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# Reflections of a VR Counselor: There's a Job for Everyone!

*By Sitara Sheikh*

The transition from school to work is wonderful and exciting, but the process can also be scary. Each of us goes through it—turning 18, opening a bank account, applying for a first job, and the myriad of activities entailed in legally becoming an adult. While some students, in accordance with the law, remain in school until they are 21, at whatever age school-to-work transition is experienced, young adults must acquire new information, get access to resources, and adjust to new environments.

As a vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor who is deaf in the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services in the beautiful state of Maine, I often work with families of deaf and hard of hearing children who have autism or cognitive challenges. I listen as families talk about their children's transition from school to work. They express love and fear in their questions: *Can my child be independent? Will he or she be able to ask questions, share concerns, triumphs, and fears? Will my child be happy?* I reassure parents that everyone can work! This—the motto of our agency—applies, of course, to everyone, including those deaf and hard of hearing individuals who have autism or other challenges. At VR, we focus on finding meaningful employment for individuals with disabilities. Employment First Maine ([www.EmploymentFirstMaine.org](http://www.EmploymentFirstMaine.org)), legislation passed in 2013, provides integrated community services for individuals with disabilities and has resulted in VR being part of a broad-based coalition of individuals with disabilities, families, advocates, providers, and state agency representatives committed to improving and customizing employment for Maine citizens with disabilities.

Transitioning from school to the workplace is challenging for any individual, but it can be even more challenging for a deaf or hard of hearing young adult who has autism or an intellectual disability. Families can help.

*Photos courtesy of Sitara Sheikh and Tyese Wright*



Here are some tips:

- **Start early.** The transition process often takes longer for deaf and hard of hearing students who have additional disabilities and involves more exploration. Those concerned in a child’s transition to the workplace should connect with VR when the child is 14. A relatively new law—the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, passed in 2014—emphasizes starting transition services early to allow a student’s transition team the time to work creatively, collaboratively, and consistently with businesses, schools, and other community providers.

Pre-employment transition services include job exploration, self-advocacy, work-readiness training, work-based learning, and future training opportunities. These services allow transitioning students to acquire workplace skills while in high school. Parents also participate as part of the transition team as they

**Above:** Sheikh gives a transition workshop to deaf and hard of hearing young adults at a high school in Southern Maine, during which ASL interpreters and CART services were provided.

enable their children to explore their interests, abilities, strengths, and challenges, especially through supporting placement in different work environments.

The law requires VR to support individuals with disabilities and remove barriers to employment. VR counselors educate employers about the Americans with Disabilities Act, discuss tools and accommodations, and purchase devices to support individuals with maintaining employment. This means that we can use those precious summer months for work experiences. Summer jobs empower young individuals to understand work etiquette, learn how to advocate for themselves, explore their goals, and develop problem-

**Right:** A student with an interest in animals interns at a dog and cat grooming business to gain work experience.

solving skills. Work is not just about getting a job; it is about the whole person.

- **Involve the individual.** Unlike many other children, deaf and hard of hearing children with additional challenges may not be exposed to the idea of employment or career. They may need more time to understand what transition to a work environment means and to discuss job and career options.

Parents and educators can take the initiative and introduce them to people who do different kinds of work. For example, they can encourage these young adults to shadow someone who works in their area of interest. This gives the young person an understanding of what it means to be in the workplace and prepares him or her for the transition. Once the transition is underway, deaf and hard of hearing students with additional disabilities may need more time to learn what college, vocational training, or the workplace is like.

- **Learn about resources.** As a rehabilitation counselor, I have noticed that navigating the system is complicated, and it can be overwhelming. Perhaps as a result, many families either are not aware of the resources available or they do not know how to access them effectively. At VR, our goal is to work with parents, families, school



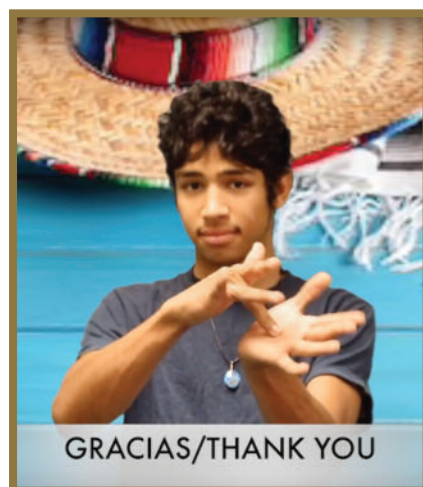
representatives, and the young person's support system to find resources and provide advocacy when needed. For students who are deaf or hard of hearing with additional challenges, resources can come from many places, including VR agencies, social service agencies, mental health agencies, disability rights or deaf advocacy programs, and other organizations. In Maine, for example, Maine Hands & Voices, the parent advocacy group, can provide guidance to parents to connect to resources, and the state Office of Aging and Disability Services can provide services for individuals with intellectual disabilities, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing.

While every state has different criteria for eligibility, VR professionals are there to help families navigate what can be a daunting complex of services. Never hesitate to ask for assistance—

whether from VR, social services, or your local advocacy agency for deaf and hard of hearing people. In each agency are people who want to work together to make the transition of a deaf or hard of hearing individual a success.

- **Participate in transition meetings.** Having regular transition meetings will enable the team to consistently support the student in developing work goals. Additionally, the student will be able to start learning skills in self-advocacy and problem solving and to apply coping skills in their lives. Transition is a process, and students need time to get information, apply it, and express themselves. Each representative in the transition meeting listens, shows patience, and empowers students to process each step critically.
- **Explore VR.** Located in every state, VR services can assist individuals in having real-life work experiences. Training individuals in different workplace environments in which they learn new skills can be exciting; different experiences

**Below:** A student interning with a school's ASL and Deaf Studies Program signs LSM (Mexican Sign Language) for a vlog during Hispanic/Latino Heritage Month.





enable individuals to grow. For deaf and hard of hearing individuals with additional challenges, direct communication is important. It is also important that they work with those with a cultural understanding of what it means to be deaf or hard of hearing.

In Maine, VR supports clients by educating employers about hiring individuals with disabilities. We strive to understand the needs of the businesses and then connect the business with potential candidates who can do the work with or without accommodations. Sometimes we work with employers to figure out specific tasks that can be successfully performed by people with very significant disabilities. On-the-job training, work assessment, and other services are also provided to enable the student to get hands-on experience; team collaboration is vital.

- **Seek allies and support.** Don't be afraid to approach a teacher, social worker, case manager, VR counselor, or another parent for support. Different perspectives help parents and young people make well-informed, balanced decisions. Therefore, individuals getting ready to seek employment should be encouraged to socialize with their peers. In Maine, a peer support group for those who are deaf or hard of hearing with cognitive challenges meets every month; these meetings enhance each individual's emotional support.

As in all states, Maine struggles with having too few employment providers with fluency in American Sign Language or visual gestural communication. We are working to solve this problem by training deaf people in the specialized communication and work support skills needed to become employment specialists.

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Empowering individuals to express their work-related needs and abilities to employers directly and to engage in everyday work conversations is a critical part of helping people be successful.

### **Everyone Can Work!**

In the right job and with proper support, everyone can work. For

students who are deaf or hard of hearing and have an intellectual disability or autism, the search for a successful job should begin early. This means contacting VR when a child is 14 years old, forming teams to help explore work options, learning about services, and connecting with adults who have already successfully transitioned into the workplace. Ask questions and follow through to get the information.

If, for whatever reason, families are not satisfied with the VR experience, they should feel free to request assistance from a state's Client Assistance Program. Every state has a link to its Client Assistance Program on its VR website. (For example, the website for residents in Maine is [www.maine.gov/rehab/cap.shtml](http://www.maine.gov/rehab/cap.shtml).) Professionals there can help with clarification and follow-ups—even nudges—to the VR system. Whether in need of pre-employment training, work experience, or job seeking, be persistent. Everyone can be ready to work!

**Below:** Students interested in teaching physical education intern at an elementary school.

