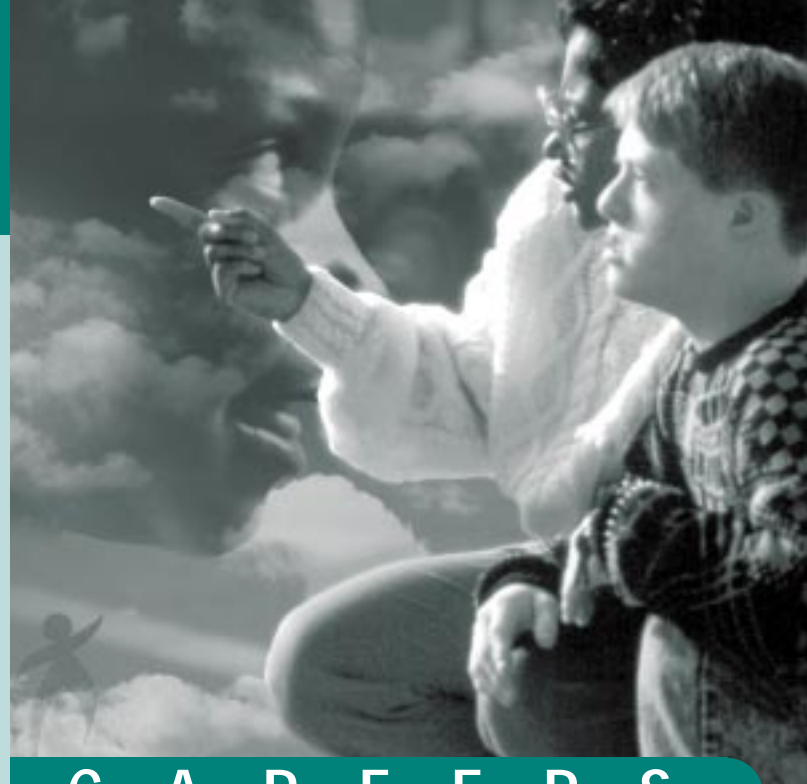


# Rehabilitation Counselor

Making  
**A**

**DIFFERENCE** in the **lives** of **students** with **special needs**

*“Steve is a young man with mental retardation. Although we worked several hours together on one of his goals, telling time, he never managed to master it. However, I did find him a job, first mowing grass at a nearby cemetery and then as a porter for a city park. But Steve wanted to do more than the menial labor assigned to him. Unfortunately, to move up the park’s employment ladder, he needed his driver’s license. I spent several sessions helping him study the rules and regulations of the road, until he was ready to take his driver’s test. He took the test several times and failed the written component each time. After the prerequisite number of failures, the state finally allowed him to take the test orally, and he passed! His parents sent me a letter of gratitude. Steve was thrilled, because he could do more varied work for the city, but the biggest reward for me was the smile on his face when he walked out of that test. I can only say he was beaming! And perhaps only he and I knew how hard he had worked to earn that smile.”*



## C A R E E R S

in Special  
**E**ducation  
and Related **S**ervices



**That is just one story** from one rehabilitation counselor. There are over 20,000 rehabilitation counselors working in the United States, and they can carry caseloads from 25 to 150 clients. These counselors assist teenagers and adults with disabilities to become employed and lead fuller lives. Rehabilitation counselors work for public service organizations, government agencies, or private firms. Those employed by state agencies often work with teenagers who are about to enter or have just entered the work force. Disabilities that rehabilitation counselors deal with can range from hearing, visual, and mobility impairments to mental retardation or long-term mental illness.

**Rehabilitation services** were originally limited to wounded veterans returning from World War I. During the 1920s, governments on all levels (federal, state, and local) expanded these services to include all citizens, not just veterans. Subsequent legislation, primarily federal, has continued to expand the role of rehabilitation counseling. Although job counseling and help are still major priorities of rehabilitation counselors, quality-of-life issues, such as medical treatment, training, corrective surgery, and therapeutic counseling also can fall within their domain. Today, rehabilitation counselors help people with disabilities deal with the personal, social, physical, and vocational impact of their disabilities.



## Nature of Work

The day-to-day duties of a rehabilitation counselor vary depending on the clients they serve. Many rehabilitation counselors are employed by state agencies and work with high school students with disabilities. These counselors help prepare the student for employment and independent living. Because rehabilitation counselors deal with employment issues, they do not typically work with young children. They work with the older student and the young adult. They are usually assigned to one or more high schools and provide services for these youths well into their twenties, or until they are functioning as well as possible on their own.

Rehabilitation counselors first evaluate the overall status of each client to help him/her find ways to meet individual needs, interests, and capabilities. To do this, the counselors meet with the client, give aptitude or other tests, if appropriate, discuss interests and otherwise get to know the client and establish a basis for trust. Rehabilitation counselors also meet with the client's parents, teachers, and other key adults to discuss any pertinent medical or psychological history.

After getting to know the client, the rehabilitation counselor plans a program that meets the client's needs. To accomplish this, the counselor must be aware of, or sometimes help establish, local job training programs and seek job openings. They may also contact community agencies that can help locate specialized training suitable for the individual, such as a guide dog program for a client who is blind.

Rehabilitation counselors will continue to meet with the clients over months or years to assess their progress, to see if anything has changed, or to just keep in touch. If one employment placement does not work for a client, the rehabilitation counselor may suggest a different one. If the counselor and the client feel the client is capable of progressing to more demanding work, the counselor may encourage the client and his/her parents to consider more challenging positions.

The counselor is also a resource for parents. If a high school student encounters difficulty with an academic subject or a particular teacher or group of students, the counselor may be called by the distressed parents. When a student with disabilities exits high school, the rehabilitation counselor may be the one constant in that student's academic life. The student

remains a part of the caseload of the rehabilitation counselor, and the counselor remains a resource and support for both the student and his or her family.

## Education Required

Generally, employers, whether private or state agencies, require a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling, counseling and guidance, or counseling psychology. However, some employers will hire individuals with a bachelor's degree in rehabilitation services, counseling, psychology, or a related field. Sometimes employers require that counselors be certified by the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification.

Course work for a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling typically involves five major areas: foundations of rehabilitation, client assessment, planning and service delivery, counseling and interviewing, and job development and placement. A field internship is frequently a part of both the bachelor's and the master's program.

## Personal Qualities

A rehabilitation counselor should be able to inspire, motivate, guide, and teach others. Being able to organize and coordinate are also important qualities for a counselor who must set up programs and work with a client's educators, employers, and family, as well as with medical and psychological personnel. The ability to communicate clearly in speech and in writing is essential.

A rehabilitation counselor must also be versatile. He or she must win the trust of not only the clients with disabilities but also the local store manager or business CEO (chief executive officer) who could employ the clients. Counselors must be familiar with some medical and psychological terminology and be able to calm parents who are upset over the latest setback for their child.

In short, a rehabilitation counselor must have excellent people skills. For someone who is good with people and interested in working with young people, a career in rehabilitation counseling with a state agency that serves teenagers may be ideal.

## PRACTITIONER'S PROFILE



## Judi Bosley

### Rehabilitation Counselor Wheeling, West Virginia

Judi Bosley is a rehabilitation counselor for the state of West Virginia. She is assigned to two high schools. Judi has an office in each school and carries a caseload of 157 clients who are 14 to 24 years old.

Like so many others, Judi did not begin as a rehabilitation counselor. Rather, she began as Coordinator of Services for Individuals with Disabilities at a local community college. Her qualifications include a degree in English and communication. She also has a brother with Down syndrome. Judi feels that growing up with her brother allowed her to accept the reality of disabilities as just another part of life. This familiarity gave her an innate respect for each individual, regardless of whether he or she had a disability.

After a few years with the community college, Judi took specialized training and became a counselor for the deaf for the state's Division of Rehabilitation. However, she missed the school setting of the college, and when a position opened for a school rehabilitation counselor 11 years ago, she applied and was accepted.

**Daily Schedule:** Judi enjoys being back in the school setting and working daily with her clients. She finds the flexibility of the job one of the most rewarding and challenging aspects of her work. Because no two days are alike, Judi develops a schedule the first thing each morning of what must be accomplished that day.

Judi divides her time roughly into the following major segments:

- (1) Counseling the students, both vocational and other counseling. This includes an initial meeting with students to ask about their interests, career goals, and other pertinent data. She stresses that counseling is not a one-time meeting but rather an ongoing process whereby she keeps informed about her clients and how they are doing.
- (2) Meeting with the interdisciplinary team members and others. Because each student has several key professionals, plus family members involved in education, these meetings, both initial and ongoing, are used to make assessments and

evaluations for each client. Interdisciplinary team members can include a case manager, teachers, parents, employment specialists, or agency representatives, sometimes appropriate health personnel, and the student.

(3) Networking on the telephone. Because each client is an individual with individual needs, Judi finds she spends considerable time on the telephone coordinating services, checking medical histories, finding employment, or training opportunities, discussing problems or concerns with parents or the client's psychologist, and talking to employers, both current and prospective.

(4) Establishing and maintaining written records. Judi sometimes begins working with clients when they are 14 years old. More typically, though, she begins meeting individually with her students at age 16 and then writes an Individual Rehabilitation Program with each one. Judi has other reports and forms required by the state and district. With such a large caseload she finds that she devotes a considerable portion of her time to "paperwork."

(5) Meeting with current and prospective employers. To place her clients in a job that best meets their needs, Judi spends the equivalent of one day a week "in the field." She stops by current employers to see how her clients are doing and checks with prospective employers to see if they would consider hiring one or more of her other clients. Judi also places her clients in situational assessments. That is, she places them on the job for a limited period of time to see how they can handle that particular situation. Judi often accompanies her students to the assessment on the first day.

(6) Maintaining her professional awareness. As a professional, Judi feels she must remain abreast of what is happening in the areas of job placement, employment of people with disabilities, and counseling.

**Challenges:** Her greatest challenges come in walking that fine line between helping her clients reach their full potential and helping them realize the real limitations that sometimes exist. "Sometimes I have to watch them make a decision, even when I believe it is a bad decision, like signing on for a training program that I know will overwhelm them. When they wash out of the program, I have to be there to pick up the pieces and help them start over."

**Satisfaction:** Despite her busy schedule, Judi enjoys her job. She feels that she can make a difference. "It is certainly not the kind of job where you say 'Aha, I'm finished!' But I can often give parents hope by locating that assistive device or training program or just assuring them that I will still be around even after their child exits high school." Judi also finds satisfaction in the changing attitudes toward people with disabilities. Both on the individual and government level, people are more aware of the capabilities of people with disabilities and more accepting of their presence. Too often, adults with disabilities are treated as "perennial children", which Judi feels robs them of their innate dignity. She is glad to see growing awareness and respect for these individuals.

## Job Outlook and Advancement

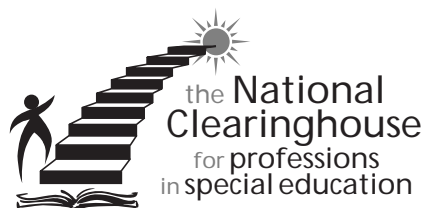
Some estimates have shown that over 43 million Americans have some type of disability that restricts some of their life activities. Both the private sector and all levels of government are showing an increased commitment to helping individuals with disabilities become as independent as they can, including gainful employment where possible. Therefore, the employment outlook for rehabilitation counselors is quite good. There are often more vacancies than there are qualified rehabilitation counselors to fill them.

There is also a great deal of variety within the field of rehabilitation counseling. Rehabilitation services are provided not only to teenagers and young adults but also to older persons, to workers hurt on the job or recovering from drug addiction, to persons with psychiatric problems, and to people who are incarcerated.

Opportunities for advancement most often come in the form of supervisory positions. Some rehabilitation counselors also opt to become private consultants to supplement their income.

## How to Prepare for a Career

Approximately one-third of all rehabilitation counselors are employed by public service organizations. Doing volunteer work with one of these organizations may give you experience and contacts that will allow you to see if the work appeals to you and to track any openings that may come up. Volunteering at a camp for teenagers with disabilities will also give you exposure to a wide range of individuals and disabilities.



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FAX: 703.264.1637  
ncpse@cec.sped.org  
www.special-ed-careers.org

## RESOURCES

**American Counseling Association**  
5999 Stevenson Avenue  
Alexandria, VA 22304  
800-347-6647  
703-823-9800  
703-823-0252 Fax  
See web site for e-mail addresses  
[www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org)

**Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification**  
1835 Rohlwing Road, Suite E  
Rolling Meadows, IL 60008  
847-394-2104

**Council on Rehabilitation Education**  
1835 Rohlwing Road, Suite C  
Rolling Meadows, IL 60008  
847-394-1785

**National Rehabilitation Counseling Association**  
8807 Sudley Road, Suite 102  
Manassas, VA 20110-4719  
703-361-2077  
703-361-1596 TTY  
703-361-2489 Fax  
See website for e-mail addresses  
[www.nrca-net.org](http://www.nrca-net.org)



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