

## CONTENT EXPERTISE

# Unprepared and Overlooked: Strengthening Disaster Readiness in Vocational Rehabilitation

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As the frequency and complexity of disasters increase, vocational rehabilitation (VR) systems face growing challenges in maintaining service continuity for individuals with disabilities. Disasters can disrupt access to employment supports, assistive technology, counseling relationships, and vocational planning placing both clients and professionals at heightened risk. This article presents findings from an informal, practice-focused poll of 150 VR counselors working in public and private settings. The results reveal critical gaps in disaster preparedness, including limited formal training, uncertainty about agency-level planning, and low confidence in crisis response. Drawing on these findings, the article offers actionable, practice-based recommendations to strengthen disaster readiness through professional training, organizational planning, client engagement, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Ensuring that VR professionals are equipped to respond to disruption is essential to advancing equity, continuity, and resilience in rehabilitation services.

### Introduction

In recent years, communities across the nation have faced an escalating number of disasters, including hurricanes, wildfires, pandemics, and infrastructure failures, that have disrupted daily life and strained public systems (Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), 2022; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023). As these events increase in frequency and scale, their disproportionate impact on individuals with disabilities has become increasingly evident (Kintziger & Scales, 2025; Morales, 2025; National Council on Disability, 2023; Nguyen-Trung et al., 2025; Putsoane et al., 2024). Disruptions such as prolonged power outages that limit access to mobility devices or medical equipment, and transportation shutdowns that isolate individuals from employment and rehabilitation services, contribute to significant health consequences for people with disabilities (Casey et al., 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024; Vance et al., 2023). For many people with disabilities, such disruptions can undermine years of progress toward independence, employment, and social participation (Stough & Kelman, 2018; Thomas et al., 2022; Twigg et al., 2011)

## Vocational Rehabilitation Training and Disaster Preparedness

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals play a central role in supporting individuals with disabilities to prepare for, enter, and maintain employment (Chan et al., 2009; Chun et al., 2024; Hartley & Tarvydas, 2022; Rehabilitation Services Administration, n.d.; Rubin et al., 2016; Strauser, 2020). However, when disaster strikes, rehabilitation services are often paused, deprioritized, or redirected leaving clients without guidance, coordination, or timely access to necessary supports (Mills et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2023). The rehabilitation counselor's role becomes even more critical during these moments, yet few professionals receive training in how to adapt services, communicate with clients, or navigate emergency systems during times of disaster or crisis. Although vocational rehabilitation (VR) training typically emphasizes employment support and accommodations, there is limited emphasis on disaster preparedness within these programs. A review of global health system rehabilitation preparedness noted that rehabilitation professionals in low- and middle-income countries often lack integration in disaster-response training which is a pattern that parallels the U.S. context and underscores a systemic gap in VR professional competencies (Gosling et al., 2024). Similarly, a needs assessment of State VR counselors revealed significant demand for technical assistance and targeted training across multiple domains, including outreach, employment services, and crisis response suggesting that disaster-preparedness modules may be a critical addition to VR training portfolios (Tansey et al., 2022). In parallel, emerging approaches in trauma-informed care underscore the importance of preparing VR counselors to respond to crisis conditions effectively. For example, VR counselors who receive specialized training in trauma-informed rehabilitation report improved self-efficacy in applying these skills during critical incidents or emergencies (Kim et al., 2024). Together, these insights suggest a clear need to embed disaster-related competencies, such as crisis communication, remote service delivery, and interagency coordination, into VR education, continuing education programs, and technical assistance strategies to strengthen the profession's readiness in disaster contexts.

### Vocational Rehabilitation, Emergency Management Systems and Individuals with Disabilities

While emergency management systems have improved their efforts to include individuals with disabilities in disaster planning frameworks (e.g., FEMA, CDC, UNDRR), vocational rehabilitation services remain largely siloed from these efforts. In practice, VR professionals are expected to address the long-term functional, emotional, and economic consequences of disasters (Amatya & Khan, 2023) yet are rarely equipped to do so. Without agency-level continuity plans or disaster-related competencies embedded in professional training, rehabilitation counselors are left vulnerable to service disruptions. These gaps in preparedness pose serious risks for clients, who may lose access to employment support services, vocational training

programs, and essential assistive technologies during and after a disaster. (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) & ATscale (2025). Counseling relationships may be disrupted in the absence of secure and stable communication systems, particularly when internet infrastructure is compromised during a disaster (Benda et al., 2020; Ramsetty & Adams, 2020). For some individuals, especially those in rural or marginalized communities, recovery may be slow and fragmented, potentially delaying return-to-work efforts or leading to complete disengagement from vocational rehabilitation services (Schaffer, 2023; Stough & Kelman, 2018).

In light of the growing frequency, intensity, and complexity of disasters, vocational rehabilitation professionals face increasing challenges in maintaining service continuity, client engagement, and equitable access to employment supports. These disruptions become acute for individuals with disabilities who rely on stable systems of care and communication. This article examines the current readiness of vocational rehabilitation professionals to respond effectively in such contexts. Drawing on findings from an informal field survey, it highlights critical themes from a practice-based perspective, regarding training, agency preparedness, and perceived competence. The article concludes with actionable recommendations for integrating disaster readiness into vocational rehabilitation education, operations, and service delivery, ensuring that the profession is equipped to meet the demands of a world increasingly shaped by crisis and disruption.

### Method

To further explore the challenges outlined above and assess the current state of disaster readiness within the vocational rehabilitation profession, an informal, practice-focused survey was conducted in early 2025. The purpose of this field inquiry was to gather initial insights into vocational rehabilitation counselors' awareness, training exposure, and perceived preparedness to support clients before, during, and after a disaster or crisis.

The survey was disseminated via email to a convenience sample of vocational rehabilitation counselors employed in both public and private rehabilitation settings across multiple U.S. states. The instrument consisted of three brief, open-ended questions:

1. Have you received any formal training in disaster management or preparedness?
2. Are you aware of your agency's disaster preparedness plan as it relates to VR services?
3. Do you feel personally prepared to assist clients before, during, or after a disaster or crisis?

Table 1. Distribution of Surveyed Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals

| Category                                      | Frequency | Proportion (%) |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Total Respondents                             | 150       | 100.0          |
| State Vocational Rehabilitation Professionals | 140       | 93.3           |
| – General VR Counselors                       | 130       | 86.7           |
| – Blindness/Low Vision Specialists            | 7         | 4.7            |
| – Deaf/Hard of Hearing Specialists            | 3         | 2.0            |
| Private Rehabilitation Professionals          | 10        | 6.7            |
| – Case Managers                               | 5         | 3.3            |
| – Life Care Planners                          | 2         | 1.3            |
| – Expert Witnesses                            | 3         | 2.0            |

A total of 150 responses were received over a three-week period. While the results are not generalizable, the survey was designed to elicit broad, qualitative insights into practitioner perspectives on disaster preparedness. Respondents were not asked to provide personal identifying details, or specified agency affiliation. However, they were asked to indicate their professional category (e.g., state or private sector) and area of specialization setting or caseload focus (e.g., general VR, blindness/low vision, deaf and hard of hearing, case management, life care planning, expert witness, etc.).

To contextualize the sample, [Table 1](#) presents a breakdown of the professional roles and settings of the 150 survey respondents. Most participants were general vocational rehabilitation counselors working within state rehabilitation systems, with a smaller representation from specialty caseloads and private rehabilitation sectors.

Responses were reviewed using a basic qualitative content analysis approach consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. Recurring patterns of language and sentiment were analyzed to identify salient themes related to training gaps, agency-level planning awareness, and counselor confidence in disaster response. These emergent themes offer a grounded understanding of professional perspectives that can inform both policy and practice within vocational rehabilitation.

## Results

Analysis of the responses revealed three salient themes that highlight critical gaps in vocational rehabilitation disaster preparedness: (1) limited formal training, (2) lack of clarity regarding agency-level planning, and (3) low perceived confidence in supporting clients during disaster-related disruptions.

### Limited Formal Training

The overwhelming majority of respondents 95% reported having received no formal training in disaster preparedness or emergency response. This absence of exposure was reflected in numerous comments such as, "We've never had a training on this topic," and "I wouldn't know where to begin

if a disaster disrupted my clients' services." These responses underscore the need for integrated training in emergency planning as part of professional development and counselor education programs.

### **Uncertainty About Agency-Level Planning**

A second major theme emerged around agency-level ambiguity and communication breakdowns. Approximately 84% of respondents indicated that they were either unaware of or uncertain about whether their agency maintained a disaster preparedness plan relevant to vocational rehabilitation services. Sample comments included, "If my agency has a plan, I've never seen it," and "I think there might be something in HR, but nothing that applies to our caseloads." These statements suggest that even when plans exist, they are not consistently communicated or tailored to frontline vocational rehabilitation practice.

### **Low Confidence in Disaster Response Capacity**

The third theme reflected a general lack of confidence in professionals' ability to respond effectively in disaster scenarios. Many respondents described feeling unprepared to modify services, support clients, or maintain continuity of care under crisis conditions. One participant stated, "I feel confident in vocational planning, but not in navigating emergencies," while another remarked, "I'd be scrambling to figure it out in real time." These sentiments illustrate a gap not only in training, but also in self-efficacy which is a crucial component of crisis response readiness. These findings suggest a clear readiness gap, one that affects both professionals and the clients they serve.

Taken together, these findings highlight a clear readiness gap that extends beyond technical knowledge and into broader issues of agency communication, counselor preparation, and systemic planning. Although the poll was informal and not representative of the entire VR workforce, the consistency of responses across a diverse group of practitioners suggests that disaster preparedness remains an underdeveloped area of vocational rehabilitation practice and is one with direct implications for client outcomes, service continuity, and professional confidence.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this informal field-based poll underscore the urgent need for vocational rehabilitation systems to adapt to the realities of a world increasingly shaped by disasters and crises. As the discussion highlights, gaps in training, agency-level planning, and counselor confidence are not just administrative oversights but have direct implications for client safety, service continuity, and long-term employment outcomes. To bridge these gaps, the following practice recommendations are proposed. These strategies are grounded in the emerging themes identified in the survey and reflect practical, systems-level approaches that can be implemented by training programs, state and private VR agencies, and frontline counselors. Together,

they offer a pathway toward a more resilient and responsive rehabilitation infrastructure and one that is equipped to support clients not only in times of progress, but also in moments of disruption and recovery.

### **Practice Recommendations**

#### **Incorporate Disaster Preparedness into VR Training and Continuing Education**

Rehabilitation counselor education programs and professional development initiatives should include modules focused on disaster impacts, continuity of operations, and disability-inclusive emergency planning. Training should build core competencies in areas such as trauma-informed service delivery, adaptive documentation, crisis communication, and interagency collaboration.

#### **Develop and Share Agency-Level Preparedness Plans**

VR agencies should establish and communicate comprehensive disaster preparedness and continuity of operations plans. These should include staff contact trees, secure access to case records, remote service delivery protocols, and clear guidance for temporary caseload reassignment or triage during service disruptions.

#### **Facilitate Interdisciplinary Partnerships**

Rehabilitation professionals and administrators should actively collaborate with emergency management agencies, public health systems, disability organizations, and workforce development entities. These partnerships should be formalized in advance of emergencies and aim to promote equitable recovery planning and inclusive service delivery.

#### **Normalize Disaster Conversations with Clients**

Rehabilitation counselors should routinely engage clients in brief, proactive conversations about how a disaster might affect their employment plans or service access. Topics may include emergency contacts, alternative communication methods, backup access to assistive technology, and potential adjustments to work settings or goals. These conversations promote resilience without creating undue concern.

#### **Closing the Gap and Strengthening Disaster Response**

The findings presented in this article reveal a significant and actionable gap in the vocational rehabilitation field's capacity to function effectively during disaster and crisis conditions. While VR professionals are well-equipped to support employment-related outcomes under typical circumstances, the survey data suggests that most feel unprepared to adapt services in the face of widespread disruption. This lack of preparation, compounded by limited agency-level planning and unclear protocols, places strain on both practitioners and the clients they serve.

Moving forward, strengthening disaster responsiveness within VR requires a shift in how preparedness is framed not as an add-on, but as an integral part of service delivery and professional competence. By embedding preparedness into training, fostering collaborative networks, and engaging clients in planning, the field can build a more resilient foundation for future challenges.

As disasters continue to reshape the social and economic landscape, the vocational rehabilitation profession has an opportunity, and a responsibility, to evolve accordingly. With thoughtful planning and practical action, VR systems can become better positioned to support continuity, equity, and empowerment, even under the most difficult circumstances.

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