INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast

Episode 20: A Vocational Rehabilitation Success Story  
Released October 8, 2024

SHARON PARMET, HOST:

Welcome to [INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast](https://www.sralab.org/research/labs/cror/projects/inside-outcomes-rehabilitation-research-podcast). I'm your host, Sharon Parmet.

On today's episode, we will be celebrating Disability Employment Awareness Month. My guests are Jennifer Barthel, a vocational rehabilitation counselor at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab, and Sabrina, a client of Jennifer's. Sabrina is not her real name because she is actively employed. Her name has been changed in this podcast to protect her anonymity. Jennifer helped Sabrina find employment after she was let go from her long-time position at a logistics company after a stroke made it hard for her to keep up with the demands of the job. Welcome to the podcast Jennifer and Sabrina.

Jennifer, I'm going to start with you. Can you briefly introduce yourself and describe your role at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab?

JENNIFER BARTHEL:

Sure. I'm a vocational rehabilitation counselor here at the Shirley Ryan AbilityLab. I started here while participating in an internship, while completing my master's in rehabilitation counseling, and afterwards I was hired. I've been here about 35 years now.

My role is to provide vocational rehabilitation services to the various programs at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab. We provide services to inpatient, outpatient, day rehab. And I specifically work at our pain management program. We see patients who are referred by physicians to help address various vocational or work-related issues that the clients come to us with and help them with addressing outcomes that will meet their expectations.

SHARON:

So what is vocational rehab?

JENNIFER:

So vocational rehabilitation is a program that works to return patients who have physical disabilities to productive vocational employment roles and helping them to become independent, contributing, integrated members of their communities. And [Shirley Ryan AbilityLab Vocational Rehabilitation Services](https://www.sralab.org/vocational-rehabilitation-services) has been providing these services for over 50 years.

SHARON:

And what makes vocational rehabilitation at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab unique?

JENNIFER:

Probably what makes us most unique is that we are not a service that is provided at very many hospitals. Probably, we estimate that there probably are about seven to 10 hospitals in the United States that are providing vocational rehabilitation services right now.

SHARON:

Jennifer, can you talk a little bit about how and when vocational rehabilitation services are offered at Shirley Ryan AbilityLab?

JENNIFER:

Yes. Vocational rehabilitation services are initiated to our program by a doctor's referral. At Shirley Ryan, we see specifically people who have physical disabilities. Each new client will be seen by the voc rehab services program, and they're going to participate in an initial vocational assessment. The comprehensive interview is conducted so that we can look at the client's medical and employment information, and then that information is going to be used to formulate an individual vocational rehabilitation service plan to help the clients with meeting their unique needs and goals. And at that time, we're helping people to determine if they are indeed ready to start this process, or if there are other things that they want to focus on before they start the process of looking for employment.

Different steps that we take in this process, we can offer vocational counseling to help people with making decisions about readiness and what direction they want to go in, helping them to kind of start processing. You know, what this whole situation might look like for them? We can offer to assist with providing comprehensive vocational aptitude evaluations to help people with determining where their vocational strengths are, what areas we might focus on, so that we know what direction to go in. Sometimes, these aptitude evaluations can also help us with identifying accommodations or modifications that we might want to think about in the workplace. Sometimes we're working with people who are going back to a job or thinking about a new employment situation where we're not totally sure of what's going to be involved in that situation. And in those situations, we can offer what we call a job analysis, where we meet with employers.

We might go and observe work environments, you know, we might do an analysis of all the different duties and responsibilities that a person performs in that work situation, so that we have a very good idea of what the expectations and duties might be to help the person with making decisions about next steps.

We can also offer what's called a work trial assessment or an internship, where a person might try out participating in a job activity and that could be on the actual job, if the employer is able to assist with that situation, or in some situations, for folks we're working with who can't go back to the work they were doing at the time of the onset of their health incident or injury or illness, or they're not sure about what types of work they're able to do. We can set up what we would call it a work trial, but it can, you might think of it like a volunteer situation, so that a person can see if that's the kind of work they they're able to do, they enjoy doing, they like the whole process of that employment situation, so that we know we can help, once again, with directing someone in a into a situation that they're going to feel positive about. And then lastly, we also offer job placement services. So we have a person in our department, and we have, we have four vocational rehabilitation counselors right now, and a job placement services provider who can help, once again, with kind of specifying what kind of work a person wants to focus on, helping them with resume writing, interviewing and the actual job application process, so that you know they have someone who can kind of support and coach them through that situation.

SHARON:

So how do patients pay for vocational rehabilitation services? I understand a lot of insurance plans don't cover it, right?

JENNIFER:

That's a great question, and a lot of things, that's something that a lot of people don't understand. Medical insurance does not cover vocational rehabilitation services the way, the way I understand it is it's determined that that's not considered a medical necessity.

And so we are very fortunate at Shirley, Ryan AbilityLab to have various grant monies and donations that are made available to us, as well as working with the Illinois Department of Human Services to provide vocational rehabilitation services.

SHARON:

Sabrina, can you introduce yourself to the listeners?

SABRINA:

Hi, I'm Sabrina. I was born and raised in Chicago on the South Side, I've worked in supply chain and logistics for over 20 years. I'm an only child, and I have a large family and a good networking village to support me.

SHARON:

Sabrina, can you describe what brought you to Shirley Ryan AbilityLab for vocational rehabilitation?

SABRINA:

I went to the ER, thinking I had a sinus infection. After blood work, it showed some concerns in elevated heart activity, so therefore they proceeded to test some other things. And come to find out I had a tear or a hole in my heart, which prompted emergency aortic dissection surgery. And in the midst of a very lengthy surgery, I suffered a stroke, but I was not aware of that. So possibly two to three days later, when I was had, when I became extremely sensitive, more sensitive than normal, to light, and my vision was a bit distorted from what I remember what I was told by my mom and the doctor. I kept saying that this is the worst headache I've ever had, and they asked me three questions. And the third question that they asked me, the one I got wrong, prompted testing to see if I had had a stroke. And the question was, What was today's date? I immediately gave a date two years prior, because that was the last time I was in the hospital, so I immediately went back to that date.

So through the testing, they did find that I suffered a mild stroke, which impaired my vision slightly. Took about six months to figure out what the issue was, and to tweak my prescription. My regular prescription for distance was still the same, except I struggled wearing those same pairs of glasses, trying to read on the computer or watch TV or look at things that were at a closer range. I found myself going back to older pairs of glasses that possibly were 10 years old just to be able to read the computer screen or watch TV or other just day-to-day things.

So in the process, I've had, I have two prescriptions now. I have, like readers for… they call them workhorse glasses, so they're for work and for reading and for smaller distances. And then my prescription actually stayed the same for distance and driving. It was just now too strong to read the computer, which was prior to my stroke. I can see out of those all day, perfectly fine. And in the midst of that, I returned back to work part time. I struggled keeping up, and I I honestly didn't know why. So after being put on a performance improvement plan, I was being monitored and see if my progress had improved.

I was let go of my position. March of 2023, I had my neurologist scheduled. My neurologist at Northwestern scheduled a psychiatric evaluation for my memory because they noticed that it was to remember long term and other things just the short term I was struggling with, as far as learning new things. So in the midst of going to the site to have an eval. I came to Shirley Ryan, and I was doing occupational therapy, and also physical therapy as well, because I was inpatient immediately after my surgery for a while, and then I got released, and then I was just doing physical therapy and occupational therapy, just like for cognitive skills and memory. And once I got back to like a sufficient level of being able to sustain my memory and things, my physical therapist referred me to vocational therapy, which I would then introduce me to Jennifer.

SHARON:

Okay, so you had already been with Shirley, Ryan AbilityLab for some other services?

SABRINA:

Correct. Referred there.

SHARON:

So at work, you were struggling with just keeping track of things. I mean, logistics is all about keeping track of what's where, when. I mean, that's really advanced.

SABRINA:

Prior to me having emergency surgery, I had switched to, I was moved to a new team, my previous team. I could still remember the functions and do everything, but because I was in the I was maybe a month or two in being transferred to a new team, so when I came back, I could not remember their flow of things. I remember things from my previous team, but that did not apply to this current team, and I had a hard time maintaining and would act, and I would take the notes, but nothing was sticking as far as new information.

SHARON:

So on top of like learning a new role, you have this event that occurs that makes it hard to remember new information. So that must have been difficult to go back.

SABRINA:

It was, it was extremely stressful. And I felt that I was not maybe given the grace that I possibly should have given after suffering such a horrific event. And honestly, at the time, we didn't know my memory had taken a loss, but I was showing up every day. I was trying, and it did not match my previous work experience or my work history. So it was a bit of a struggle mentally, emotionally and as far as to my self-confidence as well.

SHARON:

So once you were referred to vocational rehabilitation, Jennifer, what was your first meeting with Sabrina like?

JENNIFER:

So in our first meeting, I, you know, talked with her about her current situation, what was going on, I gathered information related to her medical situation, her employment situation. Got information from her about, you know, what had happened, what she had done on the job, how long she'd been there, and what had happened, you know, why this situation had ended up in a termination. We also looked at her financial situation and social kind of how she was being impacted all around. And then we, I also consulted with her therapist at Shirley Ryan to hear how she was doing and what their thoughts were about her readiness to start the process of addressing new employment goals, because that was very much what Sabrina wanted to focus on.

And then at that point, we came up with a plan to start thinking about new employment goals, identifying the types of jobs that she might be most successful in at this time.

And we came up with things like customer service and things like that, where she could use a lot of her skills that she'd had over the years, but not in such a high intensity type of situation. And then in that process, we started with not only identifying jobs that she might be interested in but revising her resume and starting to practice interviewing skills, and most importantly, in her situation, kind of helping her to address her confidence issues, which were pretty shaken by the situation.

And you know that she'd clearly been a very hard worker, a very dedicated employee in the past, very proud of her work skills, and now was a little bit unsure. A lot of times, when people go through a situation where they're terminated from a job under any circumstances, it can be somewhat devastating. And, you know, people struggle to kind of step back into the work world again. So we spent a lot of time helping Sabrina, you know, kind of prepare for getting back into the work world. We also spent time, you know, addressing issues that might come up in interviews that people who oftentimes have disabilities are concerned about. You know whether there'll be any questions about why they are changing directions with job searches, or any kind of questions that might come up on job applications that would ask about disability issues, which a lot of our clients are confronted with, where employers are asking if someone wants to identify as disabled or not.

And we spend a lot of time helping people just to understand the process that might be happening in that situation and how they can choose to answer questions in the way that might be most comfortable and best suited for their situation.

One of the things we also did was to help Sabrina with practice interviewing. We were able to set her up with someone from our vocational business team, the Shirley Ryan business team, a gentleman from Walgreens who was able to offer some advice and guidance to her regarding interviewing, and actually spent a lot of time with Sabrina, helping her with, you know, just sort of processing the whole situation, looking at how she wanted to answer questions, how she wanted to focus on her strengths and abilities and help her through mock interviews and such, with preparing for employment.

SHARON:

How was it working with Jennifer Sabrina? Did you like… how many meetings did you have, and how did that go?

SABRINA:

Actually, it was a joy to work with Jennifer. She was understanding and kind always, and she made herself readily available for me, even when my schedule conflicted, or maybe hers conflicted, at times she was It was after being terminated, not feeling that I was handled with such care. Being handled by Jennifer was literally a breath of fresh air, and it was much needed, because, like I said, my confidence took a big blow after being terminated, and she was kind offered resources.

We met, what about weekly for about maybe three or four months? And then as needed, and I would reach out to her if I needed, like, you know, a question that I needed help answering during an interview, or to tweak.

And my biggest obstacle was with the application, was whether I was going to select disabled on the application or not, because I felt that that would lessen my chances, and her and the gentleman at Walgreens reassured me that that would not be viewed and it's by a third party, and it's just for, you know, internal or for government reasons. And although I did feel relieved, I was still reluctant. So I selectively selected that depending on the job or the function of it.

SHARON:

What were the mock interviews like?

SABRINA:

Yes, it was actually extremely instrumental, as far as rebuilding confidence, knowing what they're going to ask, the tone to maybe not to answer the question without over explaining. It was just like fine tuning my interviewing skills. It did really help. After the fact that I hadn't interviewed in several years, and interviewing has kind of changed now. So it was, it was it was good. It really helped me in interviews. And as far as a lot of the newer interviews now you're doing them, you answered the question via video. It's not even a person on the other end a lot of times, so that that was very helpful.

SHARON:

What happened when you got some hits on your resume and your application?

SABRINA:

That started to boost my confidence. I felt validated again. Even though the interviewing process I had was extremely lengthy. This one particular company, I made it to the fourth round. And I asked for feedback, and honestly, the only feedback they gave me was the other applicant spoke multiple languages, and it was an international company, so I felt relieved knowing that because, like I said, I really thought I had done it extremely well, and it had been a long time since I had made it to a fourth round interview, and honestly, prior to now, normally it's like one to two, maybe

three rounds. I had never experienced a fourth round. Let me say that typically it's one to three, and either I have it or I don't. So to get to four, I'm like, Okay, this is mine.

But I was appreciative for the feedback, and it was like, there's nothing I did wrong, so I would that still help build my confidence, and I am still in the job market, searching for something that better aligns with my abilities and strengths, so I'm hopeful.

SHARON:

What job did you get as a result of all the work with Jennifer?

SABRINA:

I managed to land a planning specialist to manage the leave of absences for Fortune 500 companies.

SHARON:

Okay, and you're there now, right?

SABRINA:

I am. I started in December of 2023 and I'm currently there.

SHARON:

Okay, but you're still looking for something that would align better with the skills that you could bring to the table?

SABRINA:

Yes, I am.

SHARON:

Jennifer, is your work with Sabrina finished? Or is it an ongoing partnership?

JENNIFER:

It's definitely an ongoing partnership. There is a little bit of the process with vocational rehab at Shirley Ryan, where we are, once a person becomes employed, we've, we have a formal policy for following for 90 days to identify that placement as a successful placement, but then I have the option to keep Sabrina's case open and be available to her as needed, to help with any kind of questions that might come up as she you know, she is definitely, I think, had a good experience by having this new job situation that that she started in December, and it's definitely helped with her confidence and her self-esteem. And I think it helped her to see that she probably could return to some of the kinds of more high-level jobs that she did in the past. So we have kept her case open and are available anytime she would want to, you know, talk about any job leads, interviewing, any of those kinds of things.

SHARON:

So Sabrina, I just want to ask. You have been through an event in your life that on the other end of it, you came back to work, and you were having problems with memory and short-term memory and a new role that you had just taken right before this happened. What would you say to another person that finds themselves in a similar situation, as far as getting back to work?

SABRINA:

The advice that I would give, that I constantly give myself currently, is to give yourself grace and patience because you didn't know you're relearning your body again. You're a new person in a different way, but in the same body. So

you have to relearn things. Things don't come as easy or as quickly, and if you try to rush it, it frustrates you, and it actually makes the process of coming back longer. It prolongs the process if you try to rush it. I'm not saying don't do anything or don't work towards it, but work at a steady, reasonable pace for where you're at currently, health and mental and emotional wise, don't try to be like, Oh, okay, the doctor said, okay, I can go back to work. I should be able to do A to Z immediately. That's not the case. And even if you can, too much too fast will result in burnout or just stress, added unwanted stress. So definitely say give yourself grace and to work actively towards your things. Do the exercises, the mental exercises that the physical therapist gives you and the occupational gives you because they definitely help.

SHARON:

Well, from your mouth to other rehabilitation patients’ ears. Yes, practicing at home is key to any kind of rehabilitation.

Jennifer, we talked a little bit about working with Sabrina on the applications and the kind of like, do I check the box that I have a disability or not? Can you talk a little bit about that in general for people with disabilities who just don't know how to manage that question?

JENNIFER:

Sure, a lot of what we try to do as vocational counselors is to help people to, I guess, kind of have a better understanding of their situation and what they are able to do, and how accommodations and modifications might help them, you know, reasonable accommodations in the workplace and then help people to become more knowledgeable and comfortable with discussing their situations with employers in whatever way feels right to them. But in that process, helping them to be able to talk about their abilities, what they bring to a job situation, and how they can be an asset to a team.

I think a lot of times, people feel that if the word disability, or, you know, a health situation is brought up, it's going to be seen possibly and in a negative way. And what we try to do is help people to take that situation and focus on the positives and capabilities so that they can, you know, bring their strengths and abilities to the table.

We usually will suggest to people, first of all, just to help them to understand why those questions are being asked in that part of the application, and helping them to understand, like Sabrina mentioned that that information is supposed to be kept separate from the application that goes to the managers and such, and then helping them to determine what they feel most comfortable with in identifying as having a disability or not. But overall, helping them to, you know, identify their strengths and abilities and bring that to the table as the focus on the interview.

SHARON:

I want to thank both of you for being on the podcast today. This has been a great conversation, especially for Disability Employment Awareness Month.

JENNIFER:

Thank you.

SABRINA:

Thank you for having me.

SHARON:

This has been INside the OUTcomes: A Rehabilitation Research Podcast. This podcast is supported by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living and Rehabilitation Research. This is your host Sharon Parmet signing off.