STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL (SRC)

CT Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)

Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program

SRC ANNUAL REPORT FY 2021

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# A.  COUNCIL PURPOSE:

The State Rehabilitation Council (the Council or SRC), comprised of individuals appointed by the Governor, works in partnership with, and provides advice to the Department of Aging and Disability Services - Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program in Connecticut.

BESB serves Connecticut’s adults who are legally blind and current or former transition-age students who are legally blind or visually impaired through ongoing educational, vocational and independent living skills programs in order to empower them to achieve employment success and to enhance their self-sufficiency.

It is the purpose of the Council to advise the Governor of the State of Connecticut and BESB’s VR Program pertaining to the provision of Vocational Rehabilitation Services as described in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, to individuals who are blind so that such individuals may prepare for, secure, retain, advance in or regain employment.

# B.  COUNCIL DUTIES:

The federal law under which the Council was formed, Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, specifies the functions of the Council.  They are:

(1) review, analyze, and advise the designated State unit regarding the performance of the responsibilities of the unit under this title, particularly responsibilities relating to‑‑

(A) eligibility (including order of selection);

(B) the extent, scope, and effectiveness of services provided; and

(C) functions performed by State agencies that affect or that potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes under this title;

(2) in partnership with the designated State unit‑‑

(A) develop, agree to, and review State goals and priorities; and

(B) evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program and submit reports of progress to the

Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services Administration;

(3) advise the designated State agency and the designated State unit regarding activities authorized to be carried out under this title, and assist in the preparation of the State plan and amendments to the plan, applications, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations required by this title;

(4) to the extent feasible, conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of, and consumer satisfaction with—

(A) the functions performed by the designated State agency;

(B) vocational rehabilitation services provided by State agencies and other public and private entities responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities under the Rehabilitation Act; and

(C) employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services under this title, including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with such employment outcomes;

(5) prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and the Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services Administration on the status of vocational rehabilitation programs operated within the State, and make the report available to the public;

(6) to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance the number of individuals served, coordinate activities with the activities of other councils within the State, including the Statewide Independent Living Council, the advisory panel established under section 612(a)(21) of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act, the State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council described in section 124 of the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (42 U.S.C. 6024), the State mental health planning council established under section 1914(a) of the Public Health Service Act, and the State workforce development board and with the activities of entities carrying out the programs under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998;

(7) provide for coordination and the establishment of working relationships between the designated State agency and the Statewide Independent Living Council and centers for independent living within the State; and

(8) perform such other comparable functions, consistent with the purpose of this title, as the State Rehabilitation Council determines to be appropriate, that are comparable to the other functions performed by the Council.

# C. COUNCIL ACTIVITIES IN FY 2021:

The State Rehabilitation Council continues to be a valuable and active contributing partner to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the Bureau as a whole.  Over the course of the past fiscal year the Council members have participated in many activities on behalf of the Bureau, as well as continuing their existing responsibilities as identified in the Rehabilitation Act. These activities included:

Policy Update for Personal Adjustment Training:

Based on a resolution passed by the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut (NFBCT) pertaining to concerns with the BESB VR policy on Personal Adjustment Training, the SRC deliberated on the concerns that were encompassed within the resolution. The SRC requested that the State Director present to the Council for their review proposed revisions to the policy that would, if implemented, address and resolve the concerns presented in the NFBCT resolution. At their quarterly meeting in September 2020, the Council reviewed and approved the proposed policy revisions to proceed to a public comment period. Subsequent to the completion of the public comment period, the SRC deliberated on the comments that were received and voted to approve the implementation of the new policy at their December 2021 meeting. The new policy was subsequently implemented by the bureau.

State Plan Development:

The State Rehabilitation Council reviewed the results of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and the Consumer Satisfaction Survey to gain a clear understanding of the unique needs and areas of focus that should be factored into the development of the upcoming state plan. In particular, the members are interested in the implementation of techniques and strategies that will result in stronger engagement by clients of the program utilizing virtual options in combination with in-person services. The Council has formed a work group that will be joined by members of the Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired to assist the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in the development of the new BESB VR section of the Unified State Plan.

NCSAB / CSAVR 2021 Virtual Conferences:

This year, the SRC Chairperson was able to attend both the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) national virtual conferences. Best practices that were shared at these conferences have broadened the perspective and understanding of national trends, concerns and priorities in the field of vocational rehabilitation, enabling the chair to bring this information before the membership for future planning.

VR Client Achievements Presented at SRC meetings:

During FY 2021, the State Rehabilitation Council continued its initiative for a client of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to come before the SRC at each quarterly meeting to explain the type of work they are involved in and how BESB services assisted them in achieving their career goals. The SRC members value this component of each meeting agenda as it provides the members with an opportunity to learn directly from clients about the services that can be provided and the successes that result.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey:

The SRC once again commissioned the Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) to conduct the FY 2021 consumer satisfaction survey of Vocational Rehabilitation Program recipients. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the level of satisfaction with services that clients received from the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at BESB.

Satisfaction with the services received was measured on a 10-point rating scale, with a rating of “10.00” representing the highest level of satisfaction.

As presented below in its entirety, CPPSR reported the following results from the FY 2021 Consumer Satisfaction Survey:

***“BESB continues to receive high marks for their Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and counselors. Nine in ten clients (90%, up 2.5 percentage points from last fiscal year) reported that they would recommend BESB VR services to a friend. Reported overall satisfaction with BESB services, as rated on a scale from 1 to 10 points, remains strong.***

***To measure satisfaction with services received, clients rated each service on a 1- to 10-point scale. A rating of “10” meant the client was “very satisfied,” and a rating of “1” indicated the client was “very dissatisfied.” Clients who rated services on the high (8–10) or low (1–3) end of the scale were asked a follow-up question about the reason for their rating.***

*All eight services showed an increase in mean satisfaction rating in 2021. This is significant compared to 2019–2020 findings, where the mean satisfaction in all but one area (Higher Education Training Services) decreased. The increase in mean satisfaction ratings observed in Fiscal Year 2021 may be partially attributed to Connecticut’s successful rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine, allowing a slow return to normalcy.*

*While satisfaction increased in all areas surveyed, Transportation Services saw the largest improvement (up 3.2 mean rating points). Notably, Transportation Services tied its historical high for the service at 9.00. This is particularly impressive after scoring 5.80 the previous year, a historically low mean rating that was highly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lyft and Uber services, for example, were extremely limited (if not non-existent in certain locations) during the height of the pandemic. Additionally, public transportation services were running with heavy schedule modifications.*

*After Transportation Services, Higher Education Training Services had the second-highest increase in mean rating in 2021 (9.56, up 1.56 in mean rating). This was followed by Skills Training Services (9.00, up 1.25 mean rating), Reader Services (9.50, up 0.50 in mean rating), Personal Care Attendant Services, (10.00, up 0.33 in mean rating), and Small Business Venture Services (6.50, up 0.30 in mean rating).*

*It is important to note the issue of sample size when reviewing these figures. Historically, Small Business Venture and Personal Care Attendant Services have received especially low response rates, and this continued to be the case for these services in 2021. Small Business Venture Services had two respondents, Personal Care Attendant Services had three, and Reader Services had four. Given the comparatively small sample sizes, especially for these services, one should not place too much significance on how satisfaction rates in 2021 compare to ratings in previous years.*

*Overall, client satisfaction with counselors remains high, with mean ratings ranging from 7.07 to 9.00 (8.36 average). In 2020, the ratings ranged from 7.61 to 8.67 (8.28 average) across all categories. In comparison to 2020, the 2021 survey shows an increase in the average ratings across all areas surveyed. In 2021, BESB clients were most satisfied with counselor referrals, their professionalism, their recognition of clients’ special needs, and the counselors’ knowledge. Clients were least satisfied with their counselors’ ability to explain the process for complaint resolution, counselors’ help in identifying client career goals, and the counselors’ help in understanding their vocational rehabilitation rights and responsibilities.*

*Clients were asked to identify the services that they received from BESB. Six showed an increase in utilization and two experienced declines in 2021. By comparison, in 2020, only four services experienced an increase in use.*

*Low Vision and Rehabilitation and Adaptive Equipment services continue to be the most widely used among BESB clients, with each service reporting 80% use in 2021. Low Vision usage declined 10% since last year while Rehabilitation, while Adaptive Equipment Services increased 15%. Small Business Ventures (7%, down 5.5 percentage points) experienced a decrease in 2021. On the other hand, Rehabilitation Services (80%, up 15 percentage points), Skills Training (40%, up 20 percentage points), Higher Education Training Services (30%, up 22.5 percentage points), Reader Services (13%, up 8 percentage points), Transportation Services (30%, up by 17.5 percentage points), and Personal Care Attendant Services (10%, up by 2.5 percentage points) experienced increased use in 2021. Higher Education Training Services and Transportation Services attained historic highs for service use.*

***This fiscal year, the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program had 56 clients who achieved employment outcomes, a decline of 21 individuals from 2020. This decline is likely due, in part, to the continued challenge of finding employment opportunities caused by COVID-19. Many sectors of Connecticut’s economy have yet to return to normal operation. It should be noted that it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions with a population of this size.***

***It is important to recognize the extraordinary circumstances that were at play during the time that data was collected for this report. COVID-19 spread rapidly throughout the United States starting in March 2020. While the vaccine rollout has been helpful in mitigating uncontrolled spread, the highly contagious Delta variant resulted in continued caution in Connecticut’s reopening throughout Fiscal Year 2021.***

***The pandemic has had a profound impact on BESB’s VR Program—as well as the clients it serves. Without warning, life changed dramatically for VR clients. Readers are encouraged to interpret the findings discussed in this report within the context of the global pandemic.”***

# D.   MEMBERSHIP:

In FY 2021, appointments to the SRC were made in the categories of Recipients of Services, Business, Industry and Labor, Community Rehabilitation Provider, American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Program, and Employer.

In the coming year, the State Rehabilitation Council will be seeking new members in the categories of State Workforce Investment Board and Client Assistance Program.

# E.  BESB VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION HIGHLIGHTS FOR FY 2021:

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program continued to adapt to year two of working in a virtual environment. In July things started to open slowly and staff began seeing clients in the field again as needed with most services and activities remaining virtual.

A high priority has been to ensure that all eligible participants have access to a laptop and the assistive technology that they need to participate in virtual training programs, certificate programs, college course and work at home opportunities successfully.

Employment and training opportunities are starting to open up slowly but continues to be a significant challenge throughout the year impacting all areas of program outcomes.

* Average hourly earnings reached $24.17 compared to  
  $23.34 in the prior year for the 60 individuals who achieved employment outcomes in FY 2021, compared to 56 in FY 2020. Annualized, these earnings exceeded $2.5 million compared to 2 million in FY2020.
* Virtual opportunities for workplace learning experiences to 41 transition-age youth served by the BESB VR Program, which included 17 paid work experiences.
* Collaboration with the five Regional Workforce Development Boards has been a strong focus of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in FY 2021. Prior to the pandemic, Counselors were co-located on a part-time basis at the American Job Centers. After the onset of the pandemic, most activities were shifted to a virtual model and continue to be virtual with only 7 in person appointments occurring. Counselors contact clients remotely 1128 times regarding AJC activities and 177 are involved in AJC Services. Counselors participate in virtual business services meetings with American Job Center partners on 74 occasions. 91 clients were assisted with registering for services through the American Job Centers up from 42 for the previous year. Starting in July, Counselors have been back to colocation in 3 of the 5 sites throughout the state.
* Continuing the strong commitment to facilitating clients to be active partners in the career exploration and job seeking process, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program assisted over 138 clients to connect with Career Index Plus, a self-directed web-based resource for researching jobs in demand, credentialing requirements and current job openings.
* BESB VR Counselors maintained a strong focus on employer engagement, reaching out to businesses on more than 417 occasions during FY 2021 to explore employment opportunities.
* BESB successfully served all eligible clients in FY 2021 and projects that FY 2022 will also be a year that every eligible client can be served.

# F.  FUTURE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES:

In FY 2022, the Council will continue its role as a partner with the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program to ensure the delivery of services that afford clients the tools they need to prepare for, obtain, advance in, and maintain meaningful careers.   The SRC will work together with the Bureau to develop the goals, objectives and priorities for the new Unified State Plan for Connecticut, and to further assist in the overall development of the BESB VR section of the plan.

The SRC will utilize the Consumer Satisfaction Survey and Comprehensive Needs Assessment reports to assist the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in the development of the plan’s content and priorities.

The Council will further deliberate with the Vocational Rehabilitation Program on the meaningful lessons learned from the provision of virtual services that were developed during the pandemic, with a focus on utilizing virtual services where practical and beneficial as an option for the provision of services, meetings, and participation in web-based learning opportunities.

# G.  MEMBERS OF THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL IN FY 2021:

The Council is committed to seeking appointments of members most qualified to advise the State Director and the Council.  The Council is further committed to diversity in gender, race, disability, geography, and affiliation.  The Council continuously recruits prospective members who can enhance its diversity.  The Council has enjoyed success this year through an active membership, committed to the delivery of quality services to BESB clients.

Per the provisions of the Rehabilitation Act, membership comprises:

At least one representative of the Statewide Independent Living Council, who must be the chairperson or other

designee of the Statewide Independent Living Council

* At least one representative of a parent training and information center established pursuant to section 682(a) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
* **At least one representative of the Client Assistance Program, who must be the director of or other individual recommended by the Client Assistance Program**
* At least one representative of community rehabilitation program service providers
* Four representatives of business, industry and labor
* At least one qualified vocational rehabilitation counselor with knowledge of and experience with vocational rehabilitation programs who serves as an ex officio, nonvoting member of the Council if employed by the designated State agency
* At least one representative of the State educational agency responsible for the public education of students with disabilities who are eligible to receive services under the Rehabilitation Act and part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
* The director of the designated State unit as an ex officio, nonvoting member of the Council
* At least one representative of the State Workforce Development Board
* At least one representative of the directors of projects funded under Section 121 of the Rehabilitation Act for American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services
* Current or former applicants for, or recipients of, vocational rehabilitation services
* At least one representative of a disability advocacy group representing individuals who are blind
* At least one representative of an individual who is blind, has multiple disabilities, and has difficulty representing himself or herself or is unable due to disabilities to represent himself or herself

The FY 2021 Council members and their affiliations were:

Gary Allen (State Independent Living Council)

Brandy Altergott (Employer)

Scott Baecker, Treasurer (Community Rehabilitation Provider)

Michael Bartley, Vice-Chair (Business, Industry, Labor)

Jay Brown (Department of Education)

Frank Buonomo (Community Rehabilitation Provider)

John Carnemolla (Recipient of Services)

William DeMaio (Employer)

Lucretia Jones (Recipient of Services)

Frank Losquadro (Employer)

Phillip Magalnick (Recipient of Services)

John McNickle (Recipient of Services)

Enaida Mendoza (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor)

Karen Quesnel (Business, Industry, Labor)

Deborah Reed (Disability Advocacy Group)

Beth Reel (Statewide Parent Organization)

Dennis Regan (Recipient of Services)

Eileen Rose (Recipient of Services)

Dawn Russell (Recipient of Services)

Nicole Rico Serrano (American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation)

Brian Sigman (BESB State Director)

Kendra Valente (Representative of an Individual who is Blind, has Multiple Disabilities, and has Difficulty Representing Himself or Herself or is Unable due to Disabilities to Represent Himself or Herself)

# H. VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SUCCESS STORY

A person and a dog posing for the camera

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Michael Fulton has been a client of the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) since he was a small child. He was born prematurely and has no vision due to a diagnosis of Retinopathy of Prematurity (ROP). He received services from the BESB Children Services Program throughout his elementary, middle and high school years. Michael graduated from High school in 2014. His Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor assisted with the transition to post-secondary education.

Michael attended Western New England University to study Information Technology, receiving adaptive technology, mobility instruction and funding support through the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Michael graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Information Technology in 2018.

After graduation Michael was referred to the American Job Center in New Haven. Services were coordinated between BESB VR and the staff of Workforce Alliance (WFA) at the Center. Workforce Alliance provided Michael with a training program opportunity where he completed certifications in CompTIA A+ and Network +. BESB VR and WFA further collaborated to provide Michael with two internships at the American Job Center.

After successfully completing the certifications and the internships, Michael was referred to Independent Living Solutions (ILS), a private Community Rehabilitation Provider, for assistance with work readiness training and job search strategies. In September 2020, Michael was hired by the IT department at Springfield Housing Authority in Springfield, where he works full-time with benefits. He relocated to be closer to his new job and is looking forward to a long career working in Information Technology.