

Human Resources Issues: Recruiting and Retaining Rehabilitation Counselors and Human Service Professionals in Rural, Frontier, and Territory Communities

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Overview

The need for rehabilitation counselors and other allied health and human service providers in rural areas continues to exist as individuals face psychosocial, medical, economic, and other life challenges. For individuals with disabilities, rehabilitation counselors are able to provide direct services, as well as refer out and coordinate services. Currently, each state employs rehabilitation counselors in federal-state vocational rehabilitation agencies and blind services. In addition, rehabilitation counselors can be found in various work settings. The demand for credentialing qualified rehabilitation counselors is reflected in the number of Council on Rehabilitation Education (CORE) and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited training programs in the country. Today, in an era of decreasing allocations for human services and increasing demand for services, rural areas are disproportionately affected not only in available

resources for clients but in adequate numbers of personnel to deliver services.

The recruitment and retention of rehabilitation counselors in rural areas often requires the counselor to be a generalist with a working knowledge and skills in a variety of rehabilitation issues. Counselors must be adept in a variety of rehabilitation and job placement duties as opposed to their urban counterparts who are often more specialized. Counselors and human resource departments are aware of the barriers to recruitment and retention of personnel in rural areas. Recognizing the challenges, however, of rehabilitation counselors in rural areas, the strategies to recruit and retain counselors should temper them with a strong emphasis on the positive features of service delivery in rural areas.

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, the learner should be able to:

1. Explain the negative consequences associated with staff shortages and turnover in rural communities.
2. Understand strategies for recruiting rehabilitation professionals to work in rural communities.
3. Understand strategies to retain valued employees working in rural communities.

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Introduction

In human resources, recruitment and retention of qualified staff is a constant pressure. Unlike in metropolitan areas where there is a concentrated population, more outlets for socialization, shopping, and entertainment, the process of recruitment and retention is different in rural, frontier, and territory communities where fewer people reside. Recruitment needs are great; several demographic shifts such as the aging population, increasing numbers of veterans returning from service with rehabilitation needs, and increased life expectancy for persons with many disabilities and chronic illnesses mean that more people need rehabilitation services than ever before. Since the “applicant pool” in rural areas is smaller, retention of counselors becomes critically important once a qualified person has been hired. For the community, service providers are more than just the availability of the service(s), they also provide infrastructure to the community and are a source of employment (O’Toole & Schoo, 2010). The job outlook for rehabilitation counselors in the USA is positive; figures from the Department of Labor indicate that growth is projected at faster than average for all occupations through 2024 (estimated 9% growth; US DOL, 2015). Rehabilitation counselors work in both public and private settings, including for and not for profit organizations. They may work with children and families, youth and teens, working-age adults, or older adults. Rehabilitation counselors may support vocational, educational, independent living, or physical or mental health-related goals. Yet, the ability to recruit and retain qualified rehabilitation counselors in rural, frontier, and territory areas remains a challenge (Table 35.1).

In the rehabilitation counseling discipline, recruitment and retention poses a significant challenge to rehabilitation agencies in rural and urban settings alike. Contributors include increasing retirement rates, reduced numbers of graduates from rehabilitation counseling programs, and ongoing staff turnover (Armstrong, Hawley, Blankenship, Lewis, & Hurley, 2008). Reports of job satisfaction among rehabilitation counselors have been mixed (Armstrong et al., 2008; Layne,

Table 35.1 Top industry settings for rehabilitation counselors

Setting	Percentage of industry	Hourly mean wage
Vocational rehabilitation services	9.87	\$16.78
Residential facilities	1.82	\$15.47
Individual and family services	1.07	\$16.79
State government	0.74	\$23.35
Local government	0.10	\$21.05

Source: US Department of Labor (2015)

Hohenshil & Singh, 2004), and identified reasons for turnover include lack of advancement opportunity, work overload, poor compensation, and high levels of stress and burnout (Armstrong et al., 2008; Barrett, Riggart, Flowers, Crimando, & Bailey, 1997; Layne et al., 2004). Burnout is a term frequently used in the human services and healthcare fields characterizing the emotional exhaustion that results from the high demands placed on professionals; burnout may include physical, emotional, and/or mental exhaustion (Layne et al., 2004). Although burnout may be substantial among rehabilitation counselors and other human service providers, research suggests coping resources are a protective factor against burnout (Layne et al., 2004).

The issues of recruitment and retention are intertwined. Turnover is costly and detrimental to both the agency itself and clients. Providers functioning with insufficient staff are less likely to achieve organizational goals, and the stress put on other staff when a caseload goes uncovered puts the agency at risk to lose additional employees. For clients, insufficient contact, gaps in support, and the strain associated with getting to know a new provider are all consequences of staff turnover. Counselor job satisfaction has been linked to consumer satisfaction (Capella & Andrew, 2004), meaning that unhappy staff have the potential to negatively influence clients. Recruiting for retention (Rural Health Information Hub, 2014) is a strategy recommended where agencies recruit staff that are a good fit for the agency and community and then continually work to retain them. The following is

a discussion of the challenges inherent in the recruitment and retention of rural counselors and approaches that promote recruitment and retention.

Challenges in Recruitment and Retention of Rural Counselors

Much like other allied health and human services, the availability of rehabilitation services typically declines as the population density decreases. This issue is compounded with the higher rates of age-adjusted disability, chronic health conditions, and mortality than residents in rural areas (Jones, Parker, Ahearn, Mishra, & Variyam, 2009). Professionals in related fields have noted a trend toward practitioners recruited from cities coming to work for a few years in rural areas and then leaving, thus resulting in rural areas earning the reputation as “professional nurseries” (Schoo, Stagnitti, Mercer, & Dunbar, 2005) or places where new clinicians gain experience and learn skills but typically do not stay. Considering the learning curve associated with counseling and human service positions, retaining counselors past their training years is desirable, as this is when clinicians are more experienced and may be more effective. For this reason, authors suggest focusing on factors that attract and retain clinicians who want to live in rural areas rather than those who would prefer to live in urban or suburban locales. In fact, Mackie and Simpson (2007) found bachelor’s-level social work students more likely to seek rural employment if raised in rural communities and expressed greater comfort with living in rural settings, express a desire to raise family in rural communities, feel there is greater sense of community in rural areas, and want to work to improve the quality of life among rural residents. In a study predicting who is more likely to become a social worker in rural areas, Mackie (2007) found students raised in rural areas, participated in rural-based practicum or internship, and received education and training in rural-specific content. It is important to recognize that just as urban and rural areas differ, all rural areas are not the same.

In addition to the expense of continually recruiting and training professionals who do not stay on the job long term (Chisholm, Russell, & Humphreys, 2011), it is disruptive and potentially damaging to clients to continually lose a provider and have to begin services with another person. Negative perceptions of the rural environment, distance from family and friends, lack of social activities and entertainment, and travel costs are all listed as top drawbacks of pursuing positions in rural areas (Schoo et al., 2005). Other considerations are pay, availability of supervision and professional development, and sufficient numbers of clients to build a full caseload/practice (O’Toole & Schoo, 2010). For professionals who wish to live in a given area, the motivation to stay with a particular service provider is strong – unlike urban centers, there are fewer employment opportunities. This often creates stability within providers and agencies, which is a great benefit to professional partnerships and clients alike.

Research Box 35.1 See Sidwell et al. (2006)

In order for agencies in rural areas to recruit and retain qualified candidates, it is important to understand what workers perceive as the most desirable and most challenging aspects of their work. This information is best gathered directly from professionals and may be accomplished through a qualitative approach. The article featured here is based on qualitative survey data gathered from social workers employed in rural counties in Pennsylvania ($N = 113$).

Objective or research question: This was an exploratory study aimed to find out why rural social workers choose to live in these areas and how they describe their jobs and their experiences. This information was gathered to apply to recruitment and retention to social workers and other human service professionals in rural communities.

Method: Researchers mailed surveys to social workers in 14 rural counties in

Pennsylvania. Close and open-ended questions were included to gather perspectives on the desirable and challenging aspects of serving rural communities. One-hundred and thirteen professionals responded to the survey, for a response rate of 65%.

Results: Respondents reported the reasons that they choose to live in rural areas included: relationships (e.g., family ties), the surroundings and lifestyle (e.g., I enjoy the community), and employment (e.g., own or family members job is in this community). In response to the question about the benefits of working in the rural setting, two themes emerged, one was about work and the other related to the community. Responses regarding the work indicated enjoyment of the generalist practice and the value added of being able to help others. Responses related to the community included having a sense of belonging, enjoying the space and natural beauty of the surroundings, and the less hectic lifestyle compared to urban areas. In response to the question regarding challenges, two themes emerged: transportation, and limited resources. The lack of transportation was noted as making serving individuals difficult as was the limited resources of both the agencies as well as clients (e.g., poverty).

Conclusion: Respondents identified several reasons that they enjoy working in rural areas, particularly related to family and personal relationships, and the lifestyle and the close-knit nature of rural communities. Respondents generally reflected a feeling that the work they did was valuable. Challenges associated with limited resources to serve individuals in rural communities and the greater needs of clients (e.g., limited transportation options, greater incidence of poverty) were expressed.

Factors that Promote Rural Counselor Recruitment

In studies of rehabilitation and allied health professionals working in rural areas, researchers found several common themes related to why individuals were interested in pursuing their jobs. For those who were originally from the region, having personal or family ties was a common response. Another compelling reason was opportunity for family – including employment opportunities for spouse or partner and quality of education and opportunities for children (Daniels, VanLeit, Skipper, Sanders, & Rhyne, 2007). For those who grew up elsewhere, training on service in rural areas, exposure to working in the region through clinical internships, desire to serve an area with high need, and financial incentives for working in an underserved area were reported as encouragers to pursue rural employment (Daniels et al., 2007; Winn, Chisholm, Hummelbrunner, & Hummelbrunner, 2014). Other perceived benefits of positions in rural communities include career opportunity, challenge and autonomy, and feeling that you are doing an important job (Campbell, McAllister, & Eley, 2012). Benefits of rural living expressed by human service employees include nice living environment, relaxed lifestyle, ease of commute, friendly and welcoming community, and affordable real estate (Denham & Shaddock, 2004). The following is a discussion of strategies utilized by agencies looking to enhance recruitment, particularly recent graduates of counselor training programs.

Partnerships with Counselor Training Programs

In order to increase visibility with students training in rehabilitation services, Human Resources Directors (HRDs) might consider investing in direct and ongoing communication with university partners, considering them an important audience for community outreach (Dew, Alan, & Tomlinson, 2008). Some methods for connecting include both in-person and technology-assisted outreach to reduce the strain of travel. If feasible,

have counselors visit students and programs to discuss benefits of rural employment. Open agency doors for visits, allowing students and faculty to come see the agency space and get a sense for day-to-day operations. Counselors and staff who are taking classes to obtain credentials are also good potential recruiters. Respondents to a survey of VR agencies noted that this method is used frequently and considered effective; agency staff reported filling approximately 25% of vacancies this way. As stated by one agency representative, “our people can be our best ambassadors, but they must want to be” (Dew et al., 2008, p. 66). Bishop, Crystal, and Sheppard-Jones (2003) concurred with this sentiment, stating that counselors who are committed and enjoy their work are potentially powerful recruiters.

As key partners, agencies have the opportunity and responsibility to inform training programs of the needs of the field. Sharing this information is particularly important for rural service providers whose circumstances often differ from community partners in urban and suburban areas. Findings from a study of rural allied health professionals suggested that programs that recruit applicants from rural areas and include rural services as an aspect of training have more students who pursue work in rural communities postgraduation (Daniels et al., 2007). Rural service providers can assist programs with developing rural-specific content to compliment training and serve as potential guest speakers, mentors, or resource experts for students during their studies. This ensures that trainees are getting content that reflects the realities and benefits of serving rural residents.

Given the challenges associated with building relationships over great geographical distance, utilizing technology to be present and keep in touch with educational program partners may be prudent. If it is not feasible to visit in person, making use of teleconference or video technology to be a guest speaker, participate in advisory meetings, or working one-on-one with students still allows for interaction. Video technology has the added benefit of enhancing personal interactions. When possible, investing in travel so that

face-to-face meetings or visits can occur is also important.

Providing Mentored Training Opportunities

Fieldwork requirements for counselor program accreditation include both practicum and internship (Council for Accreditation of Counselor and Related Educational Programs, 2016; Council on Rehabilitation Education, 2014). Other allied health professionals also have internship, fieldwork, or clinical rotation requirements. Agencies may consider offering to host and mentor students completing these requirements as “formal channels for recruitment” (Dew et al., 2008, p. 15). In a survey of VR agencies, approximately two-thirds of survey respondents use this strategy, and 90% found it effective (Dew et al., 2008). Considering stipend or paid positions to offset travel costs incurred by student trainees, if feasible, will make this opportunity more attractive. Another possible approach is to utilize technology (see more about this approach in Chap. 34) to aid with training via distance modalities. The benefit to the agency of attracting the most qualified candidates is that you get to see the student perform in the work environment prior to offering a permanent position. Both parties get to “try out” the employment situation before a more permanent job offer is extended. This will help the agency decide if the student trainee is a good match, and help the student decide if working in this location is consistent with their career goals. However, in order for this to be a positive experience for the trainees, the agency, and the educational program, there must be a structure in place to ensure that the needs of all parties are known and addressed and that the experience is not too burdensome on the agency staff to become prohibitive.

Preparing Staff to Supervise and Mentor

Counselors and staff are likely at different levels of skill and preparation to assume supervisory and mentoring roles. New staff in particular may be

focused on learning the job themselves that adding the responsibility to mentor or train a student would be detrimental to their own professional growth. For students and new staff, it is critical to have supportive, positive mentors to help acclimate and learn the professional role. Prior to taking on any students, talking with more experienced staff about the agency's capacity to take on trainees and the practicalities of doing so is essential. It is important to get information from key personnel on their interest and availability of taking on students and how they anticipate students fitting in to the day-to-day operations. This will allow for projections of what opportunities may be offered and the timeline for making them available. Agencies and university partners can work through the details together, with each understanding the needs and capacities going in to the arrangement. For staff, there is additional work involved with taking students for training, and if the specifics are not arranged beforehand, the situation can become burdensome and negative for staff, students, and clients.

In addition to the practical preparations for students, providing staff with some models of supervision and mentoring will help them be more effective when working with students. Some staff may wish to participate in student development but feel unprepared to do so. Providing some guidance on mentoring and supervision prior to introducing student trainees will increase the likelihood of a good experience for both students and staff involved in this partnership. Staff members who feel as though they are thrown into situations unprepared may feel more strained with this new kind of responsibility. Students working under staff with insufficient preparation or knowledge to provide this kind of training may have a negative experience and thus leave with a negative impression about the agency and perhaps working in rural settings on the whole.

Developmental models such as the tripartite model of supervision (Schultz, 2008), which encourage attention to clinical supervision, administrative supervision, and professional development, are applicable to rehabilitation settings and provide novice supervisors a framework with which to approach training students. Central to this approach is developing the super-

visory working alliance. Many practitioners in rehabilitation settings step in to supervisory roles without the necessary knowledge or skills because of the gap in training available at the master's level in this area. Thus, having students training with the agency provides additional professional development and growth opportunities for more advanced practitioners as well as students. Students trained by staff with an understanding of counselor development and effective supervision are likely to have a better learning experience than those trained by staff without these competencies.

Meeting the Training Needs Associated with Accredited Programs

A critical point to ensure long-term success of practicum and internship programs housed by an agency is the ability of the agency to meet the requirements set by the program accreditation. Programs must place students in settings that meet the specific learning or experiential milestones associated with their requirements. For example, in counseling the accreditation bodies, both require a counseling practicum lasting at least 240 clock hours, with 40 h of direct services to clients. If the agency wants to host practicum students, they must be able to guarantee that students will receive this kind of experience. Other requirements include individual or group supervision, shadowing opportunities, and other learning objectives. Along with preparing staff to supervise and mentor students, working closely with training programs to understand the requirements and evaluate whether or not they can be fulfilled in the agency is something that must happen prior to entering into agreements with programs. Handling these requests up front puts less pressure on staff who are charged with working with students and the students who must meet the requirements in order to fulfill program criteria and graduate.

Promoting from Within

Another human resource development strategy is referred to as "grow your own" (Byham, Smith, & Paese, 2002). This strategy is based on the idea

that existing staff members are prime candidates to invest in for future growth. Staff members who are currently employed have an intimate understanding of the agency purpose and mission and ideally a commitment to the work and a connection to the community. This strategy is also consistent with findings that many rehabilitation counselors are drawn to the profession because they gain experience with a rehabilitation counselor or a person with a disability, or they have a disability themselves (Bishop et al., 2003). For some, working at a disability services agency is their first introduction to the field of rehabilitation counseling. Staff members already working in these agencies know what the job is like and understand the responsibilities and the barriers faced. Human resource directors may identify staff that are performing well in their current positions and might wish to pursue additional training to take on more responsibility within the agency. Where feasible, offer incentives to reward those who take this initiative (Dew et al., 2008). This reduces the need to recruit for counselor positions from out of area that may or may not develop a commitment to the agency and community. It allows for the development of an already valued employee into this more skilled role with the correct training. This career ladder approach provides opportunities for upward mobility, which is also linked to job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions.

Factors that Promote Rural Counselor Retention

Understanding factors that contribute to length of stay and motivation to leave are critical for agencies wishing to optimize retention of valued employees. Motivational factors are evident among various human service professionals, globally. There are a wide variety of personal, professional, and organizational factors that influence professionals to stay in their jobs or to pursue different ones. Job satisfaction, lifestyle, and professional networking contribute to job retention for rural rehabilitation and allied health professionals (Winn et al., 2014). In fact, when

comparing intrinsic motivations (those derived from the work itself, e.g., my work has meaning, I have autonomy) with extrinsic motivations (those provided by the workplace, e.g., I am happy with my salary, I get enough vacation time), intrinsic values provide greater explanation of why workers stay in human service jobs (Campbell et al., 2012). Similar studies of health-care workers' motivation to stay in jobs in rural areas found many healthcare workers are demotivated and frustrated because they are unable to satisfy their professional conscience and similar aspects related to professional ethos in pursuing their job due to inadequate or inappropriately applied human resource management tools (Mathauer & Imhoff, 2006). In a more recent study, Razeq, Whittaker, Jayasuriya, Yap, and Brentnall (2012) found that social factors that influence the motivation of healthcare workers in rural areas included the local community context, gender roles and family-related issues, safety and security, and health beliefs and attitudes of patients and community leaders. Strong, supportive communities were identified as important social factor that influenced healthcare worker motivation.

Case Study

Sara is a 26-year-old woman living in Bedford County in Pennsylvania. She has lived there all her life and is raising her own family in this community. About a year ago, Sara went back to work after a few years taking care of her young children at home. She had a hard time finding employment but eventually was able to find a job with a group home serving young adults with intellectual disabilities. Sara never worked in a human service agency before and was surprised at how much she enjoys it. One thing she wishes is that she was able to provide mental health counseling to the young adults too, as she sees a real need for these services among the residents. She knows that she

would need additional education and experience beyond her bachelor's degree to be qualified to be a counselor. Sara stands out among her coworkers as someone who has a lot of potential. Her employers have identified her as someone they would like to retain, as they have continual difficulty recruiting good staff to work for the agency – both in this particular home and in other programs. Sara's supervisor has talked with her about her career goals and is encouraging her to take some trainings offered by the agency as well as asked her to join some of the higher-level meetings so she can learn more about how the program works. These efforts are designed to support Sara and keep her engaged with the agency. Ideally, her supervisor would like her to pursue a master's degree so that she can take on additional responsibility and be more fulfilled in her day-to-day work. They are discussing giving her a flexible schedule so she can start taking a couple of classes at a time to work toward a master's degree in clinical rehabilitation and mental health counseling. They are looking for some resources to help her defray some of the costs.

The reason that Sara's employers are so interested in working with her to promote further training is that they also see a need for mental health treatment for their clients. However, they have struggled to hire counselors who are willing to move to Bedford. Students who graduate from programs within the state typically want to move to Philadelphia or Pittsburgh, and they have even had a few counselors come and work for 6 months to a year and then leave. This has been problematic for them and their clients. Sara has shown herself to be motivated and works well with the residents, and she also has family ties to Bedford County. It seems unlikely that if she were to get the training and assume a counselor position that she would leave for another part of the state or country.

Expectations of New Counselors in Rural Areas

The initial period of employment, especially for newer counselors, is stressful and comes with a steep learning curve. Pre-service counselors (e.g., students) have expectations related to what they learned in their training programs, which may or may not reflect the realities of practice. Aside from clinical experiences of practicum and internship, they may come with limited exposure to community settings. The initial period of independent practice is a major stage of professional and personal growth for new counselors, and the challenges associated with rural practice compound this growth tremendously. Agencies who hire new graduates are setting the stage for counselors, introducing them to professional expectations, decision-making, and ethics and how to balance multiple priorities at once. Their interactions with supervisors, mentors, cooperating professionals, and clients have the potential to motivate them to continue in this profession or make them question this decision. Several aspects of rural practice can support or hinder counselor satisfaction and retention over the long term. Often, the first step in the hiring process is to identify rural practitioners who are committed to living and/or working in rural settings. The following is a discussion of several of these factors, such as how agencies orient new staff to organizational culture, what aspects of the employee and the work setting support job satisfaction, and how supervisors and managers can support counselor retention.

Consistency with Organizational Culture

Organizational culture has been defined as “the basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment. These assumptions and beliefs are learned responses to a group’s problems” (Swanson & Holton, 2001, p. 271). When newly hired staff members have personal values and motivations that are consistent with agency mission and goals related

to client service and other shared beliefs, there is a positive impact on retention (Chan, 2003). While some information is learned and evaluated during the job search, application, and interview process, the initial period of employment is when new hires are truly exposed to agency culture and get the chance to see how day-to-day activities contribute and align. The degree to which the expectations of the counselors are consistent with role/responsibilities and agency culture contributes, to some extent, job satisfaction. A challenge for many agencies is moderating this adjustment. One issue that becomes particularly evident in rehabilitation agencies is performance outcome assessment. Efforts to quantify counseling performance using a single indicator (such as number of employed customers) may cause cynicism and job dissatisfaction even among those who have a strong desire to stay with the profession (Dew et al., 2008). For rural providers, greater challenges to services such as reduced access to resources, reduced employment opportunities, transportation barriers, and poverty make it even more important to have consistent alignment between new hires expectations, agency culture, day-to-day responsibilities, and methods of evaluation.

One approach that helps support staff intrinsic motivation to stay is to communicate with staff on a regular basis and highlight how their efforts contribute to the overall goal. Agencies may engage in what is often referred to as “internal marketing” to make sure that staff get info about the agency mission and goals/supporting activities the same way that external partners are informed. This helps new hires acclimate to culture and reinforces that the agency does work that is consistent with their own reasons for entering the profession. It is also important to collect information from staff, either formally or informally, to ensure that problems, questions, or issues can be addressed in a timely manner.

Promoting Job Satisfaction of Rural Counselors

Studies of rural providers have indicated that the first 12 months of employment are the optimal

time to introduce retention strategies with rural employees (Chisholm et al., 2011). While the work of a rehabilitation professional is challenging (in any area), enhancing job satisfaction is an effective way to retain employees. Since each of us has our own priorities for jobs and what is important to us, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to retaining staff. Multifaceted approaches that address several factors related to job satisfaction are recommended. The following is a presentation of factors and strategies that promote job satisfaction related to the employee, the work environment, and the role of supervisors and management.

Worker Factors

Given the particular challenges and realities associated with rural practice, some person characteristics have been associated with more successful and greater enjoyment of the work in the long term. Successful rural practitioners are those who are creative, well trained, and can work well independently with limited additional resources (Chipp et al., 2011; Sidwell et al., 2006). These traits are particularly important for rural practitioners who are working with limited in-person supervision and without some of the resources (e.g., supportive services, multidisciplinary teams) found more commonly in populated regions. Other important traits have been identified that have greater impact on whether an individual can become integrated into the community, including commitment to the community, ability to thrive in small town life (relative isolation), understanding of how factors in cases are affected by and affect the larger community, and an understanding of rural ways of life. These personality characteristics will aid new practitioners in getting to know residents and relating to them within the rural cultural context. A person who desires to become a member of the community themselves has a greater likelihood of being accepted than one who does not embrace rural living. On a clinical note, efficient and confident assessment skills, patience, flexibility, creativity, and adaptability are all desirable. Counselors may need to practice more as a generalist and find creative solutions to client barriers within the context of

limited resources. Another important area to consider is self-care. Knowing when to take a break and realizing that one person cannot address the needs of an entire community is key. Finally, for those working in relative independence, it is important to find professional consultation and supervision to support ethical and professional practice. These traits are similar to those described in other works on rural resilience and are inherently necessary when dealing with some of the challenges associated with rural practice.

Recommendations for rural providers on how to become a trusted partner in the community include methods designed to get to know residents and learn about the community. Chipp et al. (2011) suggested that providers need to work to build trust with community members, and one way to accomplish this is to get to know elders and respected residents who can help them understand the community and needs better. Another suggestion was to find a professional mentor within the area. This will in turn result in gaining the respect of others. Authors cautioned new practitioners against isolating, recommending they spend time in the community (attending church, going to market, volunteering, attending community events) and get to know their neighbors. Those who isolate are often rejected, as this goes against the value of being social and neighborly that is often shared in rural communities. Relationships develop over time, so patience is required. In some cases, a provider may have to repair mistrust from past providers who have since moved on.

Work Environment Factors

Research on stress, strain, and turnover intentions has suggested that stress is ubiquitous in rehabilitation counseling positions (Layne et al., 2004). Knowing that stress and strain in rural practice may be compounded by additional barriers related to resources, work conditions, isolation, and increased barriers among residents, managing the work environment to ameliorate these issues to the extent possible may reduce turnover and increase job retention among valued staff.

Several aspects of the work environment have been linked to job satisfaction and turnover in studies of rehabilitation counselors and related professionals. Armstrong et al. (2008) found that satisfaction and intention to quit significantly predicted by pay and size of caseload in VR settings. Respondents in this study were least satisfied with opportunities for promotion and pay. Pay and opportunities for growth are consistently identified issues in the human services field more broadly.

In a study of rural allied health professionals working with individuals with intellectual disabilities, Denham and Shaddock (2004) found that stated reasons for leaving among former employees included several addressable issues in the workplace. These included unfilled positions, insufficient support from peers, feeling that work was not valued by clients and managers, insufficient resources and management support, and insufficient supervision. While agencies are under constant pressures to maintain staff and recruit for positions when vacated, understanding these environmental factors that contributed to employee turnover are important to understand in order to address turnover issues. Conversely, employees reported aspects of the work environment that contributed to their satisfaction and intentions to remain, including nice living environment, helpful team members, supportive management, relaxed lifestyle, independent work, ease of commute, friendly and welcoming community, and affordable real estate. Another common theme was the importance of advancement opportunities; some staff reported leaving because organizations are too flat, there was no way to move up. This is particularly problematic in smaller agencies serving rural areas.

In a study of rural social workers, Sidwell et al. (2006) revealed several environmental contributors to job satisfaction. Respondents highlighted the favorable living conditions and community attachment as bringing joy to their work. Several stressors were also mentioned, including the lack of resources, transportation struggles, and poverty that clients experienced.

Some reported strain associated with taking on more responsibilities than one would need to in a more populated area where there are greater resources; responses included descriptions of being “tapped” for after-hours work more often and feeling overburdened by the responsibility (Sidwell, et al., 2006). The existence of dual relationships in small communities adds to the stress of maintaining professional and ethical boundaries with clients (Chipp et al., 2011).

Role of Supervisors and Managers

Managers and supervisors have a strong role in supporting the practice and job satisfaction of their employees. While some management practices are not feasible or reasonable given the setting, there are several methods identified that contribute to job satisfaction and increase likelihood of retention. One important approach is to take time to recognize and acknowledge effort, success, and effective practice (above and beyond just what is measured in performance reviews). While managers may not be able to pay bonuses, one can respond to success with praise and recognition. If possible, agencies should consider providing salary increases with credentials (e.g., MA degree, CRC, licensure). Among staff, be aware of and pay attention to generational differences as patterns of turnover may differ (Lu & Gursoy, 2016); for example, technology and teamwork are generally more attractive to millennials (Dew et al., 2008). Allow for counselor autonomy in situations where the person is qualified and demonstrates necessary knowledge and skill. Create an environment that allows staff to incorporate tasks and responsibilities that are intrinsically motivating where consistent with agency goals and mission. Aside from the payment of bonuses or higher wages, many of these approaches are free of cost or cost very little to implement.

A consistent theme noted in the job satisfaction literature in rehabilitation and human services is that employees appreciate when their employers support continued professional growth. Another management practice that sup-

ports retention is to provide opportunities for professional development and growth – for example, training, networking, and involving staff in higher-level initiatives/workgroups. While participating in these additional activities may seem to come at a cost to current responsibilities, do not shield staff from these types of opportunities in an effort to not overburden them (Dew et al., 2008, p. 114). Instead, try to take the pressure off of staff so that they are free to participate within reason.

Many healthcare providers and related professionals such as rehabilitation counselors are trained in an urban-centric model of care. They come to expect and depend on resources that may not be available in rural locales, meaning that they come in insufficiently prepared to practice within the rural context. Especially for those who come in unprepared, not having adequate supervision, training, and continuing education contributes to burnout and turnover (Chipp et al., 2011). For managers and supervisors, understanding your staff, their preparation, strengths, and gaps in training is important to structure their initial time to fill these weaknesses. Pairing new staff with more experienced staff, carving out time for them to get to know available community resources, and ensuring supervision time are all methods of helping new counselors get up to speed once they start working in your agency.

For all staff, participating in what is termed *responsive management* can increase job satisfaction and staff retention. Responsive managers listen to counselor and staff concerns and include counselors/staff in the process of decision-making and future planning. In some situations, nothing can be done to ameliorate the problem or change the circumstance; however, this does not mean that staff cannot understand these competing priorities when included in the discussion. When changes cannot be made, transparency about the process, the reasons, and identifying possible alternative approaches is helpful to keep the relationship between managers and staff intact.

Discussion Box 35.1

Agency X has approximately 13 locations in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and serves persons with mental health, developmental, and substance-related disabilities. The locations are spread between 1 and 2 h driving time from each other, and service areas have been carved out to reduce the travel burden on staff to the extent possible. Staff at the Escanaba location typically covers about 30–45 min north, east, and west of the office. Each counselor has a caseload of about 15 clients and is out of the office most days, only stopping in for staff meetings, case management, and other administrative tasks.

Discussion questions:

1. How might the agency organize counselors and supervisors to ensure that counselors are supported in their work and sufficient risk management practices are in place regarding availability and quality of supervision?
2. How could the agency provide training and continuing education to counselors who are rarely in the office?
3. What distance-supported or electronic means could the agency use to allow greater communication in real time when needed?

Agency Assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses

Very few human service organizations operate without any oversight or compliance responsibilities. Most are required to participate in some kind of strategic planning, program evaluation, and/or quality assurance exercise on a regular basis, to evaluate and track overall effectiveness of services (IRI, 2011). Management can take several approaches to these mandates, ranging from full participation and commitment to quality improvement to an approach of meeting the

requirements because they must be met but expressing skepticism and resistance to change (Morris & Ogden, 2011). Staff members are excellent contributors to assessment of agency strengths and weaknesses, as well as a critical audience for evaluation results. Particularly in agencies where many staff are located off-site in the community or spread out to satellite offices, they are typically most informed about day-to-day challenges and victories. Organizations may use internal review procedures (e.g., case files, case notes, observation) to identify areas of training needs for staff. Ensuring that communication flows both ways (e.g., from managers to staff and from staff to managers) is critical to collecting information on agency functioning, effectiveness, and future needs including training (Fleming, Boeltzig, Foley, Halliday, & Burns, 2014). Responsiveness to unmet needs, gaps in infrastructure, and areas of inconsistency with agency mission sends a strong message to staff regarding the culture of the organization: is this a strong organization with a vision that matches day-to-day responsibilities? These messages have an impact on staff retention.

Future Implications

The need for qualified professionals practicing in rural areas is not going away; in fact, the opposite is more likely. Several outside influences have bearing on recruitment and retention picture; such as mandates on client to staff ratio, reimbursement tied to staff qualifications, and other requirements related to having a particular number of staff with specific educational or experience requirements (Morris & Ogden, 2011). Educational programs, particularly those in states with rural and frontier areas, need to consider rural culture and practice as part of the curriculum (Breen & Drew, 2012), covering issues such as ethical considerations, working in isolation with few resources, and seeking supervision and consultation at a distance. Service agencies in rural areas may also consider the value of partnering with counselor preparation programs in order to enhance the qualifications of existing

staff to meet the needs of their clients and accreditors and/or funders.

Summary and Conclusions

Human service agencies rely heavily on staff to provide effective and ethical services to clients. In rural areas, noted problems with recruitment and retention of qualified staff have impacted services in rehabilitation counseling, as well as related social work and allied health disciplines. Addressing this gap requires a multifaceted approach and the work of several partners. Agencies, training programs, and counselors all have a role in addressing staffing issues. From the training side, educational programs need to include greater attention to rural issues, including providing information and experiences to students in order to encourage them to consider rural areas as a potential place to develop a career. This is particularly important for educational programs that are located in states with a significant rural populous. Agencies may consider strategic recruiting and retention efforts, such as promoting staff from within, partnering with educational programs as clinical sites, and encouraging applications from potential staff who demonstrate a desire to live in the area where services are provided. From the retention side, working with staff to keep qualified and effective practitioners reduces the burdens associated with turnover is critical; supervisors and managers play a significant role in addressing staff needs. Management practices that are responsive to staff issues and maintain communication and transparency are recommended to increase satisfaction and retention over time. The benefits extend past retention, as satisfied staff members are effective recruiters.

Resources

1. Occupational Outlook Handbook- US Department of Labor: <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/>
2. Rural Health Information Hub: Recruitment and Retention Strategies: <http://www.rural-health.va.gov/docs/issue-briefs/rural-provider-retention.pdf>

3. National Career Development Organization: <http://www.ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sp/resources>

Learning Exercises Self-Check Questions

1. Explain the “costs” associated with high levels of counselor turnover: include a discussion of the financial and human consequences, to the agency, coworkers, clients, and community.
2. Consider your own preferences: what are your top three priorities when it comes to a job that you would consider ideal? What would make you want to stay with an agency or company for a significant period of time?
3. What aspects of a work environment or culture do you think contribute to employee dissatisfaction or turnover?
4. Identify three things that you think managers or supervisors could do that would improve employee satisfaction.
5. If you were recruiting counselors for a rural agency, what kind of person would you be looking for?

Field-Based Experiential Assignments

1. Look up three human services agencies in your local area. Visit the website to find (or call if not available) information on recruitment initiatives, employee benefits, and retention programs.
2. Interview three people you know to find out what attracts them to jobs and/or companies, what is important to them when considering possible career moves, and what makes them want to stay in a position for a significant period of time.
3. Do a labor market analysis of your local area: find out what rehabilitation and counseling jobs are available, pay ranges, and desirable qualifications.

Multiple Choice Questions

1. Which trend is evident in rural areas with respect to staffing?
 - (a) Inexperienced professionals begin their careers in rural areas and then leave.
 - (b) More experienced professionals move to rural areas when they get closer to retirement.
 - (c) Rural areas have much fewer problems with recruitment.
 - (d) There is no trend observed related to staffing.
2. Individuals who _____ are more likely to seek employment in rural settings.
 - (a) Were raised in cities.
 - (b) Dislike rural areas.
 - (c) Gain experience in rural areas.
 - (d) Are open to new experiences.
3. Some of the perceived benefits of working in rural communities are:
 - (a) The pay is higher.
 - (b) Less travel is required.
 - (c) Affordable living.
 - (d) The work is easier.
4. One limitation noted in educational programs that hurts rural recruitment is:
 - (a) Instructors discourage students from applying.
 - (b) Limited discussion of rural content leaves students unprepared.
 - (c) Most guest speakers come from rural areas.
 - (d) Too many students are from rural areas.
5. _____ has been identified as a “formal channel for recruitment.”
 - (a) Agency-sponsored job fairs held in rural locales
 - (b) Promoting counselors to supervisor roles immediately
 - (c) Hosting students for clinical practicum or internship
 - (d) None of these
6. Counselor _____ has been shown to impact client satisfaction.
 - (a) Job satisfaction
 - (b) Preferences
 - (c) Similarity of hobbies
 - (d) Shared culture
7. An example of an intrinsic motivation to stay in a professional job is:
 - (a) A high enough salary.
 - (b) Sufficient vacation time.
 - (c) I like my coworkers.
 - (d) My work is personally meaningful.
8. An example of an extrinsic motivation for retaining a professional job is:
 - (a) I feel that my work has value.
 - (b) I feel fulfilled by my contributions.
 - (c) The benefits are generous.
 - (d) I have autonomy.
9. A new practitioner working in an unfamiliar area may consider _____ to become more integrated into the community:
 - (a) Volunteering
 - (b) Attending community events
 - (c) Joining community groups
 - (d) All of these
10. Responsive management is best defined as:
 - (a) The process of listening to staff concerns and including staff in decision-making and planning
 - (b) Protecting staff by not letting them know of agency challenges and concerns
 - (c) Always doing what staff ask
 - (d) Simplifying daily tasks so that staff do not have to work so hard

Key

1. A
2. C
3. C
4. B
5. C
6. A
7. D
8. C
9. D
10. A

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