

Their Own Words: Veterans’ Experiences Receiving Vocational Services in SCI Rehabilitation

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ABSTRACT

This quality improvement project explored how Veterans with SCI experienced IPS-based vocational rehabilitation embedded within routine VA healthcare. Findings reveal how trusted counselor relationships, care integration, and persistent outreach shape meaningful engagement with employment — and why work itself functions as a health intervention for Veterans with SCI.

BACKGROUND

- Employment rates post-SCI remain substantially below national averages
- Work is linked to improved quality of life, improved mental health, and community integration.
- Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is an evidence-based supported employment model proven effective for Veterans with SCI when embedded in clinical care.
- Despite available VR infrastructure, employment is rarely discussed in SCI clinical encounters—Veterans must often find services through self-referral or sporadic outreach.

METHODS

- **Design:** Semi-structured qualitative interviews (quality improvement project)
- **Participants:** 7 male Veterans with SCI who received IPS-based VR within VA healthcare at a VA Medical Center
- **Data Collection:** Audio-recorded via Microsoft Teams; verbatim transcription
- **Analysis:** Three-step coding process: open → axial → selective coding (219 codes; 19 categories)
- **Trustworthiness:** Peer debriefing; thick description to support transferability

IMPORTANCE TO VETERANS

Veterans engaged in Supported Employment as part of their SCI care experience real world changes in their physical and mental health and work life.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Relationship-based Support

VRC relationships were foundational—counselors served as trust navigators, advocates, and consistent points of contact through complex transitions.

Theme 2: Integration of Employment Planning

Veterans described IPS as a part of a care continuum, with work goals aligned to rehabilitation milestones and directly coordinated with the clinical team.

Theme 3: Timing and Readiness

Readiness fluctuated with medical stability and life circumstances. Persistent, low-pressure outreach kept the door open until Veterans were ready.

Theme 4: Employment as a Health Intervention

Veterans framed work as integral to identity, mental health, and ongoing SCI care---not an outcome that follows rehabilitation, but part of it.



SUMMARY

- VR counselors are essential members of SCI interdisciplinary care teams, not ancillary referral resources.
- Early, continuous, and embedded employment support is needed within SCI rehabilitation settings.
- Veteran perspectives offer actionable guidance for moving beyond isolated referrals toward coordinated, relationship-driven vocational care

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was supported by a grant awarded to the Tampa VA Research and Education Foundation from the Craig H. Neilsen Foundation (COI grant #1064274).
The contents do not represent the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States Government.

VETERANS VOICES

1-Relational Support	2-Integrated Care	3-Persistent Presence	4-Health Intervention
<i>“They helped me navigate the complex hiring process, including filling out forms.” — DC</i> <i>“I consider him as a friend because he has helped me a lot and we get along very well.” — JL</i>	<i>“The VA spinal cord clinic connected me with vocational rehabilitation services” — EH</i> <i>“[She] helped me figure out how much I could handle with my injuries and still be successful.” — TW</i>	<i>“I needed someone who was just consistently there, even when I wasn’t ready to engage.” — EH</i> <i>“[She] was constantly in communication—emails, phone calls, even just checking to see how I was doing mentally.” — TW</i>	<i>“When I’m working, it helps with depression. I feel alive, not just existing.” — JL</i> <i>“The vocational rehab program was a godsend. It got me out of a really bad place and back into the world.” — TW</i>