**GRA Town Hall Questions**

**Please find below the questions that were presented at the GRA Annual Training Conference Town Hall Meeting. The first two questions were tabled for additional feedback and information.**

**Q: According to Telemental health ethics, there are questions surrounding whether Skype is HIPPA compliant. Does GVRA have a business agreement? If not, what will GVRA do to be compliant?**

**A:** Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation Agency (GVRA) has had HIPAA, PII and US Financial data DLP rules in place since the organization started migrating users to the new environment in February 2016. These rules apply to any electronic correspondence which traverses the organizational boundary only, not internal users emailing other internal users. These also apply to SharePoint and OneDrive data, and are fairly flexible in allowing different matching terms for compliance if items beyond the typical elements need to be added.

Organizationally, GVRA is aware that there should never be client-facing conversations via Skype. Additionally, policy does not allow Skype conversations with users outside of the organization. This platform is intended only for non-confidential communications between coworkers. Skype conversations are encrypted by default, but all chats are archived along with regular email.

Some organizations choose to adopt a medical information/HIPAA disclaimer. We will involve internal individuals with appropriate expertise regarding whether a disclaimer is needed and verbiage for such a disclaimer.

**Q: With the passing of the Employment First Act, what is the Agency’s approach to hiring/training more clients who are qualified for certain positions at GVRA? Are paid internships in-house a possibility?**

A: GVRA played a significant role in the passage of Employment First, with much credit owed to the help of our Legislative Liaison, Charlie Miller. The legislation creates a 14 member council comprised of representative members of the disability community, five pre-appointed heads of various agencies that serve these populations, as well as family members of persons with disabilities, and an employer representing the business community. The goal of the council is to make policy recommendations to the Office of the Governor and the General Assembly in support of Employment First activities and implementation. The Employment First Council is administratively attached to GVRA with GVRA’s Executive Director serving as the chairman. GVRA will actively engage our council members to develop strategies that promote a diverse workforce and align with GVRA’s own philosophy that the workplace is stronger when representative of the community served. In our hiring decisions, we already make every effort to recruit the best qualified candidates. This pertains to our field intern slots as well. As a part of the recruiting process, we value individuals who have experienced disability as a resource and asset, and routinely include clients in resume consideration at their counselor’s request. Additionally, in order to create a more accurate picture of our current staff demographic as it pertains to people with disabilities, a voluntary disclosure survey is issued annually and responses are maintained independent of personnel files.

**Q. What steps are being taken to incentivize counselors to stay with VR long term?**

A: At GVRA, we value quality coworkers who are dedicated to the mission and want to retain high-performing staff. Our goal is to demonstrate that we appreciate the input of our coworkers regardless of position within the organization. We want everyone’s voice to be heard.

Over the last 18 months, GVRA has put in place a number of things to help gather staff input into our processes and give suggestions on how we can make the field staffs’ jobs easier and increase efficiency, leading to better outcomes. These have included town halls lead by the Executive Director, employee satisfaction surveys, and a hot line allowing coworkers to offer suggestions or raise concerns.

One example of how these conversations led to change is the implementation of the AWARE system. The valuable input of counselors and managers regarding serious concerns about System 7 led to the funding and implementation of a more functional and user-friendly system.

We also recognize the importance of continuous training and professional development. Many of our coworkers hold Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) Certificates. To maintain certification, we support a number of external training activities, like the annual Georgia Rehabilitation Association (GRA) conference. The University of Georgia’s Carl Vincent Institute is also currently reviewing our training processes and objectives as a whole, with the goal of implementing an accessible, robust offering for GVRA staff.

Also with regard to non-monetary incentives, GVRA has implemented programs to show our co-workers our appreciation and recognize the passion with which they do their jobs each day. New strategies include opportunities for public recognition, more professional development, relaxed Friday dress code, holiday early dismissals, and lunches hosted by managers.

**Q: Will VR provide a step increase in salaries this year?**

A: GVRA has a flat budget this year, meaning no additional funds are available for performance-based increases or salary adjustments. We are continuously exploring non-monetary incentives for our co-workers and top performing staff. If any funds do become available, GVRA will disperse those to programmatic needs and co-workers as appropriate.

**Q: In what way is VR moving towards the mainstream, and are new innovative ideas being considered?**

A: We welcome and need new ideas and suggestions from the field, business partners, and most importantly clients, as well as recommendations for best practices. The Office of Strategy and Innovation employs a Grants Manager whose mission is to explore alternate funding streams that will allow us to better serve our clients. One of the Grants Manager’s recent accomplishments was the acquisition of funds that can be dispersed to people with disabilities in areas damaged by Hurricane Irma. Additionally, this Office has launched a process for submission of new ideas, making it easy for coworkers to communicate recommendations.

With the leadership of our Deputy Executive Director, Kevin Harris, the eight administrative offices are also taking seriously various recommendations identified by a series of internal customer satisfaction surveys. A rubric has been created to address identified issues, and regular communications are sent to report progress and completion. Similar surveys are being addressed by leadership in the five programs, who are using input to implement positive change.

As we work to expand our reputation and expand our reach to potential new audiences, we have launched a multi-platform advertising campaign to market our programs and services. Efforts include advertising on television, radio, and numerous digital platforms including Georgia Trend, the Atlanta Business Chronicle, and Facebook.

**Q: Many in HR work hard and responsiveness has improved in many areas, but regular and appropriate training is not well managed. Is this being reviewed?**

A: The Office of Human Resources leads training at the agency level, while specific Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) training is now addressed within VR, with the transfer of a training coordinator back to the program. We work throughout the year to identify professional development opportunities, including those that allow individuals to accumulate CRC credits. One example is GVRA’s support of attendance for 200 team members at the Georgia Rehabilitation Association (GRA) annual conference. Two cohorts of employees are also currently enrolled in two separate program tracks through the University of Georgia’s Carl Vinson Institute, designed to develop rising leaders. These cohorts were selected through an open application process for which all employees were eligible. In addition to these tracks, the Carl Vinson institute is supporting GVRA’s ongoing commitment to better training, and has been contracted to develop a robust and useful program for staff. Finally, an annual Leadership Summit is offered in the fall, tailored based upon feedback from previous year’s attendees. This three day event offers motivational opportunities, information about state resources, and a chance to collaborate with coworkers from across the state. Please share other training ideas with Human Resources at training@gvs.ga.gov, or with the VR Policy Unit.

**Q: What is being done to hold vendors accountable now and in the future?**

A: Our VR Provider Management Unit works constantly to ensure that our vendors’ service delivery meets GVRA standards, and our field staff have an ethical responsibility to allocate referrals based upon the best interest and needs of the client. Where systemic issues are identified, they are addressed immediately at the appropriate level, up to the Executive Director as needed. This process has led to the unfortunate but necessary termination of some vendor relationships. In addition, our Office of Fiscal Services Department of Procurement and Contracts reviews all new vendor/provider applications, consulting with the General Counsel as needed to ensure compliance.

**Q. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) visited GVRA during Summer 2017 to provide technical assistance and support. What guidance has RSA recommended?**

A: The full RSA report is now available here (<https://rsa.ed.gov/display.cfm?pageid=321>) along with those of other states. We are currently developing an action plan to implement recommendations found in the report. Our action plan will be communicated to all staff as will progress updates.

**Q: How much of a change can we expect after the elections as it relates to the current Board appointments?**

A: The GVRS Board is comprised of individuals who are appointed by the Governor and serve at the Governor’s pleasure. Based on the law established by the legislation which created the Board, members serve three year terms. This means those appointed or reappointed in July 2018 would serve through July 2021 under current structure. Thanks to the efforts of all our coworkers, GVRA has maintained an excellent reputation with the General Assembly, other elected officials, and current candidates. We are confident that our hard work will carry our positive reputation over to the next administration.

**Q: In every recent survey employees have complained of lack of diversity initiatives specifically lack of minority representation in VR leadership and agency leadership. What is the Board doing to address staff concerns in these areas?**

A: Our leadership and board believe the best workforce is a diverse one. GVRA is committed to all kinds of diversity, including, but not limited to, disability, gender, age, race, ethnicity, etc. It is our hope that our workforce mirrors the larger community and our goal to provide fair opportunity and equal access to all during our hiring process. (See attached charts.)

**Q: We are hearing that many of our issues in using AWARE are due to the Agency not purchasing features that we need to work most efficiently. Will the Agency be purchasing additional features to help with field service provision? It’s difficult for field staff to hear this project came in under budget when it’s not working as we need it.**

A: Three years ago, our organization learned of the need to migrate platforms from our former system, GRACI. Having assessed our organizational needs, we were early adopters of AWARE, beginning the implementation process in 2016 and launching April 2018. At this time, we adopted a basic contract, to which we were bound until the expiration of the original warranty in August 2018. Going forward, we will begin customization, adding features as needed to make the platform more efficient.

Our Office of Business Applications has worked hard to ensure successful launch of AWARE from an IT perspective. During implementation, rigorous testing was deployed to ensure successful integration. Identified issues were addressed, and, on a case by case basis, are continuing to be addressed. If you would like to provide specific feedback to our Business Applications Team, please email BusApps@gvs.ga.gov. We are also in the process of gathering systemic and procedural issues to compile a list to be addressed by the new Vocational Services Director, for whom we are recruiting.

**Q: Will vacant positions on unit organizational charts ever be filed again? Why have they not been filled? (Are we going to keep triaging?)**

A: Many of our coworkers have seen previous organizational charts that reflected 2,200 Full Time positions. Many of these positions were established on various charts but never funded within the budget. Currently, we have between 1,350 and 1,400 employees and are at full budget. Therefore, our goal is to prioritize positions and ensure that we fill vacancies based upon greatest benefit to the client. In practice, this means that some positions vacated may not be refilled immediately because a greater client benefit could be gained from filling addressing another gap. Specific questions regarding open positions may be addressed through your chain of command.

**Q: Will we ever have funds for local “teambuilding” opportunities like we used to have in the past?**

A: Fostering teambuilding is a priority within the parameters of new rules under the Workforce Opportunity and Innovation Act, which prescribes how funds may be expended. We encourage our coworkers at the local level to engage in teambuilding, celebrations, group projects, pot lucks and other activities. Our current Town Hall tour offers a chance for coworkers from multiple offices to have lunch together, ask questions, and take part in teambuilding. We also coordinate with event planners, sports teams, etc., to offer discounted rate group nights at external functions. If you have a suggestion for such an event and would like us to explore further, please email hr@gvs.ga.gov.