messaging in the context of counseling services and how a counselor might set up those relationships to talk to the consumer about how often they check email, how the use of those different strategies will unfold in the VR process to really make sure that it's a good strategy for the consumer and the counselor.

In terms of the online career development tab we spend a lot of time talking about managing your online presence so the consumer may have things that they've shared online that need to be improved or some content that may need to be replaced or removed so we talk about some of those strategies as well as active job search online. And while this isn't entirely a rural strategy, there's a lot of opportunity for online job search and it really is how job search is happening for people with and without disabilities all across the U.S.

We found with some of our baseline research that counselors were a little bit behind the game in terms of using this strategy with their counselors and we really wanted to make sure that they had the tools to do that effectively.

Another aspect of the telecom toolbox is the ethics section. So the ethics section covers things like using distance communication, pardon me, using distance communication, using social media, informed consent processes so that a counselor if they are worried about using telecommunications has those options available to them.

And then more recently we've really used blogs as a way to keep up with the changing pace of telecommunications. That is one of the difficulties with exploring this kind of research or conducting this kind of research is that it's a moving target and there's always new platforms, new strategies and new ways of doing business online that we have to continually be thinking about.

If you are interested in checking out the telecom toolbox the address is www.telecomtoolbox.org and it is included at the end of these slides in some of our references so if you're interested I welcome you to check it out.

Okay I'm going to now turn to social media policy elements. We did a study looking at various VR policies related to social media if they had any and we found very different elements in each policy but drawing on the literature we identified six aspects that we felt were important to be included in a comprehensive social media policy. And these include including the policy scope so some guidelines about use at both the agency and counselor level. Consumer awareness, so how do you inform clients about risks and benefits of using social media including risk to their own confidentiality, and this was usually related to how consumers engaged on a VR social media account,

not necessarily an account where they've friended a counselor.

Acceptable use policies so agency expectations in terms of how social media is used, how counselors use it to interact with clients. Monitoring procedures and then disciplinary actions if people are using social media inappropriately. An example might be an agency says not to friend a client and a counselor does and what happens they may lose their social media privileges at the VR Agency.

Account management, how the agency and employees create and maintain and close different social media accounts. Confidentiality and this was a big one but how the agency and counselor will minimize risk to confidentiality and then what they will do if a confidentiality breach happens and what are the steps in place to make sure to minimize that issue.

Finally our ethical guidelines so what does the agency consider as appropriate postings and then in terms of professionalism steps to do no harm so what are the guidelines that the agency really aspires to share broadly. So interestingly we coded 22 policies and one guideline and we found that only two policies actually included all six policy elements in any kind of comprehensive way and only one policy acknowledged the role of social media as a tool for consumer job search. So most of the agency policies are related to how the agency might use the social media account to maybe post about an upcoming job fair or those sorts of things and really does not address social media to help a consumer really capitalize on that opportunity in terms of showcasing their skills and applying for jobs.

So we were a little bit surprised at the lack of use, and it really confirmed why counselors may not be using social media effectively in consumer job search activities.

I'm going to shift gears now and we're going to really focus in on some research that is -- some recent work that I've done in terms of vendor availability in rural communities.

So we know that most VR agencies utilize vendors to deliver job development services, and when we were interviewing agencies about vendor availability, we found that approximately 50% of agencies had areas in their state that were unserved, and I might add that we interviewed almost half of the VR agencies across the U.S., so this really represents a good number of agencies and vendor availability for them.

So what we found is that when vendors were not available in a particular area, say a rural community, VR counselors were typically asked to provide those services or clients really didn't receive services, there weren't services available. This introduced delays in services sometimes due to itinerant schedules and reduced opportunities for community connections where a vendor often spends time in communities to develop relationships with business owners, et cetera. So lack of vendor availability was really identified as an issue.

When we interviewed agencies about how they paid vendors, we learned that approximately 80% of agencies use a model called

"Results-based Funding," and results-based funding is something where vendors receive a set fee for meeting a certain milestone, let's say it's job placement or 30 days on the job. Results-based funding really was a model that came to attention in the early 2000s, and it was a way to get to outcomes more quickly. VR agencies were feeling like consumers were languishing in services, vendors were continuing to bill for hours without any kind of foreseeable progress in the case, and so results-based funding really was meant to incentivize getting people on the job more quickly, and based on our research in terms of pace of delivery services, this isn't a bad thing. It -- and what we do find is that it does result in higher rates of competitive employment and lower overall costs as vendors are incentivized to move cases forward.

One thing about results-based funding, however, is that it shifts financial risk from the agency to the vendor, that the agency is only paying for results and the vendor is only getting paid for results, and so it essentially -- a vendor can make a lot of money if they do their job very well and get people placed quickly, and they'll make not as much money if they aren't as effective in meeting those benchmarks.

The payments are based on average costs, and there's a mechanism where agencies will figure out how much on average it costs to get a person to employment, and they will set their rates based on that average cost; whereas, people that take longer, the vendor will get paid a lower rate, and people that are easier to place, the vendor will receive a higher rate, and then overall, in general, the idea is that vendors will get paid a fair amount on their caseload or their total caseload.

One problem with results-based funding is that it can undermine rural vendor availability, and we found this to be true, that states that utilize results-based funding had very significant areas that vendors weren't available in rural communities, and the problem relates to the case costs in rural areas are generally higher. It takes time and money to travel to rural places. There's fewer job opportunities, so getting a client to placement might take longer. There's no economies of scale, and by this I mean in a rural -- or in an urban area, I might have a relationship with Walmart or Microsoft or some other big company where I can place multiple people and tonight have to do the groundwork over and over again for every single client.

In rural areas, it's more one business/one person, and so you're continually having to spend time and energy developing those relationships, and it can be harder to develop those relationships. There's more time on the ground, more personal context, more one person/one relationship/one job.

Another risk in terms of results-based funding in rural areas is a lack of referrals or lack of steady referrals, so in order to overcome some of the risk of results-based funding, you have to have a certain number of clients moving through all the time so that if you get, say, a bad patch where it's really hard to place a handful

of clients, you're still having income coming in based on other clients that are easier to place, and, unfortunately, in rural areas, when there aren't as many clients or a limited number of people coming in the door, it can make it pretty hard for vendors to sustain an area and make it cost-effective for themselves.

Based on some of the research that we did about vendor scarcity in rural areas, we developed a number of strategies to improve the likelihood that vendors will stay in a rural area or move to serve a rural area. First is to reduce the financial risk that a vendor experiences, so this might include providing incentives for serving rural locations such as higher rates for each milestone or maybe providing travel support. There is some strategies that overlap different kinds of funding strategies, so you might pay hourly services and then get some kind of bonus for getting to placement more quickly, so some shared funding models or providing a guaranteed level of referrals or monthly fixed payments. So first and foremost is strategies to reduce the financial risk to serving rural areas.

Another strategy for reducing risk is to improve the probability of reaching a successful employment outcome, and informant interviews revealed a couple of strategies to do this. The first and foremost was to hire rural community insiders with established community connections, so these people knew the business owners and had a personal relationship with them to build job opportunities.

Another was to establish payments for nontraditional employment options, such as self-employment or at-home contracts, which essentially expanded the opportunity, the economic opportunity for job seekers.

Another area was to lower barriers for provider entry, so first of all, to allow small or independent contractors to serve underserved locations with some waived or loosened requirements. They could waive CARF requirements, they could reduce the number of years of disability experience that was required, just to make it easier for people to enter the game and serve clients on an on-needed basis as those cases came up in rural communities.

A few agencies had establishment grants, which helped small-scale outfits with start-up costs, so helping people overcome some of the costs associated with getting people hired, trained, setting up shop.

And then, also, another lowered barrier was to have the agency sponsor free training for providers so that they are ready to deliver services according to the agency's requirements but at no additional cost to them.

And then the final strategy that I'm going to highlight here is increasing agency capacity and support, so there was expanded agency vendor collaboration, such as the agency helping or sharing with job leads and vice-a-versa, so there was a more collaborative approach to getting people placed.

From a separate story, we examined rural business outreach strategies, and these seemed to fit with some of the strategies to improve rural services.

So one of the things that we learned about rural areas -- and I don't think it's going to come as a huge surprise to anyone -- is the importance of personal vs. professional relationships, so having a community presence at events, having rural office locations where people are available to talk and share about VR services in their own community, and then building on community insiders as the people who can really make things happen in rural communities.

Another thing that was brought up, and it's such an important thing the more rural you get, is the community reputation that is built in the short run will follow you for a long time. It's very important to have a long-term face of VR that is positive in the community so that you can really develop that trust and respect. Part of that is strengthened by the dual customer approach where the VR agency is actually the human resource expert in rural communities. As we know, the smaller the business, the fewer people dedicated to human resources kinds of issues, and a lot of times small rural businesses are under-equipped or under-experienced supporting people with disabilities, and VR can play a very strong role in assisting them with that.

I'm going to spend the rest of my presentation time focusing on self-employment as a very important rural alternative to traditional paid employment. So the first -- this chart shows self-employment rates in the U.S., and for the U.S. population, the self-employment rate is 9.4%. For the subpopulation of people with disabilities, it is 11.4%. And for the population of VR consumers, the rate is 2%. So as the data shows, people with disabilities turn to self-employment at higher rates than the general population, but VR closure rates to self-employment are drastically below what you might expect to see among people with disabilities.

I want to go to the next slide and show that, actually, rural areas do turn to self-employment at higher rates than urban areas in terms of the VR population, so this shows that the urban places about 1.4% are employed; large rural places 3.5%; small rural 3.7%; and isolated rural about 5.2% of those people who are closed to stats, 26 competitive employment are actually in self-employment.

We also know that VR agencies that serve blind and low vision consumers primarily have above average rates of self-employment closures relative to combined and general agencies.

We have done quite a bit of work to understand why VR agencies don't utilize self-employment at the rates we might expect, and these things can really be classified into three areas. The first and foremost is that counselors don't feel prepared to assist clients with self-employment exploration. They are not trained in business startup. A lot of times the vendors that they use are not in place to support business development kinds of activities, and there's also confusion about the process within the VR agency.

There also -- we also heard about concerns that outcomes would not result in viable employment businesses, and what we found when looking at VR case records is that this did not pan out, that if you took the subset of people who were close to self-employment and

compared them to the people who were in competitive employment closures, we found that VR self-employed clients earned comparable wages to those in competitive employment, they earned significantly higher wages, and they worked significantly fewer hours, so, essentially, they were getting more bang for their buck in terms of the hours that they worked and the wages that they received.

Counselors also expressed concerns about case costs. That case costs for self-employment would be higher than traditional employment placements, and that did, in fact, turn out to be true. The cost of purchased services were significantly higher in self-employment cases. I am not sure if that has to do with the caseload and that maybe people that turned to self-employment would be more expensive to serve in the first place. That remains to be explored, but it is a true statement that case costs will generally be higher for a self-employment closure.

Using this information as a backdrop, we really wanted to figure out how to address some of the barriers that VR agencies experienced regarding self-employment, and this has taken a couple of different formats. Some of our past work has looked at the vocational rehabilitation self-employment policies, and our more recent work has focused on a pretty comprehensive self-employment guide for VR counselors and consumers to use while they go through the VR self-employment process. The guide is free for anyone to use, and it can be found at vrselfemployment.org.

The guide includes self-guided content. Some of the material is shown in a bulleted item so it's easy for people to follow along with. There are business owner interviews that are the basis of audio and video examples throughout the guide. There's a number of companion materials such as examples, worksheets, accessible versions of all the chapter material, and the site is fully accessible.

So before I shift gears and show you some screenshots of the guide just to orient you briefly about it, I just want to highlight the partners involved in developing it. There is Margot Dana from the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation, Dr. Nancy Arnold, who proceeded me at the Rural Institute in a variety of self-employment efforts, Jennifer Stevens, who was part of the Small Business Development Center at the University of Montana, then UM Media Arts, UM School of Extended and Lifelong Learning that helped us with the development and the look of the site, and then our Business Owners with Disabilities who provided a lot of the content to reinforce some of the messages that are included in the website.

So I'm going to the next slide, and this slide is just a screenshot of the main page. The guide includes eight chapters. The first three chapters really relate to self-employment exploration within the VR system, and then the final chapters really turn to a step-by-step guide of developing a business plan.

So Chapter 1 is focused on understanding the self-employment process in VR.

Chapter 2 looks at consumer motivations for becoming

self-employed and asks them to do some exercises to consider their readiness to do so.

Chapter 3 is focused on a preliminary evaluation of the business idea and whether or not it constitutes a viable business.

Chapter 4 provides an overview of the Business Plan and first steps in the process.

And then Chapters 5-7 lay out the steps for preparing the business plan, including marketing and financial information.

And then, finally, Chapter 8 includes a variety of external resources to help navigate the business planning process that people can access for additional information.

This screenshot of the first chapter is meant to highlight where the videos are for each chapter. Business owner views told us about their experiences starting a business with VR, and for each chapter, we include a video focused on that particular chapter content and the business owner's experiences with it.

This next slide is meant to show the layout of the website, so within each chapter, there's a focus area that includes the content laid out in tabs, sort of like a file folder. The introduction tab has just a brief overview and allows people to link to PDF accessible versions of all the different examples and content included in that chapter in case they want it for reference as they go through the chapter or if they don't want to engage the chapter with multiple clicks, et cetera.

This next slide shows a screenshot of what you might see on the Myths tab. It provides a brief overview of myths and realities of starting a business, and then if you see the two little buttons below, these are slide shows about myths and realities and a quiz that people then can further access more information about that topic. If I had pressed the Myths and Realities button, this is the slide show that would have shown up. It's nine slides, and it just goes through a number of different myths and realities related to self-employment. So on this one, the myth is self-employment is my vocational goal, and the reality is, self-employment is a way to meet a vocational goal, it is not, however, a profession.

And as you can see, there is an audio section at the bottom of that myth that really talks about a business owner's perspective as they entered the program in terms of that vocational goal vs. profession content.

I also wanted to highlight some of the worksheets that we have available for download on the site. So these ones are worksheets about business feasibility, and they're worksheets that people can download and fill out and return to their counselor if they want to, but it really talks about the basics of starting your business. There's worksheets about your business, there's worksheets about you, and then on the next slide, there is actually a worksheet on doing startup costs and how to estimate those.

I wish that I could show you some of this information interactively, but, for instance, on the startup costs page, the worksheet actually does all the calculations for you, so on Table

1, which focuses on materials and supplies, you can type in shelving and the supplier and the units and cost, and it will tally the total costs and also pull that into a worksheet at the very end that actually is a master total of all the different kind of startup costs you might have, so right here we showcase materials and supplies, but there can also be things like licensing costs, inventory, signage, equipment. The list is very comprehensive to really help people get an idea that is accurate in terms of startup costs.

Finally, I wanted to show you a couple of additional features of the website. The first is the Resources by Chapter section, so for every single chapter, we have included all the resources included in that chapter so people can easily access that without going in to each chapter if they've forgotten something, to download something, or they want to check back on a specific resource, they can get it there.

And then on the next slide, we also have included a variety of additional resources that are not necessarily included in the chapter but that people can utilize for additional information focused on business development resources, funding resources, some resources directed to veterans, and tribal members.

If anyone on the call has an interest in self-employment, I really welcome additional input on the resource and would love it if people would look around and see what it has to offer.

Our next steps regarding upcoming research on the Self-Employment Guide is really focused on translating it for vocation rehabilitation programs on reservations, so a tribal version, and then also learning how it is used in practice, so we're doing some interviews with counselors and consumers and iteratively updating it based on their input.

I want to thank everyone for participating and hanging in with me on this presentation. I want to acknowledge that the research described was all supported by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehab Research within the Administration on Community Living, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

I also want to highlight that I have included references for all of the information covered today, articles regarding the premature exit, state data, telecommunications, rural service delivery, and self-employment projects, so if anyone wants to do further reading, I would love them to check out those resources.

And finally, with the time remaining, I have highlighted some discussion topics, what additional barriers deserve attention from your perspective in terms of rural barriers to effective service delivery and what additional strategies might you share building on some of the conversations that I've provided today.

Q&A Session:

>> TERRY: Thank you, Dr. Ipsen. What we will do now is -- we have about ten minutes, and Dr. Ipsen will answer some questions. I believe Heidi, our -- our presenter, will -- one of our other assistants -- I should say one of our other individuals will give you a few questions, and as I noted, we will make sure that all of your questions get answered, and what I wanted to mention very quickly -- and if you've signed in to this webinar, you will also get this information. March 20th at 10:30 Central Time, we will be having a discussion of this topic, particularly the two questions that were on that last slide that Dr. Ipsen showed, so we will be continuing this conversation on March 20th.

So Heidi, take it away.

>> HEIDI: Hi, everybody. It seems like we have quite a few questions here, but many of them have to do with people's availability or Internet, so Dr. Ipsen, would you -- would you be able to talk a little bit about helping people who don't have great phone service or limited Internet connection? That seems to encompass several of the questions.

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Absolutely. That is a problem, and I would say go vote and make sure that rural areas get broadband service. That's one thing.

Also, as we are learning more about access and online access, one thing that is coming up is that people actually have better phone access than Internet access, and so we are working to really consider how applications can be delivered over a phone using your smartphone or something. That is something that we're just starting to engage in. We have done some work to modify our telecom toolbox for that. It's harder for the self-employment kinds of resources because they're so interactive and you kind of need a computer to be filling out things and accessing forms and so forth, but it's -- I absolutely agree that it's an issue and something that we need to keep in -- at the top of our list in terms of interfacing with rural people.

The other thing that I would say is building that community insider network is important, that sometimes you're never going to overcome those barriers to reaching people in rural areas, and so spending time on the ground developing vendors that maybe are limited source, maybe they're school teachers who want to earn some extra money in the summer or off time, maybe they're retired business owners, those kinds of things, who maybe don't have a huge wealth of experience with job development or disability but can really be utilized on the ground and trained and developed, that they may not want a full-time job but that they are willing to serve people that have some limited access and want to develop kind of a part-time job. Do you -- is that -- that's all I can say on that.

>> HEIDI: I think that's excellent. I know that people will be able to contact you if they have further questions about that or information.

Some of the other questions had to do with the self-employment

aspect. Some people are -- in the questions, they were discussing that the fact that self-employment doesn't count as necessarily a placement, so if these folks are doing work at home, they were wondering if folks are able to maintain their SSI benefits with self-employment earnings and asking about how people can avoid some of the more scammy work-at-home types of things, so do you have any advice about either of those things?

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Yeah, that's a packed list of questions right there, right?

>> HEIDI: Yeah.

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: First of all, I want to say -- and it's highlighted on the website, but depending on how you structure your business, you can maintain your benefits in much the same vein that you can maintain benefits with traditional employment. There's thresholds, of course, but with self-employment, it's really important to consider how you structure your business as opposed -- like, is it a limited liability company or is it a sole proprietorship. Those kinds of questions come up, and there are very specific guidelines which are outside the scope of my expertise, but when you talk to a benefits counselor, they can help you understand which one of those setups would make the most sense from a tax standpoint to make sure that your, say, business costs and revenues aren't getting mixed up with personal revenues and so forth.

And the thing that's counterintuitive to me, but just mark my words because I've been talking to a benefits person, is that sole proprietorship is a better way to make sure that you can kind of keep those costs and things separate. So you can do that.

Also in terms of supporting that as a competitive employment outcome, that self-employment, so long as people are earning similar wages and so long as your agency is supporting that as an employment outcome that you are essentially drawing a wage, it's not a hobby, it's -- it's -- you are working to have that be a job, a viable employment option, that will fit. I think that it is more complicated with some of the new WIOA requirements and how those are going to pan out, so I can't speak with authority on how those decisions are going to be interpreted, but I -- I do think -- well, I know that self-employment is still an option for closure, so I guess I would -- I would ask those questions of, you know, agency -- RSA-level people about how to accommodate that.

I also think that it will be important if you want to increase the needle for self-employment is to make sure that when you're looking at benchmarks and things like -- and payment for vendors that that also is an option for them for reaching those benchmarks. And I'm shot sure if I got all --

>> HEIDI: I think that's great.

>> TERRY: Real quick. Dr. Ipsen --

>> HEIDI: We're right on the --

>> TERRY: We'll right on the top of the hour, but, Dr. Ipsen, would you be able to stay on for, say, another ten minutes or so?

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Sure.

>> TERRY: Let me put up a slide that gives people the CRC information. We'll do that and then come back. We're done at the top of the hour. If some of you are able to stay on, Dr. Ipsen is available to answer an additional question, so let's see.

Okay. So, again, for folks -- oops. Anyway, we'll just go with this. As we've noted, I'll do a quick read for those of you who may be visually impaired on the webinar. Copies of the recorded webinar and the slides will be available on our Community of Practice site. If you -- you would need to register to access the site, and for that, you can go to projecte3 -- so it's project3.com. I believe Heidi put that in the chat box. Again, all the questions written in the Q&A box, those we don't get to in the next ten minutes, we will ask Dr. Ipsen to answer those and post everything to the E3 site. If you are interested in CE credits, everybody who attended the webinar today will receive an evaluation form from us. On the evaluation form is the information about obtaining CRC credits for this webinar.

And, again, I will note on March 20th, we're going to continue this conversation with a phone conference. All of you will receive an invite to that, and a couple of the big items, we'll be discussing the two questions at the end of Dr. Ipsen's webinar.

So with that, we will thank those of you that need to leave who attended today, and then we will spend a few more minutes with Dr. Ipsen answering some questions. Thanks very much. Go ahead, Heidi.

(Laughter)

>> HEIDI: Thanks, Terry. We have a ton of great questions, and as Terry said, they will be available -- they will have been answered and will be available to look at a bit later, so if we don't get to your question, please don't worry, we will provide an answer for you.

Dr. Ipsen, it seems that we have several questions that pertain to transportation barriers. That's a really -- kind of a sticky wicket. There are a lot of different obstacles and a lot of different challenges. Can you speak about transportation and the limitations of transportation in rural environments just a little bit for a few minutes?

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Sure. Transportation is one of the toughest things to address, I think, in rural delivery, rural employment, rural quality of life. For anyone who is at a distance from, you know, a community and -- and that the community doesn't offer public transportation, it's tough. There are models that different communities have used, leveraging transportation dollars, for instance, for voucher models where essentially individuals will get -- well, it's very passé, and I'm speaking in passé terms, but, like, checkbooks that they can use kind of allocated dollars to get other community members to give them rides or things along that line.

I know that the Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living or APRIL, has on some of their resources things about those voucher models. I -- I believe that things like Uber and Lyft will become available at higher rates in rural communities. I think that it's a model that is expanding outward and has been tested in smaller and smaller communities. I don't know that that will be available

in the most rural communities just because of size and distance or particularly, one of the issues is accessibility in transportation. For sure I understand that. We are actually conducting a model -- or a research project right now. It's not my particular area of expertise, but one of my colleagues at the university, Andrew Myers is doing a study looking at different transportation models and what gaps there are based on those models and how to potentially overcome them, so what are the models that seem to be working the best in small communities?

That said, we aren't going down to the very smallest communities, which I think that that's where a lot of the questions really originate is those places that are just a long ways away, so I'm -- it's tough. I'm sorry. I don't have an answer. I wish I did.

(Laughter)

>> HEIDI: There probably isn't just one answer; is there?

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: There isn't, and one of the problems with rural communities is that every single one is different, and there's a different set of resources and there's different community leaders and there's different ways to kludge together different opportunities, but it's not a one-size-fits-all, and it's hard to be very prescriptive on that.

>> HEIDI: Mm-hmm. We have had some discussions about this here at SVR as well and with some of our partners talking quite a bit about Lyft and Uber and discussing the fact that if people would like to have that in their communities, it's best for people within those communities to reach out to a Lyft or Uber driver in the community and talk to them about going up the chain to get permissions or to work on developing a partnership. It's been very difficult for people to be able to -- for agencies to be able to get ahold of Lyft or Uber at a higher level. So folks have been having more luck just kind of going locally and kind of going up the chain to get that information, but it's not available for everyone, and we realize that a lot of people are having problems with that.

In addition, some people raised concerns about Lyft and Uber drivers being able to help people who may need a little bit of extra assistance, and I believe one of the providers is -- kind of screens their folks to find out if their drivers are comfortable providing a little bit of assistance that they may not need to for all of their passengers, so it's a conversation that's in circulation right now, but there haven't been any overall conclusions so far.

I do believe we had somebody else who asked a question in rural areas about busing, maybe using public school buses. Is that anything that you've heard of people using?

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: I have heard about it in very isolated incidents, and the -- the incidents that I heard about it, the -- the kind of take-home was don't tell anybody or don't give my location away, that it was a very informal arrangement, and in this particular situation, the school bus actually transported someone in to work and home from work as part -- like just along the same route that

the kids were on, and it was something that worked kind of in the community, and the community was good with that, but it wasn't something that that person really felt that -- for liability reasons and all sorts of other things that that was necessarily something that was going to work in a broad way, but I do know of different arrangements that VR has done with sorts of vanpool kinds of things where there's, you know, some support for trying to arrange those or figure out someone to pick up a person to go to and from work and that at least in the short run, until the job was kind of established, VR would pick up the costs of covering that, and then the person would be responsible, but informal relationships to -- to overcome transportation barriers for work.

>> HEIDI: Right. And that's --

>> TERRY: I think time for one more question, Heidi, and then we'll wrap it up.

>> HEIDI: Okay. That sounds great. Thanks, Terry. Let's see. I do have one question, has there been any research done on rural barriers, quality preemployment transition service delivery? That may be a little bit more of a narrow question rather than opening a giant can of worms, so --

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Well, there -- I don't know of a lot of research yet. It's pretty early in the game. The one thing that I have heard was from vendors that the delivery of preemployment transition services was something that they saw as opening up an opportunity for them to serve more rural places, that they could essentially overcome some of the risk associated with providing that kind of results-based funding job development services with some more-on-going preemployment transition services with kids, and so that essentially, they were kind of developing a steady stream of funding that would kind of help offset some of that risk associated with a small number of referrals for jobs.

>> TERRY: Well, great. Thank you. I think we'll wrap this up. We had talked an additional ten minutes, and we've hit our ten minutes. I suspect Catherine would love to talk about this all day long --

(Laughter)

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: I don't know.

(Overlapping speakers)

>> TERRY: Yeah, well that too. A topic of great concerns. A couple things I'd love -- thank you, everybody, who attended who is still on. We had a wonderful chat, conversation, lots of questions. Again, I would encourage you to join us on March 20th, as we continue this conversation, and the other piece that we're beginning to develop on our E3 site, our Community of Practice, is also discussion questions that people, you know -- so instead of having to be on the phone call, you might have an opportunity to log in and comment or have an opinion on a discussion theme, so we're working on building that up, and this may be a really good piece to help us get started on that as well as the conversation we'll have on the 20th.

Again, we'd like to thank everybody who attended, Dr. Ipsen for

a great presentation. Again, March 20th, and we also have a webinar in March, the date's escaping me at the moment. Heidi may have it at her fingertips. Molly Sullivan will be doing an overview around benefits, benefits analysis. It will be a good -- particularly for those in your staff who might be new to VR or are interested in kind of updating some of their general knowledge of benefits. That will be our webinar in March, and, again, it will be tied more specifically to our -- as I noted earlier, our target population of low-income individuals with disabilities living in high poverty communities.

So thank you very much, everybody, and hope to see a lot of you at either a discussion group or our next webinar. So that -- we are done for today, and good luck, everybody. Take everything -- everything you heard that Catherine gave you today and implement something.

(Laughter)

So thanks very much, everybody. Bye.

>> CATHERINE IPSEN: Thank you.