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## Chapter 4 VOCATIONAL EXPLORATION

### 4.01 Introduction

The goal of vocational exploration is to help the Veteran and Servicemember select a suitable vocational objective that is consistent with his/her abilities, aptitudes and interests, and does not aggravate his/her disability(ies). This chapter contains guidance on how to assist the Veteran or Servicemember in his/her vocational exploration and outlines support systems available to him/her to make a suitable career choice. Statutory and regulatory references are provided throughout the chapter.

### 4.02 References and Resources

Regulations:           38 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 21.78  
                              38 CFR 21.84  
                              38 CFR 21.86  
                              38 CFR 21.180  
                              38 CFR 21.430

VA Form (VAF):       VAF 28-1902b, Counseling Record - Narrative Report  
                              VAF 28-1902n, Counseling Record-Narrative Report  
                              (Supplemental Sheet)  
                              VAF 21-8861, Request for Medical Services – Chapter 31

Websites:             <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>  
                              <http://www.onetonline.org/>  
                              <http://www.occupationalinfo.org/>  
                              <http://www.bls.gov/>  
                              <https://www.usajobs.gov/>

### 4.03 Vocational Exploration

#### a. Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Responsibilities

Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) Division is responsible for assisting a Veteran or Servicemember with a Service-Connected Disability(ies) (SCD) prepare for, obtain and maintain suitable employment. Before a Veteran or Servicemember enters into an Individual Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP) or Individual Employment Assistance Plan (IEAP), or during the redevelopment of an IWRP or IEAP, he/she needs to know what his/her options are concerning identifying a suitable career. If the Veteran or Servicemember has transferable skills, training or experience in a suitable occupation, the same or a similar

occupation should be considered prior to exploration of occupations requiring additional training.

b. Vocational Exploration and Informed Choice

Vocational exploration counseling must be provided to every participant in the Chapter 31 program, even if the Veteran or Servicemember already “knows” or has already chosen his/her career. Using vocational exploration tools, resources and a systematic method to explore different careers with the Veteran or Servicemember will ensure he/she makes an informed choice when choosing a suitable career.

c. Documenting Vocational Exploration

VAF 28-1902n, Counseling Record-Narrative Report (Supplemental Sheet), is used to document vocational exploration and planning following the determination that a Veteran or Servicemember is entitled to VR&E services and achievement of a vocational goal is currently reasonably feasible. The goal or outcome of vocational exploration activities is to select a suitable vocational goal that is consistent with the individual's abilities, aptitudes and interests, and does not aggravate the individual's disability(ies). The following information provides guidance for the completion of the form:

1. Vocational Exploration

The activities, assignments and results of the vocational exploration activities are documented. This may include, but is not limited to:

- Research findings, including labor market and information from OOH, O\*Net and/or DOT
- Informational interviews
- Vocational goals considered
- Results of any evaluations (medical, vocational, etc.) and resulting vocational considerations

2. Suitability of Selected Vocational Goal

The selected vocational goal is stated and the suitability of the occupation/field is justified and documented. This may include, but is not limited to, information pertaining to aptitudes, interests, abilities, employment outlook, sufficient training entitlement, transferable skills and

the potential for gainful employment that will not aggravate the Veteran's or Servicemember's disabilities.

3. Type of Plan Developed

The type of plan to be developed is selected.

4. Justification for Selected Type of Plan

An explanation for the reason and basis for selecting the type of plan is provided.

5. Description of How Vocational Goal Will Be Achieved and Planned Services

A description of how VR&E services will assist the Veteran or Servicemember in achieving the selected vocational goal is prepared. The description will include any accommodations and/or supports that will be needed or considered throughout the program. This could comprise supports outside the realm of VR&E Service, such as Veterans Administration Medical Centers (VAMCs), Vet Centers, State vocational rehabilitation offices, independent living centers, and other community supports.

The services necessary to assist the Veteran or Servicemember in reaching the selected occupational goal are identified. The plan should include all services that are required to reach employability in the selected vocational goal. This may include, but is not limited to, services such as:

- Training, supplies and/or equipment
- Independent living services
- Certifications or licensures
- Job modifications or accommodations
- Medical and mental health maintenance
- Preparation for employment
- Collaboration with other agencies or programs

In accordance with 38 CFR 21.84(b)(3), the plan should contain an objective for counseling/mental health treatment and/or medical

treatment for a Veteran or Servicemember with a Serious Employment Handicap (SEH).

6. Retroactive Induction

The consideration for retroactive induction to vocational rehabilitation and any related information are documented. The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Officer (VREO) must provide concurrence prior to approval of retroactive induction.

7. Program Charges and Costs

As part of program planning (38 CFR 21.430), the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) must estimate the program charges and costs (excluding subsistence allowance and Revolving Fund Advances) during a calendar year based on the services necessary to carry out the Veteran's or Servicemember's rehabilitation plan and the total cost of Self-Employment (SE) and Individual Independent Living Plans (ILLP).

8. Level of Approval

The appropriate level of authority required to approve the program costs is selected. If the level of authority exceeds the VRC's level, a description of the program charges and costs, with a justification for exceeding the VRC's level of approval, is prepared.

9. Level of Case Management Justification

The appropriate level of required case management (38 CFR 21.180) is selected and justification for the selection is provided. The selection should be based on the type of program being pursued and the Veteran's or Servicemember's circumstances.

10. Other Considerations

Other pertinent considerations for vocational planning or service provision, such as reduced work tolerance, calendar year costs of services (including the need for any special authorization or concurrence, such as cost approval for independent living construction needs) and anticipated entitlement needed and/or need for extension of entitlement are documented. The concurrence of the case manager or Employment Coordinator (EC) receiving the case is documented in Corporate WINRS Case Management System (CWINRS) if it is being transferred post-plan development.

d. CareerScope Skills Assessment Portal

Results from tests and measurements are a starting point for vocational exploration and assist in identifying appropriate vocational goals and training needed to achieve them. Regional Offices (ROs) must use the national CareerScope assessments for testing purposes. These assessments are accessible to Veterans or Servicemembers via online at the CareerScope National Portal.

The RO CareerScope administrator manages the CareerScope portal. The VRC receives the Veteran's or Servicemember's login instructions from the administrator, and then provides the Veteran or Servicemember with a CareerScope portal link, username and password. The Veteran or Servicemember may access CareerScope from the RO Job Resource Lab (JRL) or his/her home computer. If a Veteran does not have access to a home computer, he/she can take the assessments at a training facility computer lab, local library, or a Career One Stop location.

Once the Veteran or Servicemember has completed the self-administered assessment, the VRC receives an email notification to download the completed CareerScope reports. The VRC is responsible for interpreting and communicating the results of the CareerScope assessments to the Veteran or Servicemember.

CareerScope Portal is for use by VA staff only and may not be used by contractors. The VetSuccess contract requires contractors to supply their own testing materials for Veterans or Servicemembers referred for assessment services.

In the event that the CareerScope assessment does not meet the needs of a Veteran due to specific disability limitations, the VRC must follow the guidelines outlined in Section 4.03.f of this chapter. The VRC must certify that the CareerScope assessment is insufficient and that specialized testing is required for the specific Veteran due to his/her disabilities or other needs. This certification must be documented in VAF 28-1902b, Counseling Record - Narrative Report, under Assessment of Interests, Aptitudes, and Abilities.

e. Circumstances in which Vocational Assessment May be Waived

All eligible Servicemembers and Veterans are entitled to vocational services including a vocational assessment that assists in identifying employment that is consistent with their pattern of abilities, aptitudes, and interests. However, a vocational assessment may be waived in specific circumstances, such as:

1. Servicemembers or Veterans who completed vocational testing when they initially applied for Chapter 31 or Chapter 36 services.
2. Servicemembers or Veterans with the most severe disabilities and are unable to participate in a vocational assessment.
3. Servicemembers or Veterans who have completed a degree program and submitted a copy of his/her transcript of records that may be used in lieu of standardized tests to assess a Veteran's aptitudes and abilities.

Results of the previous vocational assessments may be used during vocational exploration. However, the VRC must ensure that the vocational assessment report is obtained and included in the Veteran's Counseling/Evaluation/Rehabilitation (CER) folder. The vocational assessment report should include a summary of findings and assessments administered. The report should not include raw scores, answer sheets, copies of actual test or computerized printouts.

In addition, the VRC must use his/her professional judgment in determining whether previous assessment results are usable or additional vocational assessments are needed if the initial assessment fails to provide the necessary information for vocational exploration.

The VRC must clearly document the rationale for waiving vocational assessment for individual Servicemembers or Veterans on VAF 28-1902n or CWINRS Note.

f. Vocational Assessments for Veterans or Servicemembers with Special Needs

The standard CareerScope assessment may not be adequate for Veterans or Servicemembers with special needs as a result of their disability conditions or age. A specialized assessment may be required in exploring a suitable vocational goal.

Recommended alternatives for standard vocational evaluations are listed below:

1. Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

The VRC must refer the Veteran or Servicemember to VHA for vocational assessment services. VHA is the primary resource for the provision of vocational evaluation services under the Chapter 31 program for participants with special needs. For example, a Veteran or Servicemember with significant visual impairments may be referred to

VHA's Blind Rehabilitation Services for a specialized evaluation. The VRC will use the VAF 21-8861, Request for Medical Services – Chapter 31 to submit the referral.

2. VetSuccess Contractor

In the event that the required vocational assessment services are not available through VHA, the VRC may refer the Veteran or Servicemember to a contractor under the VetSuccess Contracts. The VRC must ensure that the national contracting procedures for VetSuccess are closely followed.

3. State Vocational Rehabilitation or Other Community Resources

If specialized vocational assessments are not available through VHA or a VetSuccess contractor, the VRC may explore vocational assessment services offered by State Vocational Rehabilitation offices. In addition, the specialized testing may be procured from other community resources. However, the VRC must certify that the requested vocational assessment services are not available through VHA or a VetSuccess contractor and that the specialized testing is required for the specific Veteran or Servicemember due to his/her disability, age, or other needs, prior to the procurement of services. A VA contract specialist must provide assistance in the process for purchasing vocational assessment services to ensure that appropriate procurement procedures are followed. Refer to M28R.V.B.4 for contracting procedures.

g. Other Sources of Vocational Information

In addition to using CareerScope assessment results, many life activities reveal evidence of a Veteran's or Servicemember's pattern of abilities, aptitudes and interests, including:

- Use of leisure time
- Pursuit of education
- Volunteer activities
- Previous employment
- Life experiences

The case manager should use this information to assist the Veteran or Servicemember in the development of a vocational exploration strategy.

h. Vocational Exploration Activities Support

Vocational exploration activities can be conducted during counseling sessions, independently, or in the RO JRL. The following individuals or activities may assist in vocational exploration activities:

- VRC
- Employment Coordinator (EC)
- Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist
- Local Veterans' Employment Representative (LVER)
- Contract counselors
- College or university career exploration, planning and placement representatives
- Librarians in military, college or local libraries
- Attendance at traditional and/or virtual job fairs
- Veteran reading the daily employment or job section of his/her local newspaper or electronic job boards to identify companies coming to or leaving an area where the Veteran desires employment

i. Role of the Employment Coordinator (EC)

During vocational exploration, the EC serves as the expert in employment information and can provide the following services:

- Labor market information for a specific geographic area
- Wage information for a specific geographic area
- Traditional and virtual job fair information
- Assistance in the JRL researching various occupations

j. Using the Job Resource Lab (JRL)

The following services are available to the Veteran or Servicemember in the JRL:

- Access to and instruction on how to use vocational exploration tools, such as the Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH), Occupational Information Network (O\*NET), Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT), social networking websites and the Federal jobs website.
- Access to job vacancy announcements and employer contact information.
- Printed material geared to assist the Veteran or Servicemember in exploring various career opportunities.

k. Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)

The OOH is a nationally recognized source of career information designed to provide valuable assistance to job seekers making decisions about their future work lives. The Handbook is revised every two years. The OOH provides the following career information:

- Training, other qualifications and advancement
- Average earnings
- Employment outlook
- Job outlook
- Typical duties performed
- Projected employment data
- Working conditions
- Related occupations
- Sources of additional information
- Nature of the work

For more information on the OOH, go to <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>

l. Occupational Information Network (O\*NET)

O\*NET is a comprehensive database of worker attributes and job characteristics. Using a code system, the database contains information about Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs), interests, general work activities and work context. The following is a summary of information available on O\*NET:

- Tasks
- Tools & Technology
- Knowledge
- Skills
- Abilities
- Work Activities
- Work Context
- Job Zone
- Education
- Interests
- Work Styles
- Work Values
- Related Occupations
- Wages & Employment
- Sources of Additional Information

For more information on O\*Net, go to <http://www.onetonline.org/>

m. Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT)

From 1938 to the 1990s, vocational lists and employment matching offered by the Federal government were available through the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT). The DOT was first published in hard copy in 1938 and emerged in an industrial economy that emphasized blue-collar jobs.

Updated periodically, the DOT provided useful occupational information for many years. However, its usefulness waned as the economy shifted toward information and services and away from heavy industry occupations. With the shift in the economy, plans developed to replace the book format of the DOT with an online database. A limited use, preliminary version was released in December 1997, followed by a public edition in December 1998. The O\*NET thus, superseded the DOT with current information that can be accessed online or through a variety of public and private sector career and labor market information systems. However, VRCs and ECs are still required to put a DOT code on every IWRP, IEAP and Individual Extended Evaluation Plan (IEEP). When a vocational goal needs to be deferred, the VRC may use DOT code 999 on an IWRP or an IEEP, but never on an IEAP.

Every occupation is assigned a nine-digit code in the DOT. In groups of three, the digits are defined as follows:

- The first three digits identify a particular occupational group.
- The middle three digits are the worker function ratings for data, people and things.
- The last three digits are used to differentiate occupations within related clusters.

For more information on the DOT, go to <http://www.occupationalinfo.org/>

#### n. Social Networking

Networking being the key word, there are two types of social networking methods available to explore vocations.

##### 1. In-Person

The Veteran or Servicemember informs his/her family members, friends, former colleagues and neighbors that he/she is researching different career options and looking for assistance in identifying what might be a good career fit.

##### 2. Online

Prospective employees use websites such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn to research companies and find out what employers are looking for in a candidate. A Veteran or Servicemember exploring vocations should consider using both methods.

## o. USAJOBS

The website <https://www.usajobs.gov/> (USAJOBS) is the Federal government's one-stop clearinghouse for civil service job opportunities with Federal agencies. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) operates this site. Although the website is primarily used for job seekers, it is also a good source for vocational exploration because it indicates labor market trends, positions available, position requirements, required education, travel requirements, salary and the locations of the Federal government positions.

## p. Conducting Information Interviews

The purpose of an information interview is to obtain firsthand knowledge about an occupation from someone who works in the field. Interviews may be conducted either in person or over the telephone depending on the arrangement the Veteran or Servicemember makes with interviewee. If the Veteran or Servicemember is able to meet with the interviewee in person, then he/she should dress professionally and be prepared to ask questions about the occupation. Anticipated questions for the interview may include, but are not limited to, the following:

- How does a person become qualified for work in this field?
- What does a typical workday entail?
- What is the potential for growth in this field?
- How can the likelihood of obtaining employment in this field be improved?
- What is the salary range?
- What are the cognitive and physical demands of the job?
- Is it temporary or permanent employment?
- What are the job duties?

## q. Labor Market Information

The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) provides labor market information online. Included in the information are the following factors within a specific geographical area:

- Highest and lowest paying jobs
- Fastest and slowest growing jobs

- Which jobs have the highest and lowest employment rates

Local labor market information can be obtained through coordination with the EC, DVOP specialist, LVER or by visiting the Bureau's website at <http://www.bls.gov/>

#### 4.04 Fast Track Planning

Fast Track planning is a process designed to provide expedited services to the Veteran or Servicemember by allowing the VRC to defer identification of a specific vocational goal in order to allow the Veteran or Servicemember to begin rehabilitation services more quickly. It is called "Fast Track" planning because the movement from Evaluation and Planning (EP) status to Rehabilitation to the Point of Employability (RTE) status is accelerated by allowing vocational exploration and planning activities, historically completed during EP status, to be completed in RTE status. As a result, plan development and the initiation of services begin earlier in the rehabilitation process. This process ensures a seamless transition with no delay in service to the Veteran or Servicemember who is transferring to Chapter 31 from Chapter 33 and who is already receiving education services through the VA, but has not decided upon a vocational goal. Additionally, this process allows the Veteran or Servicemember to start a rehabilitation plan during their transition period, while concurrently researching the labor market in which they will be seeking employment following discharge in order to select the most appropriate vocational goal.

##### a. Advantages of Fast Track Planning

The two advantages to Fast Track planning include:

- Expedited services to the Veteran or Servicemember.
- Expanded time for the thorough exploration of potential occupational goals.

##### b. Fast Track Planning Procedures

Fast Track planning allows for the identification of a specific vocational goal to be deferred during the development of a rehabilitation plan by allowing the use of DOT code 999 in an IWRP and an IEEP. The following procedures outline the use of Fast Track planning when developing, implementing and administering rehabilitation plans:

1. The rehabilitation plan is developed using DOT code 999-Deferred, as regulated in 38 CFR 21.84 for the development of an IWRP, and 38 CFR 21.86 for the development of an IEEP.
2. The following issues are addressed in the rehabilitation plan:
  - (a) The identification of a suitable vocational objective should include various tasks to assist the Veteran or Servicemember with vocational exploration, similar to what would be expected in EP status. It may also include other potential evaluations or information to determine if a potential vocational goal is suitable, such as a background check, medical evaluations or labor market research.
  - (b) Training objectives will address any needed remedial training and/or general education coursework or a similar training path that allows the Veteran or Servicemember to engage in training and make progress toward the completion of training while exploring a suitable vocational objective.
  - (c) Coordination of services objectives should address medical, psychological and related services, as appropriate, to ensure the Veteran's or Servicemember's needs are addressed and met.
  - (d) Case management objectives must be defined as at least Level 2, meaning a face-to-face meeting is required once per term, or at least three times per year for non-standard terms. It must be noted on the rehabilitation plan that additional meetings may be required to guide the Veteran or Servicemember through the vocational exploration process.
3. The case status is updated in CWINRS:
  - (a) If an IWRP is developed, the case status changes from EP to RTE status.
  - (b) If an IEEP is developed, the case status changes from EP to Extended Evaluation (EE) status. It is important to note that EE status may only be utilized when feasibility for employment cannot be determined.
4. The objectives of the plan are administered while continuing to advise and guide the Veteran's or Servicemember's vocational exploration process. It is important to note that additional counseling meetings may be required during this process to ensure the Veteran has adequate guidance and input from the VRC.

5. When a suitable and/or feasible vocational goal has been identified, the rehabilitation plan is converted from DOT code 999 to the specific identified DOT code. The redevelopment of the rehabilitation plan no longer requires case status movement back to EP status; this action can occur in EE or RTE status.
6. If the Veteran or Servicemember does not follow through with services, elects to discontinue participation or is not accepted into a training program to continue training toward an appropriate vocational goal, the case must be moved to Interrupted (INT) status utilizing Reason Code (RC) 16. While in INT, counseling services are continuously provided to assist the Veteran in determining the appropriate next steps.

c. Fast Track Planning Limitations

The goal of Fast Track planning is to expedite services to the Veteran or Servicemember, while providing a longer period for vocational exploration. This is accomplished by utilizing DOT code 999 on the rehabilitation plan. However, it is necessary to limit the use of DOT code 999 to ensure the Veteran or Servicemember participates in vocational counseling and identifies a vocational goal within a reasonable time period and achieves maximum use of his/her benefits. As such, the use of DOT code 999 is limited to the following criteria:

1. Training is limited to the completion of remedial and/or general education coursework.
2. The maximum duration for a fast track IWRP is 12 months or three consecutive terms, whichever is longer. The VR&E Officer (VREO) can approve an extension up to six months or two consecutive terms of training, whichever is longer, if it is determined that this extended period is needed and will result in the identification of a vocational goal.
3. The maximum duration for a fast track IEEP is 12 months, but may not exceed one term of training. The VREO can approve an extension up to six months or one additional term of training, whichever is longer, if it is determined that this extended period will result in both the identification of a vocational goal and the determination of feasibility to achieve a vocational goal.
4. The Veteran or Servicemember must have at least 12 months of Chapter 31 entitlement remaining or be eligible to receive an extension beyond 48 months per 38 CFR 21.78.

5. Retroactive induction for any prior training cannot be approved until the following actions are completed:
  - A vocational goal is identified.
  - An IWRP with a DOT code other than 999 is developed.
  - It is determined prior training advances the selected vocational goal.
- d. Data Requirements

Each RO will be required to monitor Fast Track participants in RTE status to ensure that the Veteran or Servicemember is not remaining in these temporary plans for longer than the allowable time frame, and that vocational counseling is moving forward as planned. For those Veterans in an IWRP, tracking can be accomplished via Intranet Reports by:

1. Filtering the report to "DOT Categories of All Trainees".
2. Sorting cases by RTE status under DOT code 999.