

# “Maximizing Employment and Independence:”

Supported  
Decision-Making  
in Vocational  
Rehabilitation  
Programs

4

Supported Decision-Making Series



Federal law says what people with disabilities and their families already know:

**“Individuals with disabilities constitute one of the most disadvantaged groups in society.”<sup>1</sup>**

It’s a sad truth: far too often, people with disabilities don’t get what they need to lead independent and productive lives.

To reverse decades of discrimination and lack of opportunities, Congress created the Vocational Rehabilitation program. The program helps people with disabilities learn the skills and get the support they need to work and live independently.<sup>2</sup>

These are the same things people with disabilities need to avoid unnecessary guardianship.

As we said in “Do I HAVE to get Guardianship,” (Found online at <https://goo.gl/DDdcZT>), for people who truly can’t make decisions or manage their lives, guardianship can be a good thing. But, if people can make decisions, either independently or when they get help, guardianship can have a “significant negative impact on their physical and mental health.”<sup>3</sup>

In this brochure, we’ll tell you about an option called Supported Decision-Making that can help people with disabilities make their own decisions, live as independently as they can, and avoid unnecessary guardianship. We’ll also show you ways you can learn and use Supported Decision-Making through the Vocational Rehabilitation program.



# Supported Decision-Making: What is It?

Supported Decision-Making is getting help when you need it, from people you trust, so you can make your own decisions.<sup>4</sup>

Isn't that how everyone – people with and without disabilities – makes decisions? When you have to make a tough choice, or a decision about something you're not familiar with, or just want to “talk it out,” what do you do?

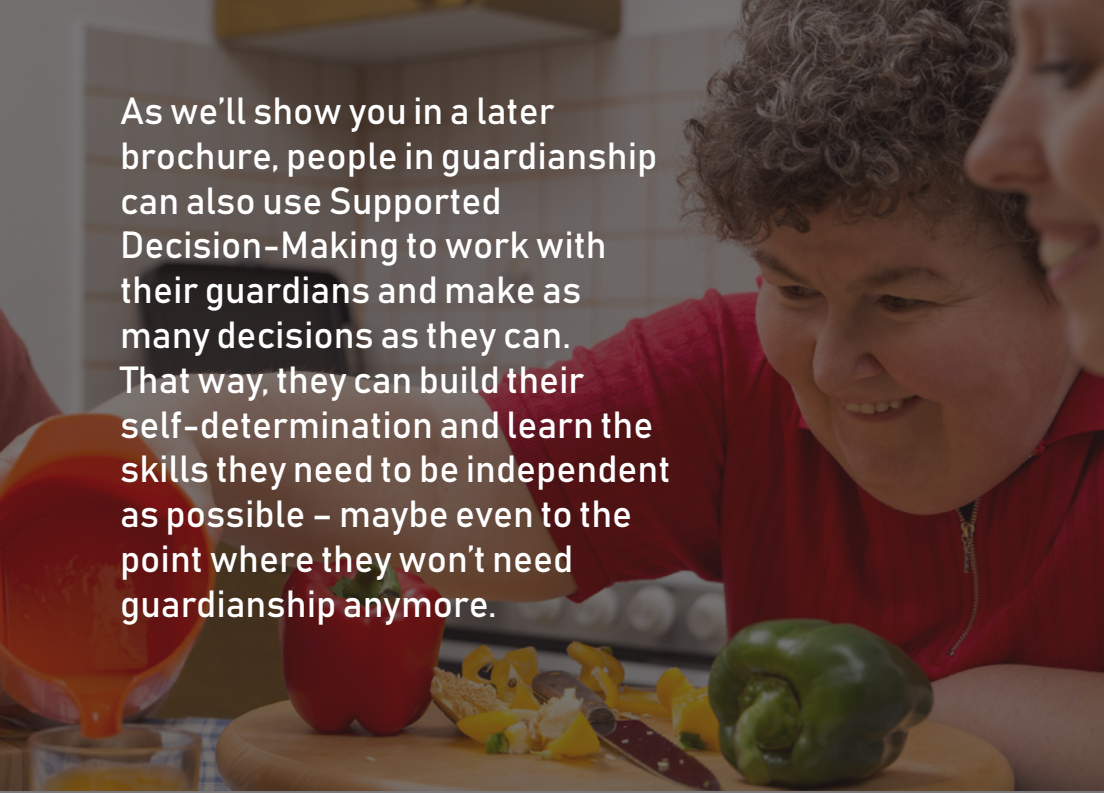
You get help, don't you? You might:

- Ask a family member or professional for financial or health care advice
- Go to a coworker about your job
- Talk to your best friend when you have relationship problems

They help you “think through” the issues and “clear things up.” That way, you can understand your options and choose the one that's best for you. When you do that, you're using Supported Decision-Making. It's simple, really: they give you support, so you can decide. **That's Supported Decision-Making.**

“Many, if not most” people with disabilities – even those with the most significant disabilities can use Supported Decision-Making, just like you.<sup>5</sup> And if they **can** make decisions just like you, then, **just like you**, they don’t need guardians.

That’s important because when people use Supported Decision-Making to make their own decisions, they have more control over their lives – more **self-determination**.<sup>6</sup> Decades of research show that when people with disabilities have more self-determination, they have better lives: they are more likely to be independent, employed, part of their communities, and safer.<sup>7</sup>



As we’ll show you in a later brochure, people in guardianship can also use Supported Decision-Making to work with their guardians and make as many decisions as they can. That way, they can build their self-determination and learn the skills they need to be independent as possible – maybe even to the point where they won’t need guardianship anymore.



## Vocational Rehabilitation, Self Determination, and Guardianship

Vocational Rehabilitation programs help people with disabilities identify and receive the supports they need to get and keep a job.<sup>8</sup>

That's important, of course, but what does it have to do with guardianship? Think about it: why are people put in guardianship in the first place? As one expert said, it's because someone thinks they can't "take care of themselves in a manner that society believes is appropriate."<sup>9</sup>

What if the same things keeping you from working are also keeping you from making your own decisions and “taking care of yourself” without a guardian?

Congress recognized that working, self-determination, and decision-making go together when it created the Vocational Rehabilitation program. It said:

*The goals of the Nation properly include the goal of providing individuals with disabilities with the tools necessary to—*

- (A) *make informed choices and decisions; and*
- (B) *achieve equality of opportunity, full inclusion and integration in society, employment, independent living, and economic and social self-sufficiency*<sup>10</sup>

So, if the same things are stopping people with disabilities from working **and** “taking care of themselves” without a guardian, the Vocational Rehabilitation program can help them learn the skills and get the supports they need to work **and** avoid guardianship. As we’ll show you, that can and should include Supported Decision-Making.



# Vocational Rehabilitation: The Basics

There are over 20 Vocational Rehabilitation offices in Missouri.

To apply for the Vocational Rehabilitation program, contact your local office to schedule an appointment.

You can find the office closest to you at <https://dese.mo.gov/adult-learning-rehabilitation-services/vocational-rehabilitation/vr-officesreceive> or by calling 1-877-222-8963.

The agency will find you eligible for the Vocational Rehabilitation program if it agrees that:

- You have a disability.
- You want to work.
- Your disability makes it hard for you to work.
- Vocational Rehabilitation services can help you work.<sup>11</sup>

As long as you meet these requirements, there are no age limits for the Vocational Rehabilitation program: you can't be too old for it and the program must work with students receiving Special Education services "as early as possible."<sup>12</sup> If you receive government benefits like Medicaid, SSI, or SSDI, you are presumed eligible.<sup>13</sup>

Once you're found eligible, you'll work with a counselor to create an Individualized Plan for Employment. The Plan identifies the job you are trying to get with the program's help and the supports they'll provide to help you get and keep that job.<sup>14</sup>



# Vocational Rehabilitation: Using “Informed Choice” and Supported Decision-Making

Supported Decision-Making is a key part of the Vocational Rehabilitation program. For example, the program must make sure that you can exercise “Informed Choice.”<sup>15</sup>

That means your counselor must give you the help you need to choose:

- The job you want to get with their help;
- The supports and services you need to get and keep that job; and
- The agencies and organizations that will provide those supports and services.<sup>16</sup>

Isn't “Informed Choice” just another way to say Supported Decision-Making? In both, people with disabilities work with professionals to help them understand their situations and choices, so they can decide what they want to do.<sup>17</sup> The program supports you, and you decide.

**That's Supported Decision-Making.**



In other words, Supported Decision-Making is built-in to the Vocational Rehabilitation program. When the program gives people support to choose their job goals and supports, its helping them get what they need to work and make their own decisions. Aren't those two of the main things people with disabilities need to avoid unnecessary guardianship?

# Vocational Rehabilitation:

## *Developing Supported Decision-Making and Independent Living Skills*

*What if you need education or training to get a job?*

*What if you have trouble keeping a job because you need help making good decisions about your physical or mental health?*

*What if you need to develop better time-management, organization, or judgment?*

If you need those or other “independent living” and decision-making skills to work, the Vocational Rehabilitation program can help you learn them.

What do independent living and decision-making have to do with getting a job? Think about it:

- Would you hire someone who has trouble understanding and following office policies?
- Would you promote people who don't take care of their health and are always out sick?
- Would you keep paying someone who makes bad on-the-job decisions that could hurt their co-workers or customers?

Of course not.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, if your decision-making or independent living skills are keeping you from working, the Vocational Rehabilitation program must provide the supports and services you need to overcome those challenges. Aren't those the same challenges that keep people from "taking care of themselves" without a guardian?

There are over 20 types of support that the Vocational Rehabilitation program must provide if they will help you work, including:

- Assessments and testing.
- Counseling.
- Services to help you find and keep a job.
- Education and training.
- Assistive technology.
- Medical and mental health care.
- On the job training.
- Job coaches and mentors.
- Transportation.
- Services to family members, like day care.
- "Other goods and services" people need to work.<sup>19</sup>

For example, assessments can help people discover what they need to work. Then, other supports – like counseling, job

coaching, medical and mental health care, and assistive technology – can help people learn and get what they need.

So, if you're having trouble getting or keeping a job because you need better decision-making skills or have trouble managing your life, the Vocational Rehabilitation program must provide the support you need to build those abilities. This can help you work, live independently, "take care of yourself," and avoid unnecessary guardianship.<sup>20</sup>

Remember, Supported Decision-Making is built-in to the Vocational Rehabilitation process – so it can help you learn to make better decisions and practice Supported Decision-Making. The program must help you use Informed Choice to identify and choose the supports you need.



This means, they must give you information about:

- Supports and services that can help you.
- The providers who can help and the support they can provide.
- Whether other people were happy with the support they received from those providers.
- Whether people who worked with those providers got and kept jobs.<sup>21</sup>

Isn't that a great description of Supported Decision-Making? The program gives you the information you need, so you can choose. That's Supported Decision-Making.

So, the Vocational Rehabilitation program can help people with disabilities learn to make their own decisions, "take care of" themselves, and avoid unnecessary guardianship in two ways:

1. By helping them learn and use the decision-making, independent living, and other skills they need.
2. By helping them learn and use Supported Decision-Making in the Informed Choice process.



# Vocational Rehabilitation: *Coordinating with Other Programs*

If you are getting support from other providers – like a school, Center of Independent Living, or a Medicaid Waiver - your Vocational Rehabilitation counselor can work with them and come to your planning meetings.<sup>22</sup>

In a later brochure, we'll show you ways these and other programs can work together to make sure you receive the support you need.<sup>23</sup>

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22. 34 C.F.R. § 361.48
23. See, Martinis, J. & Gustin, J. (2017). A culture of coordinated support. *The Frontline Initiative* 14(2), 14-15; Gustin, J. & Martinis, J. (2016). Change the culture, change the world: Increasing independence by creating a culture of coordinated support. *Apostrophe Magazine*. Available at: <http://apostrophemagazine.com/vermont-change-culture-disabilities>





## We Can Help!

Wherever you are on your Supported Decision-Making journey, we can answer your questions or connect you with people and organizations that may be able to help.

Feel free to contact us at:  
**(800) 500-7878**  
**[moddcouncil.org](http://moddcouncil.org)**



### OUR NETWORK PARTNERS

**Missouri Protection and  
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[moadvocacy.org](http://moadvocacy.org)

**UMKC Institute for Human  
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