

TRANSCRIPT
Conference Call with Vocational Rehabilitation Stakeholders
On COVID-19

3 p.m. ET Monday, March 30, 2020

- Operator: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome and thank you for joining today's teleconference, US Department of Education's COVID-19 conference call. Please note that all participant lines will be muted. I would like to begin today's conference by introducing today's speaker, Mark Schultz, acting assistant secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. Please go ahead.
- Mark Schultz: Hello, everyone. This is Mark Schultz, acting assistant secretary and commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration. I want to thank you all for joining us today, during what I know is a challenging time. I want to start our call today by introducing the Department of Education's Deputy Secretary, Dr. [Mitchell Zais 00:00:46]. We're very fortunate to have Dr. Zais join us today.
- Mark Schultz: I want to thank Dr. Zais and Secretary DeVos for their support and commitment that all governments [inaudible 00:00:55]. Whether it's the provision of educational or employment services, we need to make sure the same opportunities exist for everyone. Dr. Zais will provide us all with an update on the department separates to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you, Dr. Zais, for joining us today.
- Dr. Zais: Thanks, Mark, for the introduction. It's an honor to help you kick off things today. I hope everyone's doing well, despite the extraordinary circumstances we are currently working under. This is a challenging time, but I've been told by Mark that you're up to the task and prepared for whatever lies ahead. I want to start things off by giving you a brief update on how the department is addressing COVID-19.
- Dr. Zais: Very early on I was designated by Secretary DeVos to lead the departments' coronavirus working group. The group meets three times a week, and continues to collaborate with our federal partners to ensure that we're doing everything in our power to assist the public, to advance our mission, and ensure continuity of operations and service to the American people. We're working to provide timely, accurate, and useful information and we're working to protect the department's workforce.
- Dr. Zais: Let me assure you, that the senior management team is monitoring the situation daily. We're taking proactive measures, and responding as soon as new information becomes available. As it relates to the work you do every day, our number one priority, right now, is to keep you continuously

informed as we work toward implementing the best solutions for our grantees.

Dr. Zais: One way you can keep abreast of new developments, is by clicking on the coronavirus resource link, prominently displayed on the departments' home page. Just go to ed.gov, that's pretty simple. Ed.gov, and click on the tile that says, "coronavirus information". There you'll find a page that's updated daily, and contains the latest guidance, questions, and answers, and other helpful resources as it relates to this rapidly evolving situation. As for the impact on RSA, we're using every tool at our disposal to provide flexibility, flexibility to individuals with disabilities, and to their service providers.

Dr. Zais: Now before I hand things off to Mark, I want you to know that RSA is in good hands under his steady leadership. Most importantly, he and RSA are working hard to ensure that the focus is always on students, youth and adults with disabilities. Thank you again for your time and for the important work you do, every day. And I'd like to remind everyone to stay safe, and have a great meeting. Thank you very much.

Mark Schultz: Thank you again, Dr. Zais, for joining us today. I did not, nor I suspect that any of us think we'd be facing such an unprecedented time as we are right now, with the coronavirus pandemic. At a time when we thought we'd be anticipating celebrations, events and activities for the 100th anniversary of the VR program, we are now faced with one of the biggest challenges the program has seen over the last 100 years.

Mark Schultz: Reaching out to VR programs, we know that as of last Friday at least 44 offices were closed, and several more had partial closures within their states or area. 57 VR programs had moved to tele work, and 12 were teleworking at some level of operation. We're seeing businesses shutting down, individuals being furloughed or losing their jobs, schools closing, VR and pre-employment transition services unable to be delivered.

Mark Schultz: But there are also opportunities that exist, as we see businesses in specific sectors, such as grocery stores, drug stores and distribution centers are looking to hire hundreds of thousands of individuals across the country. Now, more than ever, we need to fall back on our principles that are so aptly captured in the CSAVR's vision 2020 messaging.

Mark Schultz: This is the time that we must be innovative and creative in how we deliver our services, and connect students, youth and adults to the services that can assist them, taking advantage of the job opportunities that exist. We need to be helping individuals with disabilities keep the jobs they already have, as they face tele work mandates, or alternate methods of doing their jobs.

Mark Schultz: We need to be leading alongside our partners, in the work force system, to develop collaborative strategies in the provision of services and supports. We need to support each other as we reach out and share what's working, and what isn't. And we need to be customizing our own services, and building our own expertise on remote service delivery, tele work and other opportunities that can serve as a model for our partners and businesses, to make sure people with disabilities are not left behind in this changing landscape.

Mark Schultz: Realizing these principles will lead the way for others, and demonstrate the value of the artist, students, youth and adults with disabilities, our work force partners and businesses across the country. Assist you as you lead these efforts, they've expanded the scope of the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center, or WINTAC. We've expanded their technical assistance within the existing framework of their technical assistance, including [inaudible 00:06:59] that are relevant to teleworking, and using technology to support staff, and to provide guidance on working service providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. And in working with consumers, implement strategies that can be used through all phases of the VR process, from intake to closure and providing services remotely.

Mark Schultz: Their technical assistance will include best practices that we're seeing states develop, and using to provide remote service delivery. WINTAC will be providing more about their available technical systems later. We're already hearing how states are being innovative, and creative in their new approaches to serving consumers and businesses, and working with our work force partners. But it will also add to states sharing more about what they're doing.

Mark Schultz: We don't have the ability today to conduct a live listening session, but I want to assure we have done plenty of this, and in over the last few weeks, as I and other RSA staff are filled with numerous questions and concerns from many of you. So, we are listening, and here's what we're hearing on your concerns.

Mark Schultz: First, we're hearing that there are a lot of concerns about meeting the 15% pre-employment transition services expenditure requirement, due to school closures and the inability to reach students. We're hearing similar concerns about the set aside for supported employment services for you. We know you're concerned about timelines for the timeline requirements for eligibility determinations, and development of the IPE's, as well as section 511 timelines for the provision of career counseling, and information referral, and the potential impact on section 14-C certificate holders.

Mark Schultz: You're concerned and want to know more about what we're going to do around RSA monitoring and state programs, as well as supporting

contracted service providers during this time, when there aren't able to provide services. There's a lot of fear of losing a network of existing services and providers, that isn't going to be there when the recovery starts, if they're not supporting you now. There are also similar concerns for the support of [inaudible 00:09:13] vendors, as facilities close and revenues are lost.

Mark Schultz: A lot of issues and concerns around program match requirements, due to states intensely redirecting resources to address COVID-19 issues within their states. And, further down the road, we're already hearing concerns about maintenance of effort requirements, and inability to be able to meet those requirements, or MLE in the long term.

Mark Schultz: On the discretionary grant side, there are concerns about the grant notice timelines, both in comments and for applications, as well as reporting. And then, for both formula and discretionary grants, concerns about meeting performance goals, as well as having large available balances due to closures, and shut-downs and the inability to carry out the projects as proposed.

Mark Schultz: So we're not just listening, we're also hard at work, and trying to push out responses and guidance back to you. So for example, we have issued emails and sent out information to those states and programs that were going to be monitored this year, that we are postponing our monitoring. Last week we issued guidance regarding WIOA performance measures and negotiations, and in just a few minutes, David [Steele 00:10:31] is going to talk about additional fiscal guidance that we have prepared.

Mark Schultz: Given the number of inquiries we're receiving, we are focused first on providing information around general categories that were covered the majority, and most urgent of the questions and concerns being shared with us. So before I turn it over to David, I have a few cautionary notes based on additional discussions with some of you in the last few days. First, our responses are based on our current ability ...

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Mark: Our responses are based on our current authority, and we've looked to provide flexibility within that authority. Many of you are aware that the CARES Act just passed last week, requires the Department of Education to report back to Congress within 30 days, but additional waivers might be needed under the Rehab Act. The waivers provided in Section 3511 in Subtitle B of the CARES Act do not extend to formula grant programs authorized under the Rehab Act, including the VR program and its business enterprise program activities.

Mark: Second, several questions have been brought to our attention about OMB's March 19th letter outlining administrative relief for recipients and applicants of federal financial assistance, directly impacted by the novel coronavirus due to loss of operations. Many agencies across the country are located, and many VR agencies across the country, are located in departments other than education. Memorandums as a result of OMB's letter are coming from agencies like HHS and Labor. And to be clear, do not provide the flexibilities and waivers VR programs are requesting. Those must come from RSA and the Department of Education. The Department of Education is working across all offices to develop consistent guidance that will be issued soon. That will be the guidance that you will need to follow.

Mark: Third, even within the Department of Education guidance, there will be times where areas of general guidance will not apply to VR programs, because we have specific statutory language in the Rehab Act that will have precedence and require waiver authority from Congress. So for example, the ability to extend funds beyond the second year, the ability to waive that 15% preemployment transition services set aside, or the waive match requirements does not exist within our current authority.

Mark: Finally, we know that as a workforce partner, some state VR programs are being asked to repurpose staff to assist with the processing of unemployment insurance claims. We ask that you notify your state liaison in advance of any action due to such a request, so we can assist you to understand any potential programmatic and fiscal consequences this might have.

Mark: So with those cautionary notes, I will now turn it over to David Steele, the chief of our fiscal unit, to share the guidance on several fiscal matters at this time. David?

David Steele: Thanks, Mark.

David Steele: As Mark indicated, RSA has received a significant number of questions from VR programs as they seek to provide continuity of operations for individuals with disabilities in the current COVID-19 environment. In the near future, RSA plans to issue a fiscal question and answer document to respond to questions that state VR agencies have asked. Today I'll be sharing some of the most frequently asked questions we've received and brief responses that will be incorporated into the more detailed question and answer document.

David Steele: Question one: May state VR agencies use program grant funds for the personnel costs, including salary and fringe benefits of VR agency

employees who are teleworking or on leave because of COVID-19 pandemic?

David Steele: The use of VR program funds for personnel costs including salary and fringe benefits is allowable to the extent the state's established written policies and procedures permit the expenditures meet the requirements and the uniform guidance and conform to the federal and state statutes and rules. Specifically, the uniform guidance at 2 CFR 200.430(a) makes clear that costs for compensation including fringe benefits are allowable so long as they meet three criteria. One, they satisfy the requirements of the uniform guidance. Two, that they're reasonable for the services rendered and conform to the agency's established written policies. They are consistently applied both to federal and non-federal activities, and conform to the agency's laws and rules and federal laws as applicable. Therefore, to the extent that the compensation is consistent with the agency's established written policies and complies with the requirements of the uniform guidance, such costs would be considered allowable.

David Steele: Question two: May state VR agencies use VR program funds to purchase cleaning and hygiene supplies, face masks, hand sanitizers, disinfectant sprays, wipes, et cetera?

David Steele: The use of VR program funds for purchases of cleaning and hygiene supplies is allowable administrative cost to the extent the expenditure meets the federal cost principles and uniform guidance. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, it would be considered necessary and reasonable that state VR agencies would need to acquire cleaning and hygiene supplies to keep employees and VR program participants safe while maintaining the continuous operation of the VR program. State VR agencies must ensure that the costs comply with the cost principles when determining the amount that is allocable to the VR program, and that the portion that should be allocated to other programs that they administer is allocated appropriately.

David Steele: Question three: May state VR agencies use VR program funds to pay community rehabilitation programs and other vendors for services not rendered or canceled as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

David Steele: State VR agencies may only use VR program funds to pay for CRPs and vendors for allowable and allocable costs of services actually rendered, except as previously explained by RSA regarding fees for services not rendered and cancellation fees. RSA encourages state VR agencies to work with CRPs and vendors to implement alternative ways to provide VR services, to carry out the terms and conditions of contracts or vendor agreements, for example, individual versus group services, or teleconferences, or training via webinars. Additionally, VR agencies may

want to ensure their providers and vendors are aware of the assistance to small businesses recently made available through the CARE act. The terms and conditions of the contract or vendor agreement stipulate the reimbursable costs and services, and VR agencies must follow their state's contracting rules and procedures.

David Steele: Question four: May state VR agencies use VR program funds to pay CRPs and vendors' retainer fees to enable these providers to maintain operations if they cannot provide service as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

David Steele: Regulations in 2 CFR 200.459(c) state that to be allowable, retainer fees must be supported by evidence of bonafide services available or rendered. Therefore, when services are not provided, payment of retainers the CRPs and other vendors are not allowable costs to federal award.

David Steele: Question five: May state VR agencies use VR program funds to pay for the ongoing expenses of CRPs using the establishment authority?

David Steele: As it relates to the establishment development improvement of CRPs, ongoing operating expenses of a program are not included in a definition of establishment of a public or nonprofit CRP at 34 CFR 361.5(c)(16)(iii). Since federal regulations specifically preclude ongoing expenses from the definition of establishment of a public or nonprofit community rehabilitation program, establishment authority at Section 103(b)(2) the Rehabilitation Act may not be used for maintaining ongoing operations of CRPs.

David Steele: Question six: How quickly will RSA process prior approval requests for anticipated costs incurred to maintain operations during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as a purchase of equipment for telework?

David Steele: RSA financial management specialists are prioritizing prior approval requests based on this at this critical time. VR agencies may use the aggregate prior approval submission process for purchases of numerous items in accordance with the OSERS grantee letter dated October 29, 2019 prior approval FAQ, and RSA will expedite these requests.

David Steele: Question seven. Can RSA extend the period of performance for the federal fiscal year 2019 VR program grant award for state VR agencies with funds currently in carryover status if they are not able to expend these funds, including those reserved for the provision of preemployment transition services by the end of the period of performance due to the unavailability of staff, the cancellation of VR services, or the inability to purchase VR services as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

David Steele: Federal law does not provide RSA with the authority to extend the period of performance. State VR agencies asking about flexibilities to spend VR funds may make new obligations during the period of performance of awards, which may include a carryover year for awards that meet the carryover requirements. In the event an agency needs additional time to liquidate federal obligations incurred during the period of performance for an award after the 90 day liquidation period for an award has ended, the agency may request approval from RSA for additional time to liquidate obligations.

David Steele: And question eight: Can RSA waive the VR program maintenance of effort requirement for federal fiscal year 2020 and future years for states with changes in non-federal expenditures for the VR program as a result of COVID-19 pandemic?

David Steele: Consistent with the federal requirements explained below, states may request a maintenance of effort waiver, once they have submitted all financial data related to a deficit year in a federal financial report or their SF 425. The Rehabilitation Act and its implementing regulations allow a state to request a waiver or a modification of its maintenance of effort requirement if the state does not meet that requirement because of certain circumstances. Section 111(a)(2)(C) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 CFR 361.62(d) authorize the secretary to grant a waiver or modification of the maintenance of effort shortfall when such an action would be an equitable response to exceptional or uncontrollable circumstances affecting the state. For States with decreased non-federal expenditures incurred in 2020, the maintenance of effort level for federal fiscal year 2020 will not be calculated until the agency submits its final SF 425 for the federal fiscal year 2020 grant award. Only then will RSA have the data necessary to know the actual non-federal expenditures incurred by the agency during federal fiscal year 2020. With that information, RSA will be able to calculate whether the state satisfied the maintenance of effort requirement by comparing FF-

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David: ... the state satisfied the Maintenance-of-Effort requirement by comparing FFY 2020 non-federal expenditures to the non-federal expenditures incurred by the state in federal fiscal year 2018. If RSA determines the state has a Maintenance-of-Effort deficit at that time, the state could request a waiver or modification of the Maintenance-of-Effort requirement. The authority to waive Maintenance-of-Effort in advance of the actual occurrence does not exist.

David: It's important to remember that we don't waive the Maintenance-of-Effort requirement, but we need to wait until the end of the fiscal year. Look at

the final SF-425's for the amounts that are reported by the state and then we look to waive an amount that may be proportionate to the downturn in the state or the issues encountered in the state. So that's part of the reason for needing to wait until the final SF-425 is being submitted before we can process Maintenance-of-Effort requests for waivers. If you have any additional fiscal questions, please contact the RFA financial management specialist assigned to your agency.

David: All right, Mark, I'll turn it back to you.

Mark: Thank you David. Just so everyone knows, we are also working on programmatic guidance that should address the majority of questions regarding delivery of services as well. So as I said earlier, we've expanded the scope for the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center and their technical assistance within the existing framework to include a number of issues.

Mark: So here to expand on that and the technical assistance that is available is [Chaz Compton 00:00:23:34], Project Director for WINTAC. Thank you Chaz.

Chaz Compton: Hi Mark. Thank you. We appreciate the opportunity to share information today. Wanted to talk a little bit today about the response that we've developed to the need for technical assistance during the crisis, what we are doing currently, and what we have planned. And then I'll hand it off to one of our teammates.

Chaz Compton: So, the demand for technical assistance specifically related to the COVID-19 crisis centered primarily around what question and answers that agencies had, how to deliver services by distance, what some resources were available, and even primarily what were other states doing.

Chaz Compton: We were thankful that RFA gave us the opportunity to refocus our technical assistance efforts during this time. So what we did initially was, we developed two resource pages on the website, the wintac.org website. Those two pages, one of them is focused on general COVID-19 resources and the other is resources for distance service delivery.

Chaz Compton: The COVID-19 resources page focuses on areas like federal disability, resources related to COVID-19, the resources for individuals with disabilities specifically, and what we did in this resource page was try and gather information that was pertinent to the crisis and information specifically geared towards individuals with disabilities. So while the Centers for Disease Control and other federal departments are certainly on there, we also tried to focus our efforts on identifying those resources for individuals with disabilities, specifically during this time.

Chaz Compton: In addition, we're gathering state resources related to the COVID-19 crisis. So state by state, we're going through, trying to identify what the resources are and then categorizing them by state so you can find some of those there under that same page. And there's also some general articles of interest related to the crisis and how folks have been responding. So that's the first COVID-19 resource page.

Chaz Compton: The second one is focused specifically on resources for distance service delivery and that includes the management and operation of the VR program as well as the delivery of services by distance or remotely, specifically as they relate to the topic areas of the WINTAC.

Chaz Compton: And I just wanted to talk briefly about how this page is structured because I think it does offer some helpful information to folks and then we'll jump into what we plan to do in the near future.

Chaz Compton: So this distance service delivery resource page includes really important information about how VR programs are currently responding during this crisis, what are some practices that they're using that have demonstrated promise or have been effective. So we're asking specifically for those of you in the audience today, if you have information about what you've done as an organization and you'd like to share it, please do send that to us. You can send it to me specifically or you can send it to your state liaison and they'll forward it to us, so that we can enter it onto the WINTAC website and give folks access to that information. Even if you think that what you're doing as an organization or as a state may not be particularly adept or whatever, we'd still would like that information because you never know when something that you're doing might resonate with somebody else or have a need giving that by somebody else. So we appreciate you sharing that information.

Chaz Compton: In addition to that, we have some resources related to teleworking and providing services, tele-counseling. That's an area now that is obviously of utmost importance because consumers still need services. So we want to provide as many resources as we can about how that works. Some of the things to address and think about during that process, some of the technical issues associated with it. We also include an area for online training. So if you're trying to find resources to help your staff get trained during the crisis, we have those up there now. And we also are building a area by topic area for the WINTAC technical assistance areas such as preemployment transition services, section 5-11 competitive integrated employment including both customized and supported employment, the alignment and integration of VR into the workforce delivery system as a whole, the common performance measures and reporting, labor market information, business engagement and apprenticeships.

Chaz Compton: All of those areas, those topic areas, we're trying to gather resources about how to deliver that information and services by distance. So if you're doing that or if you have questions or information about that, that you'd like to share, we'd be happy to put that on the site as well. Or if you're just interested in finding out about the delivery of those services by distance, please check with us. There's a section on leading and managing organizations by distance, technology and programs that facilitate remote service delivery. There will be a frequently asked questions page and general resources.

Chaz Compton: So that's the website information that we have available now. And then by Wednesday afternoon of this week or maybe Thursday morning at the latest, we'll be including a discussion forum section on the main page of the WINTAC where state agency folks and their partners can go and engage in communication in real time regarding answers to questions or examples that you're looking at or concerns you're facing, whatever discussion you might want to have with other folks across the country.

Chaz Compton: So that'll be going into effect, I should say, either on Wednesday afternoon this week or Thursday morning. And we're doing that in concert with CSA VR and they are our partners throughout this process. So we appreciate them and their work that they do to try and bring folks and agencies together and give them as much information as possible as well.

Chaz Compton: In addition, we'll be developing listening sessions, webinars and recorded sessions regarding the crisis, how folks have been responding to it, and making those available to the users of the websites for helping you develop your own state agency responses or implementing telework activities.

Chaz Compton: To give you an example of some of the reasons why we've developed these responses and to tell you a little bit more about how we're responding as an organization and as a center, I'd like to turn it over to [Melissa Deal 00:08:51] from our pre-eds team. Melissa.

Melissa Deal: Thank you Chaz. So our topic is preemployment transition services and over the past few weeks we've gotten a tremendous amount of activity and questions from states as you all move to a more virtual environment. And with the closures of schools, it's made it particularly challenging to access students. So we held a call last week where we had about 440 of you participate and we want to thank you for that, where we tried to share just a number of online open source or free resources for your staff and or your providers to move to a more virtual service delivery system for students with disabilities.

Melissa Deal: We also had a few of our state VR agencies who have overcome some of the most prevalent challenges, whether it was about creating new policies and procedures on documentation, to the development of their own virtual platforms that they were willing to share with other states. We also have been partnering with the National Technical Assistance Center on transition and tomorrow we'll be hosting a webinar on supporting the delivery of transition services to students with disabilities, both from the education side and also from the VR perspective.

Melissa Deal: We're going to be doing a series of jointly collaborated webinars in April. The first will be on employment and work based learning experiences for [inaudible 00:32:49] in a virtual environment. The next will be on supporting students with complex support needs and then developing additional resources, webinars...

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Melissa: And then developing additional resources, webinars, and training opportunities as we hear from you all and your needs, which seems to evolve daily. Some of the work that our team has been doing is primarily around helping states strategize and develop methods and resources for accessing students and kind of thinking through some of the concerns and ensuring that there are methods for the delivery of services, documentation for student participation and progress in a virtual environment, consent, what does case work look like in a virtual environment and how telework and telerehab works and just connecting states with, for example, HIPAA compliant platforms to deliver services and tools. So with that I'll just turn it back over to Mark.

Mark Schultz: Thank you, Melissa and Jeff. So I said at the last CFA VR conference, many of you heard me challenge the art programs to lead in innovation, creativity, partnerships, and our work with our consumers and businesses. So this is the time. This is the time for everyone to step up, for everyone to lead. The expectation is that services continue. They might need to look a little bit differently, but I'm very pleased to have two states share with you how they are leading the way as they implement strategies that continue the provision and services to those we serve. So first I'm going to introduce Dacia Johnson, Executive Director of Oregon Blind. And joining her will be Kevin Miller, the Director of Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. So I'm going to turn it over to Dacia. And thank you for joining us today, Dacia.

Dacia Johnson: Thank you, Commissioner Schultz, for the opportunity to share. The Oregon Commission for the Blind is open for business. The way we're delivering business is certainly different. I think we can all agree that when WIOA passed in 2014 none of us envisioned that we would be

deploying innovative strategies and dealing with this national emergency. Some of the ways that we've been looking at innovative service delivery, including partnering with our technical assistant centers and higher education to leverage distance education and new ways to deliver and reinforce alternative skills related to blindness, including technology, braille, mobility and techniques of daily living. We've been also exploring ways to work with family members and households who are living with seniors to help them deploy certain resources and support since our staff can't do in home visits, but there are things that we can do to ease their ability of to be able to live independently at this time.

Dacia Johnson: Our teachers are also offering connection opportunities with students who and our customers who may feel isolated as they're trying to seek employment or who are not able to attend our in-person training centers. Some of our teachers are offering coffee chats at certain times to be able to talk through challenges faced by students as they're applying their newly acquired skills related to blindness such as braille, adaptive devices and mobility. We're also exploring ways to use online group sessions where folks could learn from each other as they may be applying new skills in the community.

Dacia Johnson: We are also going to be launching soon virtual [Pre-S 00:36:49] activities, trying to take advantage of the time in Oregon where the schools are closed and students have lots of time on their hands. And we're looking at group sessions that students may be able to benefit from at this time. I just want to probably re-emphasize at this time to lead as Commissioner Schultz and what we've really been talking about at the leadership team with our agency is we expect our customers to be resilient as they face adversity and challenges as they face their barriers to employment. And we're really expected to lead at this time and our agency is committed to delivering the best services we can during this emergency and really expecting all of our staff to leverage teamwork, flexibility, and creativity. And what we know is that we will get through this together and our customers need us now more than ever to step up and lead. So thank you, Commissioner Schultz, for letting me share.

Mark Schultz: Thank you very much, Dacia. Now we'll have Kevin Miller.

Kevin Miller: Thank you, Commissioner. And to our fellow VR staff around the country, I hope you all are staying very safe. Here in Ohio as a combined agency and also we have our Disability Determination Unit housed within Opportunities for Ohioans With Disabilities. We have been uniquely positioned for probably four to five years to actually have our 500 plus counselors and caseload assistant staff work remotely. So we're actually a little bit ahead of the game when we, our governor, issued a shelter in place order some two weeks ago. But it did allow for us also because we

do operate from offices and then work remotely from there. Having to shut those offices down has required us to look at even more innovative opportunities. Our business and innovations unit, which works with businesses directly, worked with our vocational rehabilitation division to develop what's called an urgent job list.

Kevin Miller: As someone who sits on the governor's workforce board directly and as a member of the cabinet, we have unique access to a very robust employer network and where we have traditionally been very strong in placing individuals. I think you heard commissioner Schultz say.

Kevin Miller: There is a quite a bit of opportunity here in Ohio where we have established relationships within grocery chains, logistic centers such as Amazon, Walmart. When we talk about grocers, there's a grocery store here in the state of Ohio that is looking to hire 10,000 associates immediately and the following grocery stores are also following suit with that. And obviously we have a very strong relationship with our hospital association and working with individuals to be placed in there, especially when they were in school and going through Pre-S activities. But as we all know, those things have ended. So we are looking at how we can be more flexible and allowing more JSST remotely, how we can change how we're doing intake and things within the plan of waiving signature requirements. Having them email us after we email them to say, "Is this okay for you with intakes and billings?" with our providers.

Kevin Miller: Because as we all know, we could rely on what code says, but we're dealing with individuals with disabilities and some of them are in life and death situations. And so we're looking to act as quickly as possible to give that type of flexibility to retool and get these participants into the workforce as quickly as possible. We have a very robust provider network, some 400 and many of them are on furlough and layoffs and so they're very much questioning and I appreciated, Commissioner, your comments and concerns about, hopefully there will be a provider network at the end of this unfortunate situation. And we're looking to do as much as we can to change our business practices so that they can stay in business and help us with these individuals.

Kevin Miller: So those are some of the major things that we are doing here in Ohio and I appreciate the opportunity to share those. Commissioner.

Mark Schultz: Thank you, Kevin. And again, thank you Dacia both for sharing what you're doing within Oregon and Ohio to continue to provide services, the valuable services that individuals with disabilities and our business partners need at this time.

Mark Schultz: So what I want to just touch on is that we know that state VR programs have different capabilities in regards to remote service provision and that's why it's so critical that we share with each other and with [inaudible 00:42:01] and with RSA what's working successfully so we can accelerate our learning and maximize our ability to effectively serve individuals with disabilities, including students, youth, and our business partners. As the situation evolves over time, we're prepared to continue to work with you to resolve issues and concerns to we remain flexible where we have the authority to do so.

Mark Schultz: We haven't forgotten that this is the hundredth anniversary of the program and we're going to continue our recognition and celebration activities, although we'll need to do so perhaps differently than we originally planned. However, as we begin the next century of the VR program and those who follow us in the future look back on this time, they will see this as a key moment in the history of the program.

Mark Schultz: It's up to each of us to write that chapter in history. We must lead by partnering with each other to innovate and to take advantage of the opportunities within this challenging time to demonstrate our value to students, youth, and adults with disabilities and our business partners, when they need us the most. We at RSA and the Department of Education will continue to listen and support your work as best we can with the expectation and the belief that we will come out of this situation stronger than ever to the benefit of all we serve. I wanted to thank you all for joining us today and thank you for the great work you're doing across the country. Take care.

Operator: ... the conference. Thank you for using Event Services. You may now disconnect.

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