

Eric Kulesza, MBA, MA, CRC, CADC, LPC



Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist

**Supported Employment
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital**

My path to the rehabilitation counseling field was unconventional and lengthy, but it has thankfully led to arguably the most meaningful and rewarding career—something that fuels my passion every day now going on nearly 12 years as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for the U.S. Veterans Health Administration.

Originally working in the business world, and possessing a master of business administration, I thought my career and life path was firmly in place. A random response to a local newspaper ad for what I thought was a temporary babysitting assignment connected me with an immigrant family who had a child with autism. Up until this point, I had limited familiarity with individuals with disabilities. However, I was curious and passionate, and something about the random set of circumstances lining up seemed to make it a path worth pursuing. I trained to become an ABA therapist, and worked with this child for several years part time on evenings and weekends. Finding more meaning providing direct service and working with individuals with disabilities (rather than helping corporations earn profits), I decided to make a major leap full time into the field of disability services. After conducting research and informational interviews to identify career options, the most intriguing entry point (that could also leverage my business acumen) was Employment Specialist for a community rehabilitation provider serving individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It was a large reduction in pay, but offered meaning and purpose. I gained exposure and experience helping a wide range of uniquely qualified individuals pursue the major life and community integration goal of obtaining and maintaining competitive employment.

Loving the population I served, but enduring stress and financial concerns due to our state not paying its bills on time, I ended up job developing for myself—one time. The first and only employer that caught my eye was the local VA medical center (Hines). It took three separate tries over more than a year to get hired. While possessing a growing set of vocational skills, I was lacking the formal education and certification to be as effective as my vocational rehabilitation counselor peers. The RSA grant enabled me to return to school to obtain a second master's degree, and eventual certification as a CRC. This formal training has enabled me to effectively contribute as a member of integrated mental health treatment teams (among psychiatrists, psychologists, neurologists, nurses, social workers, and primary care doctors) to help veterans with the most complex of clinical pictures (including serious mental illness, physical disabilities, substance use disorder, homelessness, justice system involvement, etc.). Anecdotally and based on clinical studies, vocational rehabilitation counseling has proven to be the most impactful therapeutic intervention to help in a veteran's mental health recovery. Our services are individualized, patient-driven, and goal-oriented. The cases can be challenging, but there is no career that combines the aspects of counseling, case management, service planning, advocacy, social justice,

benefits planning, networking, and overall direct service with such a variety of stakeholders, from the patient/client/veteran, to family members, health care treatment teams, employers, and community resources. The look in someone's eyes when they overcome so many barriers to get hired, or reach an important milestone like a work anniversary, cannot be described.

Being able to directly help someone achieve (or restore) their independence and dignity, meaning and purpose, structure and stability, and overcome obstacles and barriers such as major mental, physical, and cognitive disabilities, homelessness, and community isolation, makes this profession unique and powers me every day.

My path to the profession of rehabilitation counseling was unconventional but fortuitous, considering I didn't even know the career existed in my mid-20s. I have learned so much from each and every client/participant/veteran I worked with over the years, and believe this is a noble and meaningful calling that we are blessed to perform.

