



Ethical Considerations for Distance Counseling

Introduction

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) and Case Managers are often faced with numerous challenges that have an impact on Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) service provision. One of these challenges involves providing VR&E services to Veterans/ Servicemembers that reside in rural/remote areas as well as outside the United States. Currently, VRCs and Case Managers undergo extensive, time-consuming travel to provide these services and Veterans/ Servicemembers are often required to travel to frequent appointments at a centrally-located Regional Office, which can be inconvenient and expensive.

Telecounseling has proven to be a remedy for the above mentioned problems and is a supplement to the traditional face-to-face services that VRCs and Case Managers provide. TeleCounseling involves counseling and support when distance or time separates the Veteran/ Servicemember from the counselor.

As VR&E Service begins taking strides towards the implementation of TeleCounseling, it is important for all VR&E Case Managers to be aware of the ethical considerations of TeleCounseling.

Objective(s)

The purpose of this training is to inform all VRCs and Case Managers of general ethical considerations that they should be aware of while entering into a video counseling session with a Veteran/ Servicemember.

Distance Counseling-Professional Organizational Views

Since distance counseling is gaining momentum as a highly effective tool in the field of vocational rehabilitation, credentialing boards and professional organizations have included ethical standards and expectations for counselors and organizations that provide distance counseling as a service.



Commission on
Rehabilitation Counselor
Certification (CRCC®)

The Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) holds rehabilitation counselors to the same level of expected behavior and competence as defined by the CRC/CRCC Code of Ethics regardless of the technology used (e.g., cellular phones, email, facsimile, video, audio, audio-visual) or its application (e.g., assessment, research, data storage).



The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics states that “counselors understand that the profession of counseling may no longer be limited to in-person, face-to-face interactions and that counselors should understand the additional concerns related to the use of distance counseling, technology, and social media and make every attempt to protect confidentiality and meet any legal and ethical requirements.”

NOTE: This presentation contains information that was adapted from the [Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification](#) and the [American Counseling Association](#). For more information on Distance Counseling Ethical Considerations, visit the CRCC and ACA web pages to view and download a copy of each organization’s Code of Ethics.

Distance Counseling-Ethical Considerations

CRCC and ACA both identify the following as key ethical considerations for the provision of distance counseling:



- Veteran Capability
- Confidentiality and Informed Consent
- Distance Counseling Interactions
- Unavailability

Veteran Capability:

When providing technology-assisted services, VRCs and Case Managers must determine that Veterans/Servicemembers are functionally and linguistically capable of using the application and that the technology is appropriate for their individual needs. VRCs and Case Managers should verify that Veterans/Servicemembers understand the purpose and operation of technology applications and follow

up with them to correct possible misconceptions, discover appropriate use, and assess subsequent steps.

Note: The use of TeleCounseling is voluntary. VRCs and Case Managers may not require program participants to engage in TeleCounseling.

If determined appropriate, VRCs and Case Managers should guide Veterans/Servicemembers in obtaining reasonable access to Jabber and other pertinent TeleCounseling software when providing technology-assisted services.

Confidentiality and Informed Consent:



VR&E Staff are to ensure that Veterans/Servicemembers are provided sufficient information to adequately address and explain the limits of:

1) Using technology in the counseling process, in general

For VR&E Service, all VR&E Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) and Case Managers may utilize TeleCounseling unless the VR&E Officer (VREO) determines that the use of TeleCounseling is not appropriate or staff's performance may be negatively impacted through TeleCounseling participation. It is also at the discretion of the VREO to determine when new staff may begin using TeleCounseling. All staff that use TeleCounseling must complete the TeleCounseling Training requirements.

2) Maintaining complete confidentiality of client information transmitted through electronic means

For example, before the TeleCounseling session begins, the Case Manager must ensure privacy and confidentiality are upheld during the session. The Case Manager must ensure that other

Counseling/Evaluation/Rehabilitation (CER) Folders and Personally Identifiable Information (PII) are not visible during the session as outlined in M28R.II.A.5.04.

The case manager must inform the Veteran/Servicemember that the TeleCounseling must be held in areas where privacy and confidentiality of information can be maintained.

Note: The Veteran/Servicemember may choose to have a family member present during the TeleCounseling session. VR&E Case Managers are required to obtain the appropriate release of information to conduct these sessions with an outside/third party.

3) Record maintenance and retention policies

VR&E Case Managers are required to document the summary of the TeleCounseling session on VAF 28-1905d, Special Report of Training, VAF 28-1902n, Counseling Record – Narrative Report (Supplemental Sheet), or CWINRS Notes. The narrative must be printed and filed in the Veteran’s CER Folder, unless it is electronically entered into a CWINRS Note.

4) Technology failure, unavailability, or crisis contact procedures

Please see the “Unavailability” Section on the following pages

5) Protecting client information during the counseling process and at the termination of services

Please review TMS # VA 10176 (VA Privacy and Information Security Awareness and Rules of Behavior) for specific guidance on protecting client information.

Distance Counseling Interactions:



- a) **BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS:** As discussed previously, VRCs and Case Managers should inform clients of the benefits and limitations of using technology applications in the counseling process and in business procedures.
- b) **INAPPROPRIATE APPLICATIONS:** If the technology-assisted distance counseling services are deemed inappropriate by VR&E Officers, VRCs, Case Managers and the Veteran/Servicemember, VRCs and Case Managers are to document this decision and pursue services face-to-face or by other means.
- c) **BOUNDARIES:** VRCs and Case Managers are to discuss and establish boundaries with clients, family members, service providers, and/or team members regarding the appropriate use and/or application of technology and the limits of its use within the counseling relationship.

Unavailability:

- a) **TECHNOLOGICAL FAILURE:** VRCs and Case Managers are to explain to Veterans/Servicemembers the possibility of technology failure and provide an alternative means of communication (e.g. telephone, email, face-to-face).
- b) **UNAVAILABILITY:** VRCs and Case Managers are to provide Veterans/Servicemembers with instructions for contacting them when they are unavailable through technological means as mentioned above.
- c) **CRISIS CONTACT:** VRCs and Case Managers are to provide referral information for at least one agency or rehabilitation counselor-on-call for purposes of crisis intervention for clients within their geographical region (e.g. 9-1-1 Service, Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Regional Office VR&E Officer/Assistant VR&E Officer, Supervisory VRC or Counselor-in-Charge).

Conclusion

As VR&E Service moves towards TeleCounseling, it is important to note that TeleCounseling will not totally replace the conventional mode of service delivery. Rather, it will complement the conventional mode to improve access and the caliber of rehabilitation counseling services provided to Veterans/Servicemembers. While conducting TeleCounseling appointments, it is important to remember that the counseling modality has two dimensions: the technical dimension and the human dimension. VRCs and Case Managers must always focus and nurture the human component of this dimension first and technical dimension second.

Remember, if you have any questions please contact your VR&E Field Liaison.

Area	Primary	Alternate	E-mail
Eastern	Vacant	Veronica Brown	VAVBAWAS/CO/VRE/EA
Southern	Veronica Brown	Vacant	VAVBAWAS/CO/VRE/SA
Central	Marisa Liuzzi	Vacant	VAVBAWAS/CO/VRE/CA
Western	Vacant	Marisa Liuzzi	VAVBAWAS/CO/VRE/WA

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If you have any problems with this process, please contact [Lamoyd Figures](#) or 407-835-5617.