

Department of Rehabilitation Services



At a Glance

AMY L. Porter, Commissioner

Established: 2011

Statutory Authority: Public Act 11-44, 18-169

Central Office: 55 Farmington Avenue, Hartford CT 06105

Web address: <https://portal.ct.gov/DORS>

Total employees: 464

Total expenditures: \$97,615,755 with approximately 71% federal and 29% state funding.

Mission

Maximizing opportunities for the independence and well-being of people with disabilities and older adults in Connecticut.

Statutory Responsibility

The Department of Rehabilitation Services provides a wide range of services to individuals with disabilities and older adults who need assistance in maintaining or achieving their full potential for self-direction, self-reliance and independent living. The primary customers of the agency are individuals with disabilities, older adults, and in our employment-based programs we also have businesses/employers as a dual customer.

Legislative authority resides in several different sections of the state statutes owing to the merged history of the agency. They appear in the following sections:

- CGS Secs. 17b -650 to 17b-666, 17b-607 and 17b-612 to 615 - DORS agency statutes and program statutes for the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) and the Bureau of Disability Determination (DDS);
- CGS Secs. 10-293 to 10-311a – program statutes for the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB);

- CGS Sect 17b-650a – Data reporting requirements for BRS and BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Programs. These requirements are in the process of changing under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act;
- CGS Secs. 46a-27 to 46a-33b – statutes for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing program;
- CGS Sec. 14-11b - statute for the Driver Training program;
- CGS Sec. 31-283 - statute for the Workers’ Rehabilitation Services program ;
- CGS Secs. 17a-302 to 17a-316a, 17b-251, 17b-349e and 7-127b - statutes for the State Unit on Aging (SUA); and
- CGS Secs. 17a-405 to 422 State Ombudsman laws.

DORS Administration encompasses the Commissioner’s Office, as well as the functional areas of legal, legislative, strategic planning, public information/communications, operational readiness, fiscal, IT, facilities and asset management, human resources, payroll and Equal Employment Opportunity. The department has four programmatic bureaus, including:

- Bureau of Aging Services (Aging/LTCOP);
- Bureau of Disability Determination Services (DDS);
- Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB); and
- Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS).

Our programs, policies and practices are designed to promote employment, independence, equal access, self-sufficiency and self-advocacy.

Public Service

While each program has its own legislative requirements and program effectiveness standards, DORS as a whole focuses on continuous improvement. We continue to work toward building a full complement of metrics to share in this annual report, focusing on our mission of *Maximizing opportunities for the independence and well-being of people with disabilities and older adults in Connecticut.*

Major Programs and Highlights of SFY19:

The Bureau of Aging Services

The Bureau of Aging Services (formerly the Department on Aging) was added to DORS with the passage of Public Act 18-169 and is administratively divided into two sections:

The State Unit on Aging administers Older Americans Act programs for supportive services, in-home services, and congregate and home-delivered meals. It also administers programs that provide senior community employment, health insurance counseling, and respite care for caregivers. Further, the unit provides oversight of and leadership for the Coalition for Elder Justice in Connecticut.

- *Elderly Nutrition Program:* The Elderly Nutrition Program serves nutritionally-balanced home delivered and congregate meals, provides other nutrition services and offers opportunities for socialization to individuals age 60 and older and their spouses. The Elderly Nutrition Program is supported by State and Federal as well as local funds and voluntary client contributions. State and Federal funds are distributed to Connecticut's five Area Agencies on Aging who, in turn, contract with local Elderly Nutrition Projects for meals and nutrition services. In FFY 2018, over 1.99 million congregate- and home-delivered meals were provided. \$2,626,390 was received in State funds for the Elderly Nutrition Program; total funding received was \$12,357,365.00*
- *Connecticut Statewide Respite Program:* In partnership with the Area Agencies on Aging and the Connecticut Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, the Statewide Respite Care Program offers short-term respite care to provide relief to caregivers of persons with Alzheimer's disease and related dementias. The program provides in-home assessments, the development of care plans and the purchase of necessary respite services. In SFY 2019, \$1,806,138 was received in state funds for this program and 629 individuals received respite services.
- *National Family Caregiver Support Program:* In partnership with the Area Agencies on Aging, this program offers a range of services that enable caregivers to care for their loved ones. The major components of the program include information about available services, access to supportive services, individual counseling, support groups, caregiver training, respite care and supplemental services. Priority consideration is given to those with the greatest social and economic need. In FFY 2018, \$2,053,876 in federal funds were received to implement these services, 482 outreach related activities were held, reaching 177,578 people and there were 1,414 caregivers who received 43,415 units of caregiver services*.

- CHOICES: Connecticut's program for Health insurance assistance, Outreach, Information and referral, Counseling and Eligibility Screening* (CHOICES) is the department's state health insurance assistance program. CHOICES provides objective counseling, outreach and training services in partnership with Connecticut's five Area Agencies on Aging and the Center for Medicare Advocacy, Inc. In SFY 2019, certified CHOICES Counselors spent more than 17,900 hours counseling Medicare beneficiaries; more than 19,000 beneficiaries received assistance with Medicare Part D and Medicare Advantage Plan comparisons and enrollments, and more than 15,600 low-income Medicare beneficiaries received eligibility screening, benefits explanation and/or application assistance for the Medicare Savings Program, Medicaid and/or Extra Help/Low- Income Subsidy programs. CHOICES participated in 518 outreach events providing Medicare-related education and information to nearly 20,900 attendees. CHOICES has conducted two New Team Member Training Sessions in 2019 in which 34 in-kind professionals and volunteers became certified CHOICES Team Members with an additional 30 additional trainees registered to take the training in September. CHOICES received \$695,154 in state funding and \$683,025 in federal funding.
- Connecticut Statewide Fall Prevention Initiative:* The overall objective of the Connecticut Collaboration for Fall Prevention is to reach older adults across the state to reduce the rate of falls and fall-related use of health care services. In SFY 2019, \$376,023 was received in state funds for fall prevention initiatives. 1,247 people residing in northeastern Connecticut were reached through fall prevention presentations, media education and screenings for balance disorders. Additionally 98 veterans in the northeast corner were screened for fall risk by the Northeastern Health District and Day Kimball Hospital at the Veterans Stand Down. Home care agencies in the southern, northwestern and eastern regions reached 812 individuals attending fall prevention clinics. Data from these agencies indicate that falls were reduced by 60% with an additional reduction in the utilization of each type of related health care service.
- Healthy IDEAS:* This community-based depression program is designed to detect and reduce the severity of depressive symptoms in older adults with chronic health conditions and functional limitations through existing case management services. The program targets underserved, chronically ill older adults in the community and addresses commonly recognized barriers to mental health care. There were 25 individuals who received this intervention in SFY 2019.
- Coalition for Elder Justice in Connecticut:* The State Unit on Aging formed the Coalition for Elder Justice in Connecticut in 2013 as the central focus of the state's Elder Rights/Elder Justice initiatives. The Coalition's mission is to prevent elder abuse and protect the rights, independence, security and well-being of vulnerable elders. The Coalition is a multidisciplinary statewide system of stakeholders partnering to better

understand and develop strategies to protect older Connecticut citizens from abuse, neglect and exploitation. In November 2018 approximately 200 representatives attended the 5th Annual CEJC Symposium “How We Communicate: Raising Awareness to Protect Rights and Prevent Abuse.”

The Long Term Care Ombudsman Program (LTCOP) provides individual advocacy to residents of skilled nursing facilities, residential care homes and assisted living facilities. The State Long Term Care Ombudsman also advocates for systemic changes in policy and legislation in order to protect the health, safety, welfare and rights of individuals who reside in those settings.

The LTCOP responds to and investigates complaints brought forward by residents, family members and/or other individuals acting on their behalf. All communication with the residents, their family members or legal guardians, as applicable, is held in strict confidentiality.

There were Federal regulations changes that were implemented in Connecticut during FFY2017. These new regulations provided clarification and interpretation of the Older Americans Act requirements. Conforming to both the Connecticut state statutes and regulations is required by the end of the 2019 legislative sessions.

- **Resident Councils:** The Coalition of Presidents of Resident Councils is an organization of residents of long-term care facilities who work to improve the quality of care and the services in their homes and effect positive change in larger systems such as state and federal governments. The Executive Board of Presidents of Resident Councils is formed to represent the interests of the Coalition and to develop legislative initiatives.
- *Programs:* The VOICES forum is an annual event jointly convened by the LTCOP and the Statewide Coalition of Presidents of Resident Councils. It is an opportunity for Presidents of Resident Councils from around the state to gather and discuss issues and concerns in their homes and to provide input into legislative proposals for the upcoming legislative session.
- *Resident Advocates:* Resident Advocates are volunteers that are trained by Ombudsman staff in residents’ rights and problem solving. Resident Advocates are asked to spend four hours per week in one assigned nursing home and help residents solve problems or concerns.
- **Advocacy:** During FY2019*, the Ombudsman’s office received 3,423 complaints; the highest category of complaints fell into the Residents’ Rights. This category received 1,348 complaints overall with the majority of the complaints, 495, being in the subcategory - Admission, Transfer, Discharge, Eviction. The second largest area of concern was in the category of “Resident Care”. This area received 1,083 complaints

with 895 of those complaints being directly related to the subcategory “Care and Services.” Other advocacy activities include participation in the Long-Term Care Advisory Council, Connecticut Elder Action Network, the LGBT Aging Advocacy workgroup, other stakeholder workgroups and serving as co-chair of the Coalition for Elder Justice.

Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) is the state’s lead Bureau for the coordination and provision of services to all Connecticut residents who are legally blind or have significant visual impairments. Founded in 1893, BESB was among the first state programs in the nation for people who are blind.

BESB has four separate service programs which provide a full range of services to clients of all ages who are legally blind or have significant visual impairments:

- *The Adult Services Program* serves as the central intake for clients and provides independent living training to adults to assist them with maintaining independence within the home and the community. In FY2019, 448 independent living services were provided to 143 Adult Blind clients (under age 55), and 2,812 independent living services were provided to 702 Older Blind clients (55 and over.) Thirty-five clients received Deafblind Community Inclusion grant services.*
- *The Children’s Services Program* provides braille instruction, mobility instruction, adaptive technology devices and training, braille and large print textbooks, and independent living training to children, as well as professional development training and technical assistance to school districts. Over 950 children received services through the Children’s Services Program, including preschool services, braille instruction, adaptive technology training, mobility training and expanded core curriculum training. There were 131 students who are blind or visually impaired that took part in BESB’s extra-curricular programs - including Skills for Life Mobility Camp, Camp Independence adapted sports summer program, and Leap into Life transition program.
- *The Vocational Rehabilitation Program* provides school-to-work transition services to youth who are blind or have visual impairments and assists adults to obtain, retain and advance in employment. The program also provides technical assistance and job candidate referral services to employers across the state. During FY 2019, 804 clients were served under BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Of these, 782 were served under an individualized employment plan and 86 clients achieved employment. The average hourly wages for these consumers were \$23.48.*

- **The Business Enterprise Program** offers entrepreneurial opportunities to people who are blind to manage their own food service and gift store businesses at public facilities. During FY 2019, gross program sales from the vending facilities reached \$5.1 million. There were 31 vending facility operators, who employed an additional 79 workers. Average annual income for the vending facility operators was \$41,410, with five of the locations providing income of more than \$80,000. *

BESB maintains a confidential registry of people who are blind in Connecticut and provides comprehensive independent living services, adaptive aids and devices and volunteer supports, among other rehabilitative services, to individuals of all ages who are legally blind, deaf-blind or visually impaired with a goal of maximizing independence and community inclusion.

Under Statutory requirements, the bureau provides any school district the services of Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments to address the vision-related developmental needs of students who are blind, deaf-blind or visually impaired upon written request.

Bureau of Disability Determination Services

The Bureau of Disability Determination Services is responsible for deciding medical eligibility for the Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income programs. These programs provide cash benefits and medical insurance to individuals who are unable to maintain employment due to the severity of their disabilities.

39,311 Social Security disability claims were adjudicated during 2019.

Individuals with disabilities can apply for benefits or inquire about the status of their application by visiting <http://www.ssa.gov/>.

Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services strives to create opportunities that enable individuals with significant disabilities to work competitively and live independently. Staff works to provide individualized services, develop effective partnerships, and share sufficient information so that consumers and their families may make informed choices about the rehabilitation process and employment options.

The Bureau hosts a number of programs:

- **The Vocational Rehabilitation Program** is designed to help individuals with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, maintain or advance in employment. In FFY 2019, 7,516 consumers were assisted in the BRS Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Of these 5,569 were served under an individualized employment plan and 1,248 achieved employment. Average hourly wages for those who achieved employment were \$20.50.*

- **The Connect-Ability staffing program** is designed to connect employers with qualified job seekers. BRS Employment Consultants are strategically located across the state and can review the needs of businesses, offer qualified candidates and assist in developing training plans before the new trainee/employee starts working.
- **The Connect to Work Project** allows individuals who receive Social Security disability benefits to better understand the impact returning to work will have on their disability benefits. 466 new consumers met with the Connect to Work Project benefits specialists. 255 individuals received benefits analysis services and 425 follow-ups were completed. There were also 25 presentations and other outreach activities targeting underserved populations, especially youth in transition.
- **The Connecticut Tech Act Project** increases independence and improves the lives of people with disabilities by providing access to and acquisition of assistive technology devices and services for work, school and community living. 3,900 individuals received Assistive Technology services which include independent living services, educational assistance and employment support.
- **The Employment Opportunities Program** enables individuals with the most significant disabilities to engage in competitive employment by providing funding for long-term supports in order to maintain competitive employment.
- **The Independent Living Program** provides comprehensive independent living services to persons with significant disabilities through contracts with Connecticut's five community-based Centers for Independent Living. In fiscal year 2019, 448 Independent Living Part B clients were served.*
- **The Driver Training Program** provides evaluation and training for individuals with disabilities who seek to be licensed using a modified vehicle in the state of Connecticut. 323 clients were served under the Driver Training Program during SFY2019. Of these 153 clients completed driver training (some of which included vehicle adaptations), 46 were actively receiving services and 133 had requested services, pending evaluations.
- **Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services** include the Counseling Program and the DORS Interpreter Registry. The Counseling Program provides counseling related to special language, communication and socioeconomic problems unique to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and their families. There were 713 Deaf and Hard of Hearing Counseling Services performed during SFY2019 (which may include multiple referrals and services during one session.) The department also monitors and posts a statewide Interpreter Registry for all sign language interpreters working in Connecticut in

accordance with state statute. There were nearly 400 interpreters listed on the Connecticut Registry at the end of the fiscal year.

- **The Workers' Rehabilitation Program** assists individuals with work-related injuries to return to the workforce. During SFY 2019, 522 Initial Interviews were completed in the Workers' Rehabilitation Services program. Of these 380 clients achieved employment.

**Please note, some numbers were captured under the latest full Federal Fiscal Year reporting, which ran from October 2017 to September 2018.*

Additional Information as Required by Statute

- DORS has a memorandum of agreement for all **Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity** (AA/EEO) programs and services. Under the direction of the Commissioner, the agency is responsible for ensuring compliance with a wide variety of federal and state laws and department policies that address equal employment and education. Activities related to the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act include investigating grievances as well as determining, documenting and providing reasonable accommodations.
- **Affirmative Action Plan:** During the reporting period the Affirmative Action Plan was approved without condition. DORS has successfully achieved goals in many categories and classifications, thereby upholding its commitment toward achieving parity in the workforce. The department supports affirmative action and diversity in the workplace and actively seeks applicants from all sectors of the population and takes seriously the commitment to develop a workforce that reflects the diversity of the state and the client population it serves.