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Creating a Comprehensive Blindness and Low Vision Resource List

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For rehabilitation professionals (RPs) that are new to blindness and low vision, awareness of resources is usually limited. This is also true for some who have been in the field for many years. Insufficient knowledge about resources can impact the quality and extent of services consumers receive. For example, if an RP is unfamiliar with other professionals who serve persons with blindness or low vision, they may not refer consumers to them or educate consumers about them. And the barriers these professionals could help consumers to overcome can remain. This Practice Perspective will explain how developing and utilizing a comprehensive resource list can enhance service provision.

What is a Comprehensive Blindness and Low Vision Resource List?

For over 20 years, the Vision Specialist in Vocational Rehabilitation Graduate Certificate (VSVR) program has helped RPs to increase their knowledge about blindness and low vision. Students learn about medical and psychosocial issues, assistive technology, and resources for those with blindness and low vision. Developing a comprehensive resource list is a significant project in this program. Provided with a list of about 150 resources from their instructors to research, document, and organize, some students have described this assignment as tedious. Others stated that because of the usefulness of this tool, completing the project was a highlight of the program. So, what is a comprehensive blindness and low vision resource list? It is an electronic or printed catalog of information that consists of the names, addresses, phone numbers, websites, contact persons, and descriptions of local, state, and national resources. It provides an efficient way to share and explore resources with consumers, colleagues, and other stakeholders.

How to Create and Maintain a Resource List

So how does one develop a resource list? Creating a resource list can begin by gathering resources you or your agency already have available. For example, if someone in your agency has completed the VSVR program, they may be willing to share their resource list with you. You may need to update it to match your formatting preference and check to ensure the websites, phone numbers, and other information are still accurate.

Another helpful method is to use the group approach to developing the resource list. Each person can select a section to complete and share their completed segment with others in the group. The group approach may reduce the amount of time it would take to complete a resource list independently. Depending on the format chosen, it may be helpful to have a table of contents. To search for resources online to add to your resource list, it usually helps to include the word "blind," "visual impairment," or "low vision" to the category for which you are searching. For example, if you are looking for organizations of or for the blind, you could search for "organizations blind." If you are looking for local low vision resources, it may be helpful to do an online search for "low vision resources near me," or you can specify by city or state.

Most resources can be organized by the following categories: education, employment, transition, sports and recreation, assistive devices, professional and consumer organizations, and programs. However, they can also be arranged by preference. Although Microsoft Word and Excel are standard programs used to develop the resource list, the layout can be selected based on the developer's taste and software knowledge. Because phone numbers, contact persons, and websites often change, performing periodic reviews and updates every three-six months is essential to maintaining the resource guide's usefulness and usability. By including the date when the resource was found, or last updated, users can keep track of what resources need to

be reviewed for possible revisions before sharing them. Conversations with RPs revealed that they are less likely to use the resource list if they do not make periodic updates or if it is challenging to navigate.

To store the electronic files, cloud storage services such as Google Drive, OneDrive, and Dropbox are viable options. These programs allow files to be uploaded, edited, and shared from various devices and anywhere with an internet connection. For those who choose to work collaboratively on the resource list, these services can help make collaboration easier. Each person can see changes made by the group in real-time, and as long as each person has an internet connection, they have the most updated version of the document.

Ways to Use a Resource List

The resource list is a tool RPs can use during various stages of the rehabilitation process. At the time of service inquiry or referral, the list can be used to find other programs or services that can meet a consumer's needs. During the initial meeting, it can guide the discussion of the many supports available to help consumers with blindness or low vision to achieve their goals. While developing a plan for services, the list can be used to explore potential vendors, services, and devices.

Some RPs give consumers copies of their resource list. According to one RP, those she gives the resource list choose to explore and pursue options independently with little support or reach out to her for help once they have found resources they would like to consider. Regardless of how they choose to utilize it, she reports that her consumers have directly benefitted from the resources they've found on her list.

Sharing resources with consumers can empower them to be more self-sufficient, explore options independently and take a more active role in the rehabilitation process; it does not remove responsibility from the RP to provide information and discuss resources. Sharing

the resource list with consumers can also support self-determination, autonomy, informed choice, and collaboration between the consumer and the RP.

One RP reported that he has supported and connected with colleagues statewide by responding to their requests for specific resources using information from the resource list. Others have reported sharing resources from their list with professionals outside of the field of rehabilitation so that they can be better able to support persons with blindness or low vision. Sharing resources with consumers and the professionals that serve them can help ensure that more consumers will get the services and resources they need. Because she finds the resource list so helpful, one RP reported that it is the most important thing in her office. Though online listings of blindness and low vision resources exist, no list is exhaustive. RPs can tailor their resource list to match their specific usage needs, including their local resources and formatting preferences. Some RPs reported using their resource list as an electronic database, while others stated that they prefer to print it out and use the hard copy. Some reported using it as a phone book to look up contact numbers, search engine to look up keywords, and those that include definitions in their descriptions, use it similar to a dictionary. Some creative individuals have added images to represent categories and to provide an example of the resource listed.

How can the Resource List Enhance Services?

Local offices for persons with blindness and low vision can often be the primary source of information regarding resources. Therefore, a consumer's knowledge of services, programs, and organizations can be limited to their service provider's or agency's awareness. Becoming more knowledgeable about resources equips RPs with the ability to offer consumers more resource options and connect them with programs that match their unique interests and needs.

One RP who reported that the resource list helps her perform her job also stated, "I enjoy having useful information at my fingertips." Others have also noted that the process of developing a resource list taught them about many programs and services, so even if they do not have the resource list on hand, they can sometimes remember enough information to complete an online search. Another RP stated that he turns to his resource notebook when he faces hard questions regarding his consumers.

Every category of the resource list is essential. Resources that fall into the education category include the Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC), a local school for the blind, National Agenda. These and other educational resources can help RPs to become familiar with the programs and services available to youth and better understand their educational context. The employment category can be foundational to learning about national and local resources for employment and critical legislation. Some of these resources include the National Employment Team (NET), National Industries for the Blind (NIB), and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Resources and information under the assistive technology category can bring awareness of the types of aids available, where to find them, and how to use them. They include local AT instructor, blindness and low vision apps, and OCR devices for persons with blindness or low vision.

The sports and recreation and professional and consumer organizations categories represent the importance of a holistic approach to rehabilitation. RPs can use resources in the sports and recreation category to build consumers' awareness of what persons with blindness and low vision can do beyond employment and educational settings. These resources include goalball, Ski for Light, and USABA. Information under the professional organizations category can help RPs enhance their skills, knowledge, and career mobility, helping them become more

effective service providers. Listed under this section are the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER), International Society for Low Vision Research and Rehabilitation (ISLRR), and VisionServe Alliance. Information under the consumer organizations category can be used to educate consumers about the importance of connecting to services, programs, and persons with blindness or low vision. These resources include American Council of the Blind (ACB), Blinded Veterans Association (BVA), and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB).

There are many resources available to persons with blindness and low vision and their service providers. An RP's level of knowledge about resources and how to find them can determine the quality and extent of services consumers receive. Developing and utilizing a comprehensive resource list is one tool that can help overcome limited awareness of resources and enhance service provision.