

Does Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Structure Matter A Review of the Research on Outcomes for Blind and Visually Impaired Consumers in Separate vs. Combined Agencies

In 1920, legislation was signed into law creating the first civilian vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies. These early VR agencies served very few blind consumers. Instead, most individuals with blindness or low vision (B/LV) sought services from private, non-governmental organizations. As service delivery for individuals with B/LV evolved, more states created VR agencies focused specifically on serving individuals with B/LV (referred to as “separate” or “blind” agencies). As of 2022, there were 22 separate agencies serving individuals with B/LV. Instead of maintaining separate agencies, other states operate “combined” agencies that serve consumers with all types of disabilities.

Separate and combined agencies can take on many different forms. In general, separate agencies are those that have their own administrator, budget, spending authority, and plan for providing services. Some separate agencies restrict services to consumers with the most severe B/LV; in those cases, consumers with less severe impairments are served by the state’s general VR agency. Combined agencies may have a division dedicated to consumers with B/LV, or they may take a more general approach to service delivery (for example, consumers with B/LV may be served by the same personnel that serve consumers with all other disabilities).

The existence of separate agencies has been a source of controversy. Opponents of separate agencies consider them to be expensive, duplicative, and potentially unfair to individuals with other disabilities. Instead of maintaining separate agencies, opponents suggest that these agencies be consolidated into a single, combined agency. On the other hand, many consumer groups, advocates, and professionals in the field of blindness promote the maintenance of separate blind agencies. They believe that individuals with B/LV have unique needs that can best be served by dedicated agencies.

Several research studies from the NRTC have examined services provided by separate and combined agencies. In general, our findings support the maintenance of separate agencies for individuals with B/LV. Explore research-based answers to frequently asked questions in the following pages.

Research Takeaway

Across multiple studies, separate agencies were found to serve a higher proportion of socially disadvantaged individuals but performed as well as, if not better than, combined agencies on key outcome measures, such as competitive employment rates.

Do separate and combined agencies serve different consumer populations?

Multiple studies have found that, in general, separate agencies serve consumers who are more socially and economically disadvantaged. Overall, consumers of separate agencies are more likely to:

- Have more severe vision loss
- Be Hispanic
- Have less than a high school diploma
- Have a secondary disability
- Be female
- Receive public assistance

In general, the population served by separate agencies consists of more consumers at higher risk of unemployment due to their sociodemographic characteristics, such as lower levels of education and the presence of secondary disabilities.

How does service provision differ between separate and combined agencies?

Legally blind consumers served by a separate agency typically received more services and spent more time in VR. This finding is not surprising, given that separate-agency consumers are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, have less education, or have a secondary disability. Separate agencies were more likely than combined agencies to provide their consumers with adjustment services, on-the-job training, and counseling/guidance services.

Case costs in separate agencies are slightly higher than costs in combined agencies. This may be associated with several factors: (a) separate agencies tend to serve a more at-risk population who may require more services; (b) separate agencies deliver more services per consumer; and (c) separate agencies' consumers tend to spend a longer time in VR. It is also important to note that, although separate agencies may have greater expenditures, this does not necessarily address the question of cost-effectiveness, which also considers outcomes. It may be that, given the more at-risk population they serve, separate agencies are just as, or more, cost-effective than their combined agency peers.

Among Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) beneficiaries, consumers who received job-readiness training from a separate agency experience better employment outcomes compared to their peers who received the same service in a combined agency. This finding may indicate that separate agencies do an especially good job of providing consumers who require work-basics training with the extra support they need to achieve positive employment outcomes.

Do consumers served in separate and combined agencies have different outcomes?

In some states, consumers served in separate agencies were more likely to:

- Achieve competitive employment
- Report that income/earnings at closure were their primary source of support (rather than public assistance)

Separate agencies closed more clients in competitive employment and self-employment and closed fewer clients as homemakers or unpaid family workers. (Note that since 2016, homemaker and unpaid family workers are no longer valid closure outcomes.)

VR consumers who are deafblind were nearly twice as likely to be closed with employment if they received services from a separate agency rather than from a combined agency. Deafblind consumers served by general agencies (those that serve people with all disabilities other than blindness or visual impairment) were also more likely to be closed with employment than those served by combined agencies. Consumers with B/LV and a traumatic brain injury (TBI) who were served by separate agencies were also more likely to obtain competitive employment. However, there was no difference in earnings based on type of agency for consumers who are deafblind or B/LV with a TBI.

When SSDI recipients were served by separate agencies, they were more likely to achieve employment than those served in combined agencies. The positive impact of separate agencies was especially evident for older SSDI recipients. Rates of employment in combined agencies declined sharply for consumers over the age of 60. Consumers of a similar age served in separate agencies were more likely to achieve competitive employment, and this higher employment rate did not diminish as consumers grew older. Female SSDI beneficiaries, who typically have lower employment outcomes compared to males, achieved better results when served by a separate agency. Being served in a separate agency provided a substantial earnings advantage for younger SSDI beneficiaries as well.

Should separate agencies be maintained?

Findings from multiple research sources support the continued existence of separate agencies for the following reasons:

- Separate agencies serve a consumer population that is more at risk for poor employment outcomes (for example, individuals who are the most significantly disabled). Consumers of separate agencies are more likely to have lower levels of education and higher rates of secondary disabilities and receipt of public assistance.
- When compared with combined agencies, separate agencies provide more services at only a slightly higher cost.

- Consumers served in separate agencies are more likely to achieve competitive employment, and some research suggests that they earn higher wages.
- Among SSDI recipients, being served by a separate agency can help overcome employment disadvantages for women and older individuals, as well as provide an earnings boost to younger individuals.
- VR consumers who are B/LV and have additional disabilities (i.e., deafness or TBI) have greater odds of obtaining employment when served by a separate agency.

Learn More

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