

# Enhancing Employment Outcomes

Professor Josephine Wilson



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Professor Josephine Wilson currently serves as the Director of the Substance Abuse Resources and Disability Issues Program. Here, she answers questions about her latest research project, which aims to make vocational rehabilitation available online to those with disabilities.



**To start off, what inspired you to work with disabled persons? Do you focus your work on vocational rehabilitation (VR), or do you work with disabled persons in other capacities as well?**

Even before we became SARDI—or the Substance Abuse Resources and Disability Issues Program—the observation from my staff who included rehabilitation counsellors was that there were no substance abuse and mental health treatment programs that were willing or able to treat individuals with disabilities in our geographical area. We began first by studying this issue and then opened the first clinical unit in our area to offer substance abuse and mental health treatment for individuals with disabilities. These groups included those who are deaf or have conditions like traumatic brain injury or developmental delays. Our work has focused on VR (including supportive employment), mental health and substance abuse treatment and recovery services, and online resources for individuals with disabilities.

**This project requires that a number of counsellors participate. How did you select the counsellors you will be working with? Will they be communicating both with you and the other counsellors frequently throughout the course of this study? Beyond that, do you have other collaborators, and if so, has that complicated the project in any way?**

We will be working with counsellors in two states who work for State VR offices. Our plan also includes recruiting counsellors who are

with private VR firms. We will be allowing the state VR agencies to recruit the counsellors for us.

Apart from this, the procedure includes the production of a webinar series about online VR services. The goal of the webinar series is to provide continuing education credits to VR counsellors. The expectation at the end is to have these counsellors be interested in trying out our online services after viewing our webinars. We will use the same tactic with private VR agencies, which is to allow the administrators to recruit volunteers for us. Beyond the organizations that are supplying VR counsellors to our project, we have no outside collaborators on this field-initiated project. The state agencies are anxious to work with us, given cuts to their budgets, particularly in the area of counsellor travel.

**Your research plan includes following up with patients for up to a year as they receive VR. Are you concerned about whether the patients will continue the treatment for the duration of the study, and do you expect a certain percent of patients to drop out?**

The amount of time a VR consumer spends with the VR counsellor depends on a number of factors. We will continue to make our online services available to any consumer until they have been discharged from VR counselling services. If they receive VR counselling services for longer than one year, they will be dropped from our study (i.e., we'll stop collecting data on them), although online services will continue to be available for them.

Of course, we do expect a certain number of consumers to drop out, but most of them do remain because this is how they stay eligible for benefits/income. On the other hand, any consumer who asks to be returned to traditional (a.k.a. face-to-face) VR services will be transferred immediately – this is one piece of data we will be tracking.

**Why did you choose Kentucky, Illinois and Ohio as the locations to conduct your research?**

We chose these three states because we have worked successfully with them on other grant-funded VR projects related to assessment and supported employment. Since receiving the grant, Kentucky has asked not to participate because of another unrelated project that they have implemented. We've decided that, rather than enlist another state to work with us (and I am certain many states with large rural populations would have loved to join on), we might try out the feasibility of these services in a private VR setting.

**Did you have any difficulty securing funding for this project?**

It took us two tries to NIDRR (now NIDILRR) to land a grant. Our first proposal was too unrealistic and grandiose, as it involved too many states and too many consumers, but we pared our project down and received funding the second time around.

# Online Job Services for the Disabled

The Substance Abuse Resources and Disability Issues Program (SARDI) recently received funding from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research to conduct a research project that will provide online vocational rehabilitation (VR) services to persons with disabilities.

## INCREASED ACCESS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Many persons with disabilities (PWDs) face numerous challenges when looking for employment. While many states have counselling services designed to help with training and the job search process, these services may not be easily accessible to those with severe disabilities. For some, lack of mobility or transportation makes it physically impossible for them to travel to a counselling centre. For others, their access to counselling services may be limited due to cultural and social problems, such as a reduced ability to communicate. Professor Josephine Wilson works to alleviate this problem by developing online programs for PWDs who need assistance finding jobs.

Wilson's online platform can provide nearly all the necessary services to those who need them, with the exception of a few tasks that must be performed on-site, such as on-the-job training or fittings for assistive devices. Consumers using the online platform will be able to access pre-employment assessments, career exploration advice, job-seeking skills training, job search assistance, guidance and counselling, vocational training, assistive technology, job placement assistance and benefits planning. Post-employment VR consumers have access to supported employment services, job coaching and support and transport services. The online programs will be evaluated to determine in three ways: ease and effectiveness of use, contribution to the improvement of employment outcomes and satisfaction with the service for both VR counsellors and consumers.

By creating an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) together with the counsellors, the online services cater to an individual's needs. The skills, work history and natural ability of consumers will help counsellors determine the specific course of

action that will benefit a particular customer. The online platform is comprised of web portals, which are personal web pages that can be accessed using a unique username and password. Each web portal has buttons which direct the user to online counselling sessions, homework assignments, online job listings, VR assessment tools or social networking sites. Counsellors can assign consumers to complete certain tasks using the portals.

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Some of these assignments may include reviewing web pages that will help them pick the right career through links to articles, websites and videos. They can gain even more information about potential jobs through informational interviews and job shadowing, which are also available online. Counsellors may also request that the consumer complete the O\*Net Online Skills Search Assessment so that they can discuss the results together. After reviewing the resource materials available, the counsellor and consumer may discuss a plan of action so that the consumer can continue career exploration on their own. The counselling sessions will also focus on educating the consumer about what to expect during their career exploration. This may eliminate the cost of authorizing career exploration services or reduce the number of hours for the job search process. Increasing consumer independence is



one of the major goals of this project, since the online platform allows them to be more active in their own vocational rehabilitation, be more accountable for their job search outcomes, and have a better understanding of the services that are available to them.

#### **SUPPORT FOR COUNSELLORS, TOO**

Another major goal of this project is to train VR counsellors about the potential benefits and proper use of online tools for vocational rehabilitation. The online platform benefits counsellors by allowing them quick and easy access to consumers via video conferencing technology. This will increase face-to-face time with consumers and strengthen the counsellor-consumer relationship. The use of these online services will also reduce the need for counsellors to travel to meet with their consumers. By eliminating unnecessary travel time, they will be able to spend more time working directly with consumers. The online service also benefits counsellors by giving them access to a 24-hour call centre with trained IT support staff to help them address a particular consumer's needs. This is beneficial for counsellors who are not included in the original online content.

#### **ANALYSING EFFICACY**

To compare the effectiveness of the newly-developed online VR program with traditional on-site VR, Wilson will conduct a randomised controlled trial. There will be a total of 540 consumers in the study, of the sample, 270

patients will use the online services and 270 patients will use traditional VR services. It should be noted that consumers who are assigned to traditional VR services will likely utilise online services as well. The extent to which each individual uses online resources will be tracked and taken into account during analysis. Those assigned to the online service will receive all services online. It is also important to note that the same counsellors will provide online and face-to-face counselling so that differences among counsellors are accounted for. Comparing online to off-site services allows the researchers to evaluate the process as well as the outcomes for each method. Data will be collected at three, six, nine and twelve months after VR is initiated in both groups. Employment outcome will be determined by consumer retention in VR services, the number of hours of training completed, training completion rates, university enrolment, community college enrolment, hours of employment completed per week, duration of employment and wages received.

The researchers will compare the success and cost-effectiveness of the programs, and assess whether these online programs are feasible, easy-to-use for consumers and easy-to-adopt for VR counsellors. The number of minutes counsellors need technical assistance will also be considered when deciding whether an online program is more time-efficient. Throughout the course of this project, researchers also aim to ensure that the services are optimised for any platform, including computers, smartphones and tablets. The effectiveness of the programs will be evaluated using variables such as the number and types of VR services received, the number and types of accommodations required, the total cost of services and employment outcomes. Consumer and counsellor attitudes toward the online program will also be surveyed and reviewed, since it is hypothesised that users will regard it favourably.

Ultimately, the researchers at SARDI hope to enhance employment outcomes for many individuals. The ability to use these services anywhere, at any time and using any device is critical. Ease of access to these resources will likely significantly speed up the VR process to the benefit of both counsellor and consumer. An efficient process for PWDs and their counsellors means that more work will be accomplished, and increased productivity has potential socioeconomic benefits.

## Researcher Profile



#### **Professor Josephine Wilson**

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Professor Josephine Wilson' began studying psychology at SUNY Fredonia. Later on, she received her Ph.D. in Psychology at Columbia University. She also completed training as a dentist at SUNY Buffalo. Currently, she teaches community health at the Boonshoft School of Medicine at Wright State University. Wilson has received numerous awards, including the Omicron Delta Kappa Distinguished Teaching Award for New Faculty, the Wittenberg University Alumni Association Distinguished Teaching Award, and the Outstanding Achievement Award from SUNY Fredonia. She serves as a reviewer for National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) grants and is the faculty representative for Wright State University on the Federal Demonstration Partnership.

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