**2024-2027 STATE PLAN REQUIREMENTS FOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION**

## Program-Specific Requirements for State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program

**The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services Portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan must include the following descriptions and estimates, as required by sections 101(a) and 606 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by title IV of WIOA.**

**(a) State Rehabilitation Council. All VR agencies, except for those that have an independent consumer-controlled commission, must have a State Rehabilitation Council (Council or SRC) that meets the criteria in section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act. The designated State agency or designated State unit, as applicable, has (select A or B):**

**[check box] (A) is an independent State commission.**

[X] (B) has established a State Rehabilitation Council.

**In accordance with Assurance 3(b), please provide information on the current composition of the Council by representative type, including the term number of the representative, as applicable, and any vacancies, as well as the beginning dates of each representative’s term.**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Council Representative** | **Current Term**  **Number/**  **Vacant** | **Beginning Date of Term**  **Mo./Yr.** |
| Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)  Melissa T. | 1 | 01/2024 |
| Parent Training and Information Center  Laura K. | 1 | 05/2024 |
| Client Assistance Program  Jennifer J. | 2 | 12/2023 |
| Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor (Ex Officio if Employed by the VR Agency)  Enaida M. | 1 | 07/2021 |
| Community Rehabilitation Program Service Provider  Frank B. | 1 | 08/2021 |
| Business, Industry, and Labor  Heidi S. | 1 | 08/2023 |
| Business, Industry, and Labor  Bill D. | 1 | 07/2021 |
| Business, Industry, and Labor  Brandy A. | 2 | 03/2023 |
| Business, Industry, and Labor  Shelly M. | 1 | 05/2024 |
| Disability Advocacy Groups  Deb R. | 2 | 01/2023 |
| Current or Former Applicants for, or Recipients of, VR services  Phil. M | 2 | 12/2023 |
| Section 121 Project Directors in the State (as applicable)  Contessa B-J. | 2 | 08/2021 |
| State Educational Agency Responsible for Students with Disabilities Eligible to Receive Services under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)  Jay B. | 2 | 01/2023 |
| State Workforce Development Board  Joe C. | 1 | 03/2024 |
| VR Agency Director (Ex Officio)  Carol J. | 1 | 05/2023 |
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**If the SRC is not meeting the composition requirements in section 105(b) of the Rehabilitation Act and/or is not meeting quarterly as required in section 105(f) of the Rehabilitation Act, provide the steps that the VR agency is taking to ensure it meets those requirements.**

The SRC membership workgroup and the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) are working diligently with the State of Connecticut’s Office of the Governor who is responsible for appointments to boards and commissions to obtain appointments to the SRC to become fully compliant with the membership requirements, term limits, and disability majority requirements. The Office of the Governor has identified a primary point of contact for applications and appointments to the SRC to streamline the process. The SRC meets on a quarterly basis and does typically have a quorum present for each quarterly meeting. However, currently the SRC membership is at 50% disability, and BESB and the SRC membership workgroup are actively recruiting blind and visually impaired individuals to meet the majority disability requirement. There are a few SRC positions that will expire this summer, and BESB and the SRC work group have been working diligently with the point of contact in the Governor’s office to get applications submitted and approved for appointment. The following positions will expire this summer and are actively being worked on for applications and reappointments:

1. The Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor (Ex Officio if Employed by the VR Agency) position will expire in July 2024 and an application for re-appointment is being worked on.
2. The Section 121 Project Directors in the State (as applicable) position will expire in August 2024, and a new individual has applied for appointment.
3. Community Rehab Service Provider: Expires in August 2024, and BESB and the SRC workgroup have identified an individual who is currently working on submitting an application.
4. One Business, Industry, & Labor position will expire in July 2024, and BESB and the SRC workgroup are actively working on recruiting an individual to apply.
5. The Parent of a Person who can't Represent themselves, who is blind, has multiple disabilities, or has difficulty representing himself or herself will expire in August 2024 and BESB and the SRC workgroup are actively working on recruiting for this position.

**In accordance with the requirements in section 101(a)(21)(A)(ii)(III) of the Rehabilitation Act, include a summary of the Council’s input (including how it was obtained) into the State Plan and any State Plan revisions, including recommendations from the Council's annual reports, the review and analysis of consumer satisfaction and other Council reports.**

The SRC for the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program at BESB continues to be a valuable and active contributing partner to the VR Program and BESB. Over the course of this plan, the SRC developed a workgroup responsible for working with BESB on the state plan through reviewing annual consumer satisfaction surveys and the Consumer Statewide Needs Assessment that was completed in 2023. SRC members continue to participate and work actively in partnership with BESB as well as continuing their existing responsibilities as identified in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

The following information summarizes the recommendations of the SRC through their continued collaboration and partnership with BESB.

Recommendation 1:  Resolve the RSA Corrective Action Plan for compliance in the Pre-Employment Transition Services Reserve.

Recommendation 2:  Work on exploring ways to fully spend the awarded VR grant on services, technology, training, etc.

Recommendation 3:  Focus on program outreach to underserved populations, small business employers, local governments, and such to increase awareness of services provided by the VR program.

Recommendation 4: Focus on marketing, revitalizing BESB VR’s image, creating accessible VR marketing materials, social media posts, PSAs, and public education and awareness to increase the number of consumers referred to and served by the VR program.

Recommendation 5: Provide more training to VR staff on areas of identified needs and interests to better serve VR consumers and increase VR staff professional development.

Recommendation 6: Explore how adaptive technology can be more readily available for consumers across the whole state to have demonstrations and hands-on experiences with technology in order to make better informed choices prior to BESB providing technology and necessary training to consumers.

**Provide the VR agency’s response to the Council’s input and recommendations, including an explanation for the rejection of any input and recommendations.**

BESB agreed with all of the SRC’s workgroup recommendations and did not reject any of the recommendations.

**(b) Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA).** **Section 101(a)(15), (17), and (23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to provide an assessment of:**

1. **The VR services needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the State, including:**
2. **Individuals with the most significant disabilities and their need for Supported Employment;**

BESB VR and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) contracted with the Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) at Central Connecticut State University to conduct a comprehensive statewide needs assessment (CSNA) in 2023 to assist BESB VR and the SRC with establishing goals and priorities. The full report was issued by CPPSR in December 2023, which runs on a three-year cycle. Among the variables reviewed, CPPSR conducted an analysis of BESB VR services to individuals with the most significant disabilities. A summary of the results and a list of the identified needs are as follows:

“According to 2022 ACS 1-Year Estimates, there are approximately 82,889 members of the Connecticut population with visual disability, representing 2.2% of the state population. For census purposes, a visually disabled person is defined as one who is legally blind or has serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses. Looking at the ethnic breakdown of those with visual disability in Connecticut for 2021 (2022 data is not yet available from ACS), some ethic populations have a higher prevalence of visual disability.

While the 2021 data indicates that 2.2% of state residents have a visual disability, among the American Indian/Native Alaskan population, this percentage is 5.3% —the highest among all ethnic groups. The Black/African-American population shows a slightly higher than average prevalence of visual disability at 2.9%. The White and Asian populations have lower than average prevalence at 2.0% and 1.3%, respectively.

A glance at different age populations reveals that the prevalence of visual disabilities is higher among those age 65 and up. Again, with 2.2% of the state population having a visual disability, the rate is 5.2% among senior citizens. Those in the 21–64 age group have lower than average visual impairments (1.8%), while those age 20 and under have visual disabilities at a rate of 2.7%—somewhat above average.”

A list of the results of the identified needs are as follows:

* Improve consumer access to assistive technology, technology training, and transportation.
* Assess whether current technology training is addressing the needs of consumers with the most significant disabilities and address service gaps.
* Increase employer education and training on the needs and rights of those with significant disabilities.
* Hire additional support staff, such as a housing coordinator.
* Design staff training that targets how to address the needs of this population.
* Cultivate closer relationships with consumers that include more frequent check-ins.
* Increase funding that is specifically allocated to this population.

One issue identified in the CSNA was a decrease in the number of individuals being referred and served. BESB has a statutory obligation to maintain a registry of all individuals in Connecticut who are legally blind. BESB’s registry has shown a slight increase. The last state plan had 8,642 individuals on the registry, while there are now 9431, which is a 0.91% increase. One reason for this increase may be due to the increasing numbers of older blind adults who are not of working age.

However, from an analysis of the new referrals and applicants into the VR Program a decline has been noted. Since eye doctors represent the primary source of new referrals into the Bureau, the eye report form was updated and sent to all eye doctors in the state focusing on outreach in PY 2023. The eye doctor reporting form was updated to add clarity and definition for the reporting of functional vision impairments for circumstances where consistent results cannot be obtained during eye examinations to where a functional vision assessment would need to be conducted by designated Bureau staff to make a final eligibility determination. This form was posted on the agency website, which will include online submission capabilities in 2024, followed by a mailing of the new form to all eye doctors across the state, which also included the statutory reporting requirements.

Furthermore, each of the VR Counselors will incorporate focused program outreach to community-based organizations as well as underserved consumer populations into their work activities to make these organizations aware of the services that are available through BESB VR. Additionally, working in close collaboration with the regional workforce boards, the BESB VR Counselors will continue to participate in business services teams to learn about upcoming job opportunities. Outreach to community colleges to identify certificate program opportunities shall also remain a priority to assist clients with identifying and pursuing careers that are available through these types of initiatives.

1. **Individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program;**

BESB VR’s 2023 CSNA conducted an analysis of VR services to individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program. A summary of the results and a list of identified needs are as follows:

“A snapshot of the 2022 ACS Census Estimates reveals that Connecticut residents can be identified according to the following groups: 78.4% White, 12.9% Black or African-American, 5.2% Asian, .7% American Indian or Native Alaskan, and 2.7% other/multi-racial. As noted previously, the American Indian/Native Alaskan population has the highest prevalence of visual disability in the state (5.3% vs. the average of 2.2%). Thus, one might expect the VR consumers served during the most recent program years (PY 2022 and PY 2023) to include an overrepresentation of individuals from that group. However, while American Indian/Native Alaskan residents make up 0.7% of the state population, they represent only 0.3% of those who were served in the VR Program during PY 2023 (and 0.2% in PY 2022).

A similar divergence from expectations exists for representation of those with Hispanic ethnicity. The prevalence of visual disability among Hispanics is 3.3%, higher than the state average of 2.2%. While the VR program could expect to see Hispanic representation at a rate higher than that in the general population of Connecticut (18.2%), the percentage of Hispanics who were served in the VR program in PY23 (18.5%) is, in fact, very similar to that of the overall population in the state. The percentage of Hispanics served in PY22 was even lower at 17.5%.”

A list of the results of the identified needs are as follows:

* Improve consumer access to assistive technology, technology training, and transportation.
* Broaden the accessibility of BESB materials to those who speak languages other than English.
* Offer services in languages other than English.
* Tailor services to address the unique challenges that minority consumers may face.
* Increase targeted outreach to the unserved.
* Reduce the cost of essential equipment for consumers.
* Hire counselors that represent a wider range of demographic backgrounds.

BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation program appears to be on par at engaging Connecticut’s visually impaired minority community. Overall, Bureau clientele enrolled in the VR program who self-identify their ethnicity reasonably reflect both the state and national minority population. Sub-groups are similarly represented. For PY 2022, BESB reported the following VR program enrollment: 25.0% African American, 20.2% Hispanic/Latino, 2.6% Asian, less than 1% Native American/Pacific Islander, and 2.2% Multi-Racial/Other.

Individuals from underserved populations are tracked in VR to ensure that they are engaged in services and fully understand the scope of available services that can be provided. Before any individual from a traditionally underserved population is closed from BESB VR with an unsuccessful outcome, a supervisory review process is required. The VR Supervisor confirms that the individual was provided with information in his or her preferred language and accessible format. Additionally, the Supervisor reviews the case record of services to confirm documentation is present, substantiating that the individual was afforded the opportunity to make informed decisions regarding participation in VR services.

BESB VR employs a Counselor who is bicultural and is fluent in Spanish. BESB VR also employs four Counselors who are African American, two of the Counselors are covering a regional caseload and the other two cover a Transition caseload. These five staff are available to provide outreach to community-based organizations that can offer linkages to traditionally underserved communities.

Outreach to Hispanic organizations continues to be a goal of the program. A new Bilingual/Bicultural Counselor was hired recently who will be doing more outreach on a statewide basis with Hispanic organizations. Currently we have a Counselor who has a seat at the table of the Hispanic Council, which covers Fairfield County in CT.

As mentioned above, all of the VR Counselors have a program outreach goal incorporated into their work activities. The individualized relationships the Counselors have established thus far with the community-based organizations have strengthened the outreach activities in the local communities, but this was expanded to ensure a wider reach across the entire state. The decline in new referrals to BESB VR further suggests that more outreach activity is necessary to ensure that organizations and individuals are made aware of the services that BESB VR can offer.

1. **Individuals with disabilities served through other components of the workforce development system; and**

BESB VR’s 2023 CSNA conducted an analysis of VR services to individuals with disabilities served through other components of the workforce development system. A summary of the results and a list of identified needs are as follows:

“This section of the assessment provides insights into some of the most prominent needs of BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program. These findings are based on themes that span across study surveys, as well as qualitative feedback received from various constituent groups. Attention is drawn to ways in which these themes relate to some of BESB’s most vulnerable and/or at-risk populations, including minorities, those with multiple or significant disabilities, and youth.

More than one-third of the consumers surveyed (37%) indicated that they have a secondary disability that affects their ability to work. Overall, more than three-quarters (77%) of consumers with multiple disabilities said they did not achieve their employment goals. By comparison, this percentage was slightly less than half (47%) among those with no secondary disability. The primary reasons shared by these underserved consumers for not reaching their goals included health issues, lack of follow-up from BESB, and general insufficient assistance from BESB.

Minorities were more likely to state that they do not have medical or dental insurance. Among minorities who said they are employed, a strong majority (86%) said that they did not have medical insurance and none (0%) had dental insurance. Among employed White respondents, slightly more than two-in-five indicated that they do not have medical or dental insurance (43% for both).

Among minority BESB consumers, more than 80% did not find BESB to be helpful in achieving their employment goals. Slightly more than three-in-five (61%) said they did not achieve their employment goal, while slightly more than one-in-five (22%) said they achieved their goal, but that BESB did not help them in this effort. Among White consumers, only 59% did not find BESB to be helpful; 47% did not achieve their goals, and 12% achieved their goal without BESB’s help. Overall, White respondents were more likely to say that they achieved their employment goal due to BESB services (41%) compared to minority survey participants (17%).

In addition, among those consumers who indicated that they are currently employed, White respondents were slightly more likely to be employed full-time (57% full-time, 43% part-time) compared to minority participants (29% full-time, 71% part-time). Concern was raised for those consumers with limited access to the Internet and/or assistive technology. VR staff members cautioned that the pandemic had a particularly negative impact on consumers without computers and/or access to the Internet. Consumers that lacked critical web navigation skills were also deeply impacted. Consumers with multiple disabilities were less likely to rate Rehabilitation Technology Services as meeting their needs.”

A list of identified areas of need is as follows:

* Medical
* Mental Health
* Dental
* Housing
* Transportation
* Technology Services
* Employment Services

BESB VR has been actively involved in referring clients to other programs and services available through the statewide workforce development system. The level of commitment to facilitate client engagement in other components of the system is evident in the data that reflects 30 clients who have engaged in Adult Employment and Training Programs, 8 clients engaged in Adult Education Programs, 2 clients engaged in Dislocated Worker Programs, 1 client engaged in Job Corps, 66 clients enrolled in Wagner-Peyser, and 2 engaged in Youth programs during Program Year 2022. BESB VR finds great value in these partnerships. Maximizing the resources and services available through other components of the statewide workforce development system has been a priority for BESB VR.

1. **Youth with disabilities, including students with disabilities and their need for pre-employment transition services. Include an assessment of the needs of individuals with disabilities for transition career services and pre-employment transition services, and the extent to which such services are coordinated with transition services provided under IDEA.**

BESB VR’s 2023 CSNA conducted an analysis of VR services provided to youth with disabilities, including students with disabilities and their need for pre-employment transition services. A list of the results of the identified needs are as follows:

* Increase consumer access to assistive technology and technology training.
* Identify creative ways to increase engagement from parents, teachers, and schools.
* Emphasize training for teachers, including how to address consumer accommodations for coursework.
* Improve consumer education on their rights, as well as how to advocate for these rights.
* Expand access to summer programs, jobs/internships, and mentorship opportunities.
* Increase opportunities for guidance and socialization through outlets such as support groups.

In addition to a Transition Coordinator, BESB VR has dedicated two VR Counselors to work exclusively with Pre-Employment Transition-Age students. There are currently 78 students who are potentially eligible or eligible for Pre-Employment Transition Services. The VR Counselors participate in Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings to address the full range of services that are available. Real work experiences are coordinated in both after-school and summer jobs. Career exploration and job shadowing opportunities are provided to many of these students as well. With the existence of a Children’s Services Program at BESB, VR staff have a strong linkage for identifying referrals of new clients who are potentially eligible for Pre-Employment Transition Services. Education Consultants from the Children’s Services Program and Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments from the school districts often coordinate with the VR Transition Coordinator to develop expanded core curriculum activities that feature mentoring, career exposure, and independent living skills training for clients served in that program as well as clients that are mutually served by both programs simultaneously.

The two Pre-Employment Transition Counselors participate in PPT meetings of students with disabilities and assist in the coordination of Individualized Education Programs (IEP’s) for these students. The services that are detailed in the IEP of each student are factored into the development of each client’s Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), which must be developed within ninety (90) days of the determination of eligibility for vocational rehabilitation services, or by the time the client exits high school, whichever comes sooner. VR Counselor involvement can begin as early as age 14, with Pre-Employment Transition Services commencing at age 16 and ending at the end of the school year the student turns age 22. Referrals to BESB VR are most commonly initiated by the Education Consultants of BESB’s Children’s Services Program or by Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments that work directly for school districts.

Since BESB maintains a registry of all students who are legally blind or visually impaired within Connecticut, the process for identifying and referring clients from Children’s Services to BESB VR is streamlined and efficient. The electronic case management system for BESB has a built-in tracking system for identifying clients by age range to further facilitate the referral of students who desire to participate in vocational rehabilitation services. The VR Counselors work with the students, educators, parents or guardians, and the Program’s Transition Coordinator to identify careers of interest, develop career exploration opportunities, work and job shadowing experiences, mentoring activities, and leadership development programs.

In addition to serving on the Statewide Transition Taskforce, BESB VR’s Transition Coordinator is also an active member of the Connecticut Transition Community of Practice. BESB VR continues to conduct career exposure programs for high school students who are visually impaired or legally blind. These programs include opportunities to interact with former recipients of vocational rehabilitation services who are successfully employed in a variety of careers.

BESB VR staff members continue to participate in and present information at in-service training programs organized by BESB for public school teachers and guidance counselors on issues affecting students who are blind or visually impaired. The Children’s Services Program of BESB provides a comprehensive training series every year for school district staff to learn about low vision aids, adaptive technology, braille instruction, expanded core curriculum activities and resources that are available to facilitate the education and transition of students served by BESB.

BESB VR also participates in PPT meetings early in the transition process to identify the need for supported employment services, and to identify providers, both private and public, that may offer services while a student is preparing to transition from public or private education into employment.

1. **Identify the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State.**

Other than providing training to staff of community rehabilitation programs on blindness related technology and adaptations for accessing training and employment, no needs to establish, develop or improve upon these programs have been identified. BESB’s VR Supervisor is an active participant on the statewide Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP) committee made up of the Department of Aging and Disability Services staff as well as staff from the CRPs. This committee meets regularly to improve collaboration and create efficient, effective processes.

The CRPs work through a collaborative contract with the General VR program within the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS). There is an online cross disabilities training provided to the CRPs, focusing on the specific services to be provided such as Trial Work Experiences, Job Coaching, and Work-Based Learning.

The CRPs have very little experience working with individuals who are blind. BESB VR Counselors and Rehabilitation Technologists provide training to staff of the CRPs on how to work effectively with individuals who are legally blind. The Technologists demonstrate the most common assistive technology devices available for individuals who are blind to use in a work environment. In addition, BESB staff provide information on incentives to hire an individual who is legally blind. This training occurs at least one time a year either in person or virtually.

**(c) Goals, Priorities, and Strategies. Section 101(a)(15) and (23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to describe the goals and priorities of the State in carrying out the VR and Supported Employment programs. The goals and priorities are based on (1) the most recent CSNA, including any updates; (2) the State’s performance under the performance accountability measures of section 116 of WIOA; and (3) other available information on the operation and effectiveness of the VR program, including any reports received from the SRC and findings and recommendations from monitoring activities conducted under section 107 of the Rehabilitation Act. VR agencies must—**

1. **Describe how the SRC and the VR agency jointly developed and agreed to the goals and priorities and any revisions; and**

BESB and the SRC meet quarterly. They review all results from the consumer satisfaction survey as well as the consumer statewide needs assessment to identify strengths, weaknesses, and any gaps in service provision. The SRC developed a work group to work in partnership with BESB on the development of BESB’s goals and the state plan.

1. **Identify measurable goals and priorities in carrying out the VR and Supported Employment programs and the basis for selecting the goals and priorities (e.g., CSNA, performance accountability measures, SRC recommendations, monitoring, other information). As required in section 101(a)(15)(D), (18), and (23), describe under each goal or priority, the strategies or methods used to achieve the goal or priority, including as applicable, description of strategies or methods that—**
2. **Support innovation and expansion activities;**
3. **Overcome barriers to accessing VR and supported employment services;**
4. **Improve and expand VR services for students with disabilities, including the coordination of services designed to facilitate the transition of such students from school to postsecondary life (including the receipt of VR services, post**

**secondary education, employment, and pre-employment transition services); and**

1. **Improve the performance of the VR and Supported Employment programs in assisting individuals with disabilities to achieve quality employment outcomes.**

Goal 1 and Basis:

Based on the December 2023 CSNA’s identified needs for youth with disabilities, including students with disabilities and their need for pre-employment transition services, BESB VR will expand access to summer programs, jobs/internships, and mentorship opportunities.

Strategy, Method, and Measurement:

BESB VR will work to expand access and opportunities for programs, work experiences, and mentorship opportunities to students with disabilities by providing a minimum of three pre-employment transition services events/programs.

Goal 2 and Basis:

Based on the December 2023 CSNA’s identified needs for minorities and underserved populations, BESB VR will broaden the accessibility of BESB materials to those who speak languages other than English.

Strategy, Method, and Measurement:

BESB VR will work to broaden the accessibility of BESB materials to those who speak languages other than English by having BESB VR program materials translated and printed in Spanish.

Goal 3 and Basis:

Based on the December 2023 CSNA’s identified needs for minorities and underserved populations, BESB VR will increase targeted outreach to the minority and underserved populations.

Strategy, Method, and Measurement:

BESB VR will work to increase targeted outreach to minorities and underserved populations by having BESB VR staff conduct 10 targeted outreach activities to minorities and underserved populations.

Goal 4 and Basis:

Based on the December 2023 CSNA’s identified needs for serving consumers in other components of the workforce development system, BESB VR will increase client engagement in the Adult Education and Literacy Programs.

Strategy, Method, and Measurement:

BESB VR will work to increase client engagement in the Adult Education and Literacy Programs by having BESB VR Staff referring and engaging 10 consumers in this program.

Innovation and Expansion:

BESB VR will conduct the following I & E activities:

1. BESB VR will provide co-sponsorship support for developing leadership skills and community involvement through the Youth Leadership Forum, to you and students with disabilities.
2. BESB VR will expand the availability of adaptive technology and training in core services to the partners so that solutions can be identified and implemented in the planning stages to ensure equal access. As a part of this BESB VR will provide support for the adaptive technology laboratory located at the Southeastern Connecticut Community Center of the Blind, making it possible for clients located in that region to receive local training in the use of adaptive technology.
3. BESB VR will fund the activities of the State Rehabilitation Council.

**(d) Evaluation and Reports of Progress: VR and Supported Employment Goals. For the most recently completed program year, provide an evaluation and report of progress for the goals or priorities, including progress on the strategies under each goal or priority, applicable to that program year. Sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to describe—**

1. **Progress in achieving the goals and priorities identified for the VR and Supported Employment Programs;**

Goal A: Engage employers to increase career opportunities for eligible individuals of BESB VR.

Objective A1: BESB staff will reach out to employers and partner agencies to collaborate and educate them on BESB services.

Strategy: BESB VR Counselor Coordinator and VR Counselors will meet with and present to employers, partner agencies, and national organizations educating them on BESB services.

Progress: This goal has been achieved through presentations and participation in the following: Meriden Lions Club; AVANGRID- Presentation via TEAMS to corporate VP’s from HR from around the country about Vocational Rehabilitation services; ADA Advisory Counsel for the City of Stamford, which was created to address accessibility issues/concerns within the city of Stamford; HACGS (The Hispanic Advisory Council of Greater Stamford); Elm City Chapter’s Meeting on Business Networking; GNHRRT(Greater New Haven Re-Entry Roundtable) Committee; Rose City Business Networking meeting; Virtual presentation to over 100 participants in each session on BESB services through the Work for Council where the participants were employers, community rehabilitation providers, state agencies, and the American Job Centers throughout the State of Connecticut; Epilepsy Foundation; and News interview on NBC -CT on the services BESB provides.

Objective A2: Develop digital BESB marketing materials that can be distributed to employers and partner agencies.

Strategy: Create materials showing success stories and services that BESB offers.

Measure: Documentation of distribution to employers and partner agencies.

Progress: This has not been achieved. The VR Supervisor, VR Counselor Coordinator and VR Counselor met with a marketing firm to develop new marketing materials and to update the website with a new logo, materials, and a new QR code. A contract was never approved with this marketing firm and the State of CT.

Objective A3: Train BESB VR clients how to use CT Hires, Career Index Plus, Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP), Indeed and other accessible job exploration platforms.

Strategy: Rehabilitation teachers and VR Counselors will teach no fewer than 10 job seeking clients per year how to navigate and utilize these platforms.

Measure: Documentation of a list of accessible and effective sites and utilization by each client.

Progress: This goal has been achieved. VR counselors report monthly to the VR supervisor on the clients that have been trained. The most common sites used were the O\*NET job exploration site and the Talent Acquisition Portal. Other sites used by consumers were Indeed and Linked In.

Objective A4: VR Counselors will engage clients on their caseloads to participate in job fairs, hiring events and training programs with partner agencies.

Strategy: VR Counselors will share this information with individuals on their caseloads and facilitate attendance at these events.

Measure: Documentation of no fewer than 5 clients per VR Counselor caseload per year attending one of these events and a survey of their experience.

Progress: This goal has been achieved. This was also tracked in the monthly report that VR counselors submitted to the VR supervisor each month. All five AJCs throughout the state have put on at least one hiring event this year. The Northern and Southern part of the state put on a Resource Fair with employers and providers present for consumers. In addition, the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services put on a hiring event in September of 2023 where many consumers attended. Other events consumers participated in were college job fairs and resource events.

Goal B: Provide coordinated services to students with disabilities to prepare for careers and post-secondary education after exit from high school.

Objective B1: BESB VR will continue to serve clients that are in the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) category.

Strategy: Students will be assigned to a caseload to receive specific, qualifying Pre-ETS services with dedicated Pre-ETS funding.

Measure: Documentation of Pre-ETS services

Progress: This goal has been achieved. BESB has filled both vacant Pre-ETS VR Counselor positions. Currently, there are two dedicated Pre-ETS Counselors, splitting the state of CT by Southern and Northern halves. Each Pre-ETS VR Counselor has a caseload of approximately 60 consumers being served where IEP meetings are attended when the Pre-ETS VR Counselor is invited. The Pre-ETS program also has a Transition Coordinator who assists in coordinating Pre-ETS’ programs and events for consumers throughout the year.

Objective B2: BESB VR staff will coordinate enrollment and participation for their Pre-ETS eligible students in BESB run events as well as partnership with agencies that promote the development of self-determination, self-advocacy and financial literacy.

Strategy: BESB VR staff working with Pre-ETS eligible students will develop opportunities and distribute information on existing programs. These opportunities will focus on pre-employment activities such as work based learning opportunities, internships, college preparatory programs, life skills programs, and related career development programs.

Measure: Documentation of participation in these events.

Progress: This goal has been achieved. Students participated in workplace experiences and workplace skills trainings throughout the year. Pre employment transition students participated in work-based learning activities through community rehabilitation providers at various sites in the summer. Through LEAP Vermont students participated in work-based learning opportunities through the program in the summer. Several students also participated in the preemployment transition programs through the Carroll Center for the Blind: Youth in Transition, Real World of Work, and Computing for College. The Youth Leadership Forum is a leadership program based on the UConn campus during the summer where students participated in a 5-day program whereby the students stay in dorms and learn leadership skills and independent living skills. In addition, there were two virtual programs through Sky’s The Limit Communication on Financial Literacy and Self Advocacy, eight sessions- 2hours each where Pre-ETS students participated.

Objective B3: BESB VR Staff will develop a mentor program for transition aged students

Strategy: BESB transition aged students will be provided opportunities for group mentoring events, job shadowing and peer-to-peer support networking.  Individuals will be matched with a mentor that is blind or visually impaired who is employed within a wide range of careers.

Measure: A list of mentors available for a match with a transition aged student. Documentation of mentor matches and participation at events.

Progress: This goal has been achieved. The Pre-ETS Transition Coordinator has created a list of mentors who have been matched with mentees. Each mentor undergoes a background check and undergoes training on how to be a mentor. This list has been newly created and is continuously growing. In addition, the Pre-ETS Coordinator helped coordinate an overnight two-day in-person mentoring event through Sky’s the Limit Communication. This first mentoring event had 12 participants who were mentors and mentees.

Objective B4: BESB VR and the SRC co-sponsor leadership development activities and camps for groups of Pre-ETS eligible clients.

Strategy: The SRC and BESB VR provide co-sponsorship funding for the leadership events such as the Youth Leadership Forum, and similar programs if available.

Measure: Documentation of the funds committed.

Progress: This goal has been achieved. BESB VR had one consumer who attended the Youth Leadership Forum this year and two consumers who attended last year.  BESB sponsored these participants, so they were able to attend the program at no cost. The Counselor and Transition Coordinator keep in touch with the participants. There are regular updates and progress from the camp and is reflected in the case record of the clients who attended the program. Each year at least one representative from BESB attends the end-of-camp luncheon celebration which highlights each participant of the program and any accomplishments they achieve.

1. **Performance on the performance accountability indicators under section 116 of WIOA for the most recently completed program year, reflecting actual and negotiated levels of performance. Explain any discrepancies in the actual and negotiated levels; and**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM PERFORMANCE INDICATORS  Performance Indicators | PY 2022 Expected Level | PY 2022 Negotiated Level |
| Employment (Second Quarter After Exit) | 52.2 | 52.5 |
| **Actual Level** |  | 59.5% (Met) |
| Employment (Fourth Quarter After Exit) | 47.2 | 49.7 |
| **Actual Level** |  | 42.2% (Unmet)  **BESB VR sought VR technical assistance through VR TAC QM. VR TAC QM provided training for BESB and BRS VR staff to better understand the reporting requirements for the six common performance measures. This technical assistance focused on quality employment outcomes and helping consumers with disability obtain careers and what that may entail rather than just finding entry level jobs.** |
| Median Earnings (Second Quarter After Exit) | 5153.0 | 6200.0 |
| **Actual Level** |  | $6,858 (Met) |
| Credential Attainment Rate | 11.8 | 20.0 |
| **Actual Level** |  | 23.3% (Met) |
| Measurable Skill Gains | 52.2 | 52.5 |
| **Actual Level** |  | **44.6% (Unmet)**  **BESB VR was underreporting this measure. BESB VR and BRS sought VR technical assistance through VR TAC QM and provided training to VR staff on the six Common Performance Measures in order for VR staff to have a better understanding of the reporting requirements. BESB VR is also working with Libera on developing a Dashboard for the System 7 case management system to allow VR staff to better track measurable skill gain opportunities for consumers. .** |
| Effectiveness in Serving Employers | Not Applicable | Not Applicable |

1. **The use of funds reserved for innovation and expansion activities (sections 101(a)(18) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act) (e.g., SRC, SILC).**

Programs serving youth, including youth from underserved populations have been identified for growth opportunities. VR staff assists in the development of independent living, leadership and career exposure programs and initiatives. The SRC and BESB VR offer co-sponsorship to the Youth Leadership Forum, a proven model for developing leadership skills and community involvement for youth with disabilities.

Expansion of the availability of adaptive technology in training programs in core services is another category where there is considerable need. BESB VR staff brings their knowledge of blindness related technology accommodations into discussions with the partners so that solutions can be identified and implemented in the planning stages of new initiatives, ensuring equal access to services. BESB VR also provides support for the adaptive technology laboratory located at the Southeastern Connecticut Community Center of the Blind, making it possible for clients located in that region to receive local training in the use of adaptive technology.

The SRC also receives funding to support efforts to assist BESB VR in assessing programs and services provided to VR consumers. The SRC incurs travel expenses to in–state meetings and the cost of transportation and accommodations, when needed. When desired by the SRC, these funds are utilized to send an SRC delegate to attend out–of– state conferences for the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC), the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), and the National Council of State Agencies of the Blind (NCSAB).

**(e) Supported Employment Services, Distribution of Title VI Funds, and Arrangements and Cooperative Agreements for the Provision of Supported Employment Services.**

1. **Acceptance of title VI funds:**
   1. [X] VR agency requests to receive title VI funds.
   2. [check box] VR agency does NOT elect to receive title VI funds and understands that supported employment services must still be provided under title I.
2. **If the VR agency has elected to receive title VI funds, Section 606(b)(3) of the Rehabilitation Act requires VR agencies to include specific goals and priorities with respect to the distribution of title VI funds received under section 603 of the Rehabilitation Act for the provision of supported employment services. Describe the use of title VI funds and how they will be used in meeting the goals and priorities of the Supported Employment program.**

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program has found it challenging to utilize the Title VI funding under the allowable uses that were placed upon these funds in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. In addition, the State of Connecticut increased the secondary graduation age to 22 through the end of that full school year, which shortens the length of time for youth with disabilities to find work prior to reaching age 25. Under prior regulations, these funds could be utilized to explore vocational opportunities through work assessments, rehabilitation technology assessments, and a host of other support services that were incorporated into each client’s IPE. Under current rules, these funds can only be utilized for support after a job hire, primarily in the form of job coaching and extended services. It is a primary goal of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to identify strategies that will result in a job hire so that greater utilization of these funds can be achieved. This strategy will not necessarily rely upon Title I funds to provide for the work assessments, short-term internships with supports, and for the provision of adaptive technology so the individuals can have the opportunity to demonstrate to potential employers their capabilities.

Title VI funds are split equally into portions for adults and youth. BESB VR does not use any administrative funds to meet match requirements for the youth portion of Title VI funds. BESB utilizes contractual agreements and fee schedules established by the Designated State Agency, the Department of Aging and Disability Services, to work with community providers to purchase supported employment services prior to the transition to the provider of extended services. BESB VR primarily uses Title VI funds for job coaching after the supported employment consumer has obtained permanent employment.

BESB has an active agreement with the State Department of Developmental Services (DDS). This cooperative agreement assists in the coordination and identification of training providers that have specific expertise when a client with a developmental disability and legal blindness could benefit from supported employment services. This working relationship also involves the utilization of DDS as a long-term third-party provider of funding. Efforts at coordinating customized employment services are also underway, with joint development of vendor qualifications for the delivery of the components of customized employment being finalized and readied for full implementation.

BESB has also developed a working relationship with the State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Through this arrangement, individuals who have a mental health diagnosis, acquired brain injury, or an addiction diagnosis along with legal blindness can access services to assist them in achieving a competitive, integrated employment outcome, including supported employment opportunities, with DMHAS providing the third-party funding.

Beyond the collaborative arrangements for third party funding with other state agencies, BESB VR continues to work with the community rehabilitation providers throughout the state that are contracted by the designated state agency for the provision of these services.

1. **Supported employment services may be provided with title 1 or title VI funds following placement of individuals with the most significant disabilities in employment. In accordance with section 101(a)(22) and section 606(b)(3) of the Rehabilitation Act, describe the quality, scope, and extent of supported employment services to be provided to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including youth with the most significant disabilities; and the timing of transition to extended services.**

Supported employment services refer to competitive integrated employment, including customized employment in an integrated work setting in which an individual with a most significant disability that includes visual impairment or legal blindness, including a youth with a most significant disability, is working on a short-term basis toward competitive integrated employment that is individualized and customized. These services are provided in a manner that is consistent with the unique strengths, abilities, interests, and informed choice of the individual. Supported employment services are available for individuals for whom competitive integrated employment has not historically occurred, or for whom competitive integrated employment has been interrupted or intermittent as a result of a significant disability, and who, because of the nature and severity of their disabilities, need intensive supported employment services and extended services after the transition from support provided by the Bureau, in order to perform this work.

An individual with a most significant disability, whose supported employment in an integrated setting does not satisfy the criteria of competitive integrated employment, is considered to be working on a short-term basis toward competitive integrated employment so long as the individual can reasonably anticipate achieving competitive integrated employment within six months of achieving a supported employment outcome. In limited circumstances, a period not to exceed 12 months from the achievement of the supported employment outcome is permissible if a longer period is necessary based on the needs of the individual and the individual has demonstrated progress toward competitive earnings based on information contained in the service record. The six-month short-term basis period, and the additional six months that may be available in limited circumstances, begins after an individual has completed up to 24 months of supported employment services (unless a longer period of time is necessary based upon the individual’s needs) and the individual has achieved a supported employment outcome. The job placement of the individual must be stable for a minimum period of 90 days following the transition to extended services. At this point, the individual has achieved a supported employment outcome.

Ongoing support services, including customized employment, and other appropriate services needed to support and maintain the client in supported employment are organized and made available, singly or in combination, in such a way as to assist the client to achieve competitive integrated employment, and these services:

(A) Are based on a determination of the needs of an eligible individual, as specified in an Individualized Plan for Employment;

(B) Are provided by the Bureau for a period of time not to exceed 24 months, unless under special circumstances the eligible individual and the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor jointly agree to extend the time to achieve the employment outcome identified in the Individualized Plan for Employment; and

(C) Following transition, as post-Employment services that are unavailable from an extended services provider and that are necessary to maintain or regain the job placement or advance in employment.

Supported employment services are initiated once the individual is hired and has started to work at the actual job site for the employer. Title 6B Supported Employment funds can only be utilized for this specific service or for extended services for youth with disabilities placed into supported employment. All other services as planned for and detailed in the IPE, including job placement services, can only be paid for using basic Vocational Rehabilitation Title I funds, state matching funds, or program income funds. The most frequent type of supported employment service is job coaching, although on-site evaluators and similar services that provide direct support to the individual at the job site may also be considered for funding through the Title 6B funds.

An Individualized Plan for Employment for an individual with a most significant disability, for whom an employment outcome in a supported employment setting has been determined to be appropriate, must–

1. Specify the supported employment services to be provided by the Bureau;

2. Specify the expected extended services needed by the eligible individual, which may include natural supports.

3. Identify the source of extended services, or to the extent that the source of the extended services cannot be identified at the time of the development of the IPE, include a description of the basis for concluding that there is a reasonable expectation that such a source will become available.

4. Provide for periodic monitoring to ensure that the individual is making satisfactory progress toward meeting the weekly work requirement established in the Individualized Plan for Employment by the time of transition to extended services.

5. Provide for the coordination of services provided under an Individualized Plan for Employment with services provided under other individualized plans established under other Federal or State programs.

6. To the extent that job skills training is provided, identify that the training will be provided on site; and

7. Include placement in an integrated setting for the maximum number of hours possible based on the unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice of individuals with the most significant disabilities.

Extended services refer to ongoing support services and other appropriate services that are needed to support and maintain an individual with a most significant disability that includes visual impairment or legal blindness, including a youth with a most significant disability, in supported employment. Extended services can be made available singly, or in combination, in such a way as to assist an eligible individual in maintaining supported employment. The services are customized and based on the needs of the eligible individual, as specified in their Individualized Plan for Employment. Extended services may be provided by a state agency, a private nonprofit organization, employer, or any other appropriate resource, after an individual has made the transition from supported employment provided by the Bureau. Transition to extended services occurs once the individual has received up to 24 months of supported employment services or the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and the individual have determined that an extension of time to provide supported employment services beyond 24 months is necessary to support and maintain the individual in supported employment before the individual transitions to extended services.

For a youth with a most significant disability that includes visual impairment or legal blindness, the Bureau may directly provide, or fund extended services for a period not to exceed four years or at such time that a youth reaches age 25, whichever occurs first. The Bureau cannot provide extended services to an individual with a most significant disability who is not a youth with a most significant disability.

It is the primary goal and priority of BESB VR to consider supported employment as an option in all circumstances where the provision of these services will increase the likelihood of job placement success for people with significant, multiple barriers to employment.

BESB has been actively involved in cooperative working relationships with other public and private agencies for many years with regard to supported employment and extended services. The BESB VR Counselors identify individuals who have a significant disability along with legal blindness who can potentially benefit from long-term supports through supported employment. This process begins as early as middle school and high school for transition-age youth through the Counselor’s involvement in the PPT meetings and discussions, but it can also often occur during the adult years of clients in situations where supported employment services may be appropriate and beneficial.

In order to facilitate the identification of supported employment options for transitioning high school students, the two VR Counselors assigned to work with this specific client population participate in PPTs and work in cooperation with the Children’s Services Program at BESB. The teams are informed about the scope of vocational rehabilitation services, including the option for providing up to 4 years of extended services for eligible individuals who meet the requirements. Education Consultants from the Bureau’s Children’s Services Program are also made aware of this provision to assist in facilitating discussions with team members and parents or guardians of these individuals. The Bureau has available funding to support youth with disabilities in extended services and looks forward to entering into such arrangements with school districts, state agencies, private community providers, or directly with employers who can offer natural supports after the period of extended services funding.

While CRPs will continue to be utilized as the providers of extended services when available, greater emphasis on natural supports through the employer will be encouraged as a goal in the future. Where available and feasible, natural supports through a client’s family to expand options for the provision of support services will also be encouraged. With the opportunity to offer extended services funding to youth with disabilities to provide for longer-term supports on the job, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program shall also work closely with the Planning and Placement Teams in the school districts to make them aware of these funding options to support clients placed into supported employment.

The Title VI funds were used for individuals who are eligible for long-term supported employment. Job coaching was provided for on-the-job support services for both youth and adults of the VR program. The job coaching support was long term for up to 24 months for these individuals allowing more support before the third party began as follow along services.

1. **Sections 101(a)(22) and 606(b)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act require the VR agency to describe efforts to identify and arrange, including entering into cooperative agreements, with other State agencies and other appropriate entities in order to provide supported employment services. The description must include extended services, as applicable, to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including the provision of extended services to youth with the most significant disabilities in accordance with 34 CFR 363.4(a) and 34 CFR**

**361.5(c)(19)(v).**

BESB continues to have an active working arrangement with the State of Connecticut, Department of Developmental Services (DDS). This cooperative agreement assists in the coordination and identification of training providers that have specific expertise when a client with a developmental disability and legal blindness could benefit from supported employment services. This working relationship also involves the utilization of DDS as a long-term third-party provider of funding.

In addition to the collaborative relationship with DDS, BESB has developed a working relationship with the State of Connecticut, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Through this arrangement, individuals who have a mental health diagnosis, acquired brain injury, or an addiction diagnosis along with legal blindness can access supported employment opportunities, with DMHAS providing the third-party funding.

The VR Staff are members of the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) and the VR Supervisor is on the Board representing BESB. Staff participate in regular trainings and seminars offered through APSE. This organization links community providers, employers, state agency representatives, and other resources together to exchange information on job placement strategies, funding sources, and employer job leads. Annually, staff participate in the National Conference and in the Regional Conference.

**(f) Annual Estimates. Sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act require all VR agencies to annually conduct a full assessment of their resources and ability to serve all eligible individuals before the start of the Federal fiscal year. In accordance with 34 CFR § 361.29(b), annual estimates must include the following projections:**

1. **Estimates for next Federal fiscal year—**
2. **VR Program; and**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Priority Category (if applicable) | No. of Individuals Eligible for Services | No. of Eligible Individuals Expected to Receive Services under VR Program | Costs of Services using Title I Funds | No. of Eligible Individuals Not Receiving Services (if applicable) |
| **NA** | **749** | **749** | **$1,177,888.46** | **NA** |

1. **Supported Employment Program.**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Priority Category (if applicable) | No. of Individuals Eligible for Services | No. of Eligible Individuals Expected to Receive Services under Supported Employment Program | Costs of Services using Title I and Title VI Funds | No. of Eligible Individuals Not Receiving Services (if applicable) |
| **NA** | **26** | **26** | **$164,623.35** | **NA** |

**(g) Order of Selection.**

[X] The VR agency is not implementing an order of selection and all eligible individuals will be served.

[check box] The VR agency is implementing an order of selection with one or more categories closed.

\* VR agencies may maintain an order of selection policy and priority of eligible individuals without implementing or continuing to implement an order of selection.

**Pursuant to section 101(a)(5) of the Rehabilitation Act, this description must be amended when the VR agency determines, based on the annual estimates described in description (f), that VR services cannot be provided to all eligible individuals with disabilities in the State who apply for and are determined eligible for services.**

1. **For VR agencies that have defined priority categories describe—**

1. **The justification for the order;**

Not Applicable

1. **The order (priority categories) to be followed in selecting eligible individuals to be provided VR services ensuring that individuals with the most significant disabilities are selected for services before all other individuals with disabilities; and**

Not Applicable

1. **The VR agency’s goals for serving individuals in each priority category, including how the agency will assist eligible individuals assigned to closed priority categories with information and referral, the method in which the VR agency will manage waiting lists, and the projected timelines for opening priority categories. NOTE: Priority categories are considered open when all individuals in the priority category may be served.**

Not Applicable

1. **Has the VR agency elected to serve eligible individuals outside of the order of selection who require specific services or equipment to maintain employment?**

[X] Yes. BESB VR is not in an order of selection.

[check box] No

**(h) Waiver of Statewideness. The State plan shall be in effect in all political subdivisions of the State, however, the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (Commissioner) may waive compliance with this requirement in accordance with section 101(a)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act and the implementing regulations in 34 CFR 361.26. If the VR agency is requesting a waiver of statewideness or has a previously approved waiver of statewideness, describe the types of services and the local entities providing such services under the waiver of statewideness and how the agency has complied with the requirements in 34 CFR 361.26. If the VR agency is not requesting or does not have an approved waiver of statewideness, please indicate “not applicable.”**

Not Applicable

**(i) Comprehensive System of Personnel Development. In accordance with the requirements in section 101(a)(7) of the Rehabilitation Act, the VR agency must develop and maintain annually a description (consistent with the purposes of the Rehabilitation Act) of the VR agency’s comprehensive system of personnel development, which shall include a description of the procedures and activities the VR agency will undertake to ensure it has an adequate supply of qualified State rehabilitation professionals and paraprofessionals that provides the following:**

1. **Analysis of current personnel and projected personnel needs including—**

1. **The number and type of personnel that are employed by the VR agency in the provision of vocational rehabilitation services, including ratios of qualified vocational rehabilitation counselors to clients;**
2. **The number of personnel currently needed by the VR agency to provide VR services, broken down by personnel category; and**
3. **Projections of the number of personnel, broken down by personnel category, who will be needed by the VR agency to provide VR services in 5 years based on projections of the number of individuals to be served, including individuals with significant disabilities, the number of personnel expected to retire or leave the field, and other relevant factors.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Personnel Category | No. of Personnel Employed | No. of Personnel Currently Needed | Projected No. of Personnel Needed in 5 Years |
| **Secretary** | **1** | **1** | **2** |
| **Quality Control Reviewer** | **1** | **0** | **1** |
| **Rehabilitation Teacher** | **3** | **0** | **3** |
| **VR Assistant Counselor** | **1** | **0** | **1** |
| **VR Counselors** | **8** | **0** | **8** |
| **VR and Transition Coordinators** | **2** | **0** | **2** |
| **VR Supervisor** | **1** | **0** | **1** |
| **VR Director** | **1** | **0** | **1** |

1. **Ratio of qualified VR counselors to clients:**

Based on the PY 2024 projections the ratio of qualified VR counselors to consumers is 1 to 83.

1. **Projected number of individuals to be served in 5 years:**

BESB projects serving 575 eligible consumers in five years.

1. **Data and information on personnel preparation and development, recruitment and retention, and staff development, including the following:**
2. **A list of the institutions of higher education in the State that are preparing VR professionals, by type of program; the number of students enrolled at each of those institutions, broken down by type of program; and the number of students who graduated during the prior year from each of those institutions with certification or licensure, or with the credentials for certification or licensure, broken down by the personnel category for which they have received, or have the credentials to receive, certification or licensure.**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Institute of Higher Education | Type of Program | No. of Students Enrolled | No. of Prior Year Graduates |
| **Central Connecticut State University (CCSU)** | **Vocational Rehabilitation Program** | **120** | **16** |

BESB analyzes the graduate information from the regional Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) – accredited universities to find schools that offer required courses or graduate degrees in rehabilitation counseling. BESB also checks with local CACREP schools for the availability of distance learning opportunities for the required CSPD courses. In the state of Connecticut, there is one CACREP–accredited institution of higher education that is preparing vocational rehabilitation professionals: Central Connecticut State University (CCSU).

1. **The VR agency’s plan for recruitment, preparation and retention of qualified personnel, which addresses the current and projected needs for qualified personnel; and the coordination and facilitation of efforts between the VR agency and institutions of higher education and professional associations to recruit, prepare, and retain personnel who are qualified, including personnel from minority backgrounds and personnel who are individuals with disabilities.**

BESB VR remains in contact with CCSU, the institution of higher education in this state that offers a master’s degree program in Counseling and Counselor Education with a Specialization in Clinical Rehabilitation to ensure that an adequate flow of graduates is anticipated for projected vacancies. When positions are available, recruitment efforts are conducted through job announcements that are placed on the state’s online job portal through the CT Department of Administrative Services web site. BESB VR also distributes the job vacancy announcements to organizations of and for individuals who are blind within the state, as well as advertising nationally through Rehab Net, which is a list-serve that connects all of the state public VR agencies across the country and the island territories. The list-serve for the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) is also utilized to distribute job announcements to ensure the widest possible distribution. Given the relatively competitive starting salaries for VR Counselors in comparison to the private sector for similar positions, the BESB VR Program is not experiencing a retention issue beyond what is expected through retirements and career advancement decisions. When job openings do occur, the applicant pool is significant and allows for a wide range of potential candidates to be interviewed.

1. **Description of staff development policies, procedures, and activities that ensure all personnel employed by the VR agency receive appropriate and adequate training and continuing education for professionals and paraprofessionals:**
2. **Particularly with respect to assessment, vocational counseling, job placement, and rehabilitation technology, including training implemented in coordination with entities carrying out State programs under section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998; and**
3. **Procedures for the acquisition and dissemination of significant knowledge from research and other sources to VR agency professionals and paraprofessionals and for providing training regarding the amendments to the Rehabilitation Act made by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.**

Working with the Department of Labor, the One-Stop Centers, and their regional partners, BESB VR staff participate in training seminars on the needs of employers within the state. BESB VR staff work closely with the American Job Center partners, participating in regional team meetings with the business consultants from the partner agencies to identify employment opportunities for clients and to be kept current on emerging sector-based training opportunities within their regions of the state.

BESB VR makes available a full range of training programs offered through public and private entities such as the Technical Assistance Centers, Rehabilitation Services Administration, the Council for State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), and the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB). Program staff members are encouraged to identify training areas of particular interest for their individualized professional development in addition to BESB VR identifying programmatic training categories for staff to participate in to remain current in the field of rehabilitation.

VR Counselors work directly with their supervisor to identify areas for professional growth and development each year. Each employee of BESB VR receives at least one written evaluation per year, which is consistent with collective bargaining agreements. The Supervisor of BESB VR meets with staff members regularly to assist with any areas of their job performance that could benefit from further development and to provide feedback on best practices that have proven to be effective in-service delivery. Technical assistance on policies and procedures is also provided during individualized meetings and during staff meetings. If an employee is found to need additional assistance and training in order to meet the job requirements, then a plan for improvement is developed. This may include the use of weekly reviews, additional written performance evaluations, and increasing the opportunity for the employee to participate in formalized training programs to increase skills and competencies.

Assistive Technology continues to be among the highest training priorities for staff in BESB VR, particularly since adaptive equipment is so often a component of success on the job for clients served by BESB VR. Examples of training opportunities that staff have participated in are IOS Accessibility for Users who are Visually Impaired and Topaz OCR among others. Other training opportunities staff have participated in include: Program Evaluation and Quality Assurance, Jobs Accommodation Network, Self-Employment: Who, What, Where, and How to Close, Windmills Disability Awareness Training, ADA Mini- con on ADA basics, WIOA Performance Accountability Training ( VR TAC QM), Bridging the Gap: Encouraging Equity in Registered Apprenticeships for Neurodiverse Youth and Adults, Working with Transition-Aged Youth with Disabilities and Ethical Considerations When Working With Hispanic Immigrants, and Celebrating Accomplishments and Building an Inclusive Tomorrow: Increasing Access & Equity for Individuals who are blind and DeafBlind

The annual conferences of Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation, National Council of State Agencies for the Blind held in the Spring and Fall, and the National Employment Team (NET) were held in person allowing staff to attend each conference. In addition, employment staff attended the two-day National Employment Team Summit.

Cultural Diversity and sensitivity continue to be high priority topics for VR staff. A comprehensive four-day training was made available to staff, the VR Supervisor participated in the Knowledge Building Session on Cultural Diversity for members of one of the state’s workforce boards, and members of the VR staff participated in a Community of Practice.

Information from the RSA supported technical assistance centers is made available to staff and has been utilized to assist with interpreting regulation requirements. VR staff participated in a two-day training on WIOA performance accountability. VR leadership staff participated in a two-day Fiscal Training and have utilized the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition.

The VR Supervisor participated in a quarterly Veteran’s Professional Network COP comprised of VR professionals throughout the Country. The VR Supervisor, Transition Coordinator and VR Counselor Coordinator participate in the Pre-ETS Blindness COP that meets quarterly and discusses programs offered to Pre-ETS individuals and best practices throughout the country.

1. **Description of VR agency policies and procedures for the establishment and maintenance of personnel standards consistent with section 101(a)(7)(B) to ensure that VR agency professional and paraprofessional personnel are adequately trained and prepared, including—**
2. **Standards that are consistent with any national or State-approved or -recognized certification, licensing, registration, or other comparable requirements that apply to the profession or discipline in which such personnel are providing VR services; and**
3. **The establishment and maintenance of education and experience requirements, in accordance with section 101(a)(7)(B)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act, to ensure that the personnel have a 21st century understanding of the evolving labor force and the needs of individuals with disabilities.**

All staff members working as VR Counselors, the VR Supervisor and the BESB VR Director meet the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development requirements. These staff members meet these requirements by having a master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling or a closely related field, as specified by the criteria for certification as a rehabilitation counselor by the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC).

There is one VR Assistant Counselor that does not meet the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development requirements of a master’s degree in Rehabilitation or a closely related field. As specified in BESB VR policy, the VR Supervisor, who meets this standard, approves all eligibility decisions, Individualized Plans for Employment, and case closures for this staff member.

There is no requirement in the job specification of the VR Assistant Counselor series to advance into the Counselor level. Staff hired into the job title of VR Assistant Counselor may seek continuing education to meet the qualifications of the VR Counselor level, within available funding.

1. **Method(s) the VR agency uses to ensure that personnel are able to communicate in appropriate modes of communication with or in the native language of applicants or eligible individuals who have limited English speaking ability.**

There is one VR Counselor who is bicultural, who is fluent in Spanish, and who serves Spanish-speaking clients throughout the State. BESB VR also provides information to clients in large-print, Braille, electronic, and audio formats to ensure that materials are accessible. BESB VR staff can also utilize contracted translation services to communicate with clients in other languages. Interpreter services for individuals who are deaf are available on a fee-for-service basis, including tactile interpreters for clients who are deaf and blind and whose preferred mode of communication is through sign language.

1. **As appropriate, describe the procedures and activities to coordinate the designated State unit's comprehensive system of personnel development with personnel development under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.**

Collaboration through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) occurs on a continual basis through joint training programs and initiatives. Staff members from BESB VR participate in transition work groups including the Transition Task Force that is facilitated by staff from the State Department of Education. There is also a Community of Practice group that focuses on best practices and emerging trends in transition services to youth with disabilities. This multi-agency initiative includes representatives from BESB VR as well as the State Department of Education, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Department of Developmental Services, and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), Connecticut’s General VR Program. In addition, the Pre-Employment Transition Services Staff participated in a two-day Capacity Building Conference on Transition with transition partners throughout the country

**COOPERATION, COLLABORATION, AND COORDINATION (Section 101(a)(11) of the Rehabilitation Act)**

**(j) Coordination with Education Officials. In accordance with the requirements in section 101(a)(11)(D) of the Rehabilitation Act—**

1. **Describe plans, policies, and procedures for coordination between the designated State agency and education officials responsible for the public education of students with disabilities, that are designed to facilitate the transition of the students with disabilities from the receipt of educational services in school to the receipt of vocational rehabilitation services, including pre-employment transition services.**

BESB VR is actively involved in a variety of transition school-to-work initiatives, with extensive collaboration and coordination at the administrative and service delivery levels of the organization. The Department of Aging and Disability Services, in the role of designated state agency, has a formal interagency agreement with the State Department of Education (SDE) that details the roles and responsibilities of Connecticut’s VR programs and SDE in the transition process. This formal interagency agreement was enacted on November 17, 2017.

At the direct service level, BESB VR Counselors participate in Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings of clients who are in middle school or high school and assist in the coordination of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students. The services that are detailed in the IEP of each student are factored into the development of each client’s Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) which must be developed within ninety (90) days of the determination of eligibility for vocational rehabilitation services, or by the time the client exits high school, whichever comes sooner. BESB VR Counselor involvement may begin as early as age 14, with referrals to the VR Program to initiate the application for VR services. These referrals are most frequently initiated by Teachers for Students with Visual Impairments, some of whom work for the Bureau and some of whom work directly for school districts. Pre-Employment transition services may be initiated at the age of 16. Pre-Employment transition services clients are assigned to one of the two BESB VR Counselors that are exclusively dedicated to serving this population of eligible or potentially eligible students. Assignments are based on geographic location of the client. The BESB VR Counselors provide and coordinate the full range of pre-employment transition services to enable the students on their caseloads to gain exposure to careers through real work experiences, discussions with mentors who are blind, job shadowing, informational interviews and internships. Exploration of post-secondary programs that can lead to credentialing in careers of interest is also coordinated by the Counselors.

Within higher education, the Department has successfully negotiated with the State University System to establish a cooperative agreement that addresses the services available in the university setting for students with disabilities. This cooperative agreement includes the responsibilities of both of the Department’s Vocational Rehabilitation programs and the responsibilities of the universities to ensure that students with disabilities achieve equal access to classroom instruction, internships, and school-sponsored activities.

1. **Describe the current status and scope of the formal interagency agreement between the VR agency and the State educational agency. Consistent with the requirements of the formal interagency agreement pursuant to 34 CFR 361.22(b), provide, at a minimum, the following information about the agreement:**
2. **Consultation and technical assistance, which may be provided using alternative means for meeting participation (such as video conferences and conference calls), to assist educational agencies in planning for the transition of students with disabilities from school to post-school activities, including pre-employment transition services and other vocational rehabilitation services;**
3. **Transition planning by personnel of the designated State agency and educational agency personnel for students with disabilities that facilitates the development and implementation of their individualized education programs (IEPs) under section 614(d) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act;**
4. **The roles and responsibilities, including financial responsibilities, of each agency, including provisions for determining State lead agencies and qualified personnel responsible for transition services and pre-employment transition services;**
5. **Procedures for outreach to and identification of students with disabilities who need transition services and pre-employment transition services. Outreach to these students should occur as early as possible during the transition planning process and must include, at a minimum, a description of the purpose of the vocational rehabilitation program, eligibility requirements, application procedures, and scope of services that may be provided to eligible individuals;**
6. **Coordination necessary to satisfy documentation requirements set forth in 34 CFR part 397 regarding students and youth with disabilities who are seeking subminimum wage employment; and**
7. **Assurance that, in accordance with 34 CFR 397.31, neither the SEA nor the local educational agency will enter into a contract or other arrangement with an entity, as defined in 34 CFR 397.5(d), for the purpose of operating a program under which youth with a disability is engaged in work compensated at a subminimum wage.**

As identified in the formal interagency agreement, BESB VR program staff continue to participate and present information at in-service training programs organized by the Bureau for public school teachers and guidance counselors on issues affecting students who are blind or visually impaired. BESB VR staff makes information available on transition initiatives, such as mentoring opportunities, independent living training programs, and work experiences that may be of interest to students who are blind or visually impaired. The Children’s Services Program of the Bureau provides a comprehensive training series every year for school district staff to learn about low vision aids and adaptive technology, braille instruction, expanded core curriculum activities, and resources that are available to facilitate the education and transition of students served by BESB.

The BESB VR Educational Projects Coordinator serves on the Statewide Transition Task Force and participates on the Steering Committee for this group. The Statewide Transition Task Force supports the Connecticut State Department of Education in its efforts to inform and guide students with disabilities, families, school districts, and community organizations to facilitate the progression from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, independent living, and community participation. The Steering Committee maintains the Mission Statement & Guiding Principles of the task force, develops committee activities and projects, creates and facilitates workgroups, and recommends outside experts to assist with the designated activities and projects.

The Education Projects Coordinator also participates in the Connecticut Secondary Transition Symposium which brings students and their families together with educators and other professionals to improve secondary transition programming and services for students with disabilities. The annual symposium builds the capacity of educators and other professionals, in partnership with middle and high school students with disabilities and their families, to help ensure successful post-school outcomes. Participants learn about a variety of programs and resources to support students who are transitioning to adult life. The symposium includes sessions specifically for students making college and career choices. The two Pre-ETS Counselors presented at this year’s symposium to a group of parents about BESB VR services, the VR eligibility process and the five required Pre-ETS transition services.

The BESB VR Education Projects Coordinator also participates in the Connecticut Transition Community of Practice. This group brings multiple stakeholders together to collaborate and share ongoing secondary transition information, resources, activities and events in a centralized location that is accessible to all students, families, and statewide transition teams. The resources assist students, families and others in making informed decisions to achieve personal success including education, meaningful employment, self-sufficiency, and community access and involvement.

The agreement with the State Department of Education (SDE) allows staff from SDE to assist staff from BESB VR to connect with the individual Local Education Agencies (LEAs). The intent is to assure that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) developed by LEAs for youth with disabilities aged 16 or over include plans for the provision of educationally related transition services as defined in 34 C.F.R. 361.22(b)(4) and 34 C.F.R. 300.43. The educationally related transition services include activities identified by the LEAs that are based on the student's needs, consideration of the student's preferences, and are designed to facilitate movement from school to post-secondary activities, including employment. Counselors from BESB VR are participants in the PPT meetings to assist with the formulation of transition goals and activities. To the maximum extent possible, the BESB VR Counselors also incorporate these transition goals into the IPE of the client to align these transition activities between the LEA and BESB VR.

Through the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with SDE, the roles and responsibilities of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the public educational system are clearly defined. This includes financial responsibilities as well as coordination of services and staff training. To facilitate this coordination, the Education Projects Coordinator from BESB serves on an interagency Transition Task Force and there is an appointed representative from SDE serving on the State Rehabilitation Council to BESB.

As detailed in the MOU, at no cost to BESB VR, SDE provides general supervision of the IDEA's requirements for special education and related services to ensure a free appropriate public education for children and youth with disabilities. SDE coordinates with BESB VR in disseminating information to LEAs regarding effective, results-based practices for preparing students with disabilities for post-secondary education, vocational training, competitive employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. SDE further collaborates with BESB to disseminate information about and train school personnel on how to coordinate services for students with disabilities as they transition to life after high school, including those students interested in supported employment. For each student with a disability with an IEP or Section 504 Plan that the LEAs have reason to believe may pursue subminimum wage employment following their exit from the school system, SDE assures that the LEAs document the provision of transition services in accordance with the documentation requirements of 34 C.F.R. 397.30(b)(1), including, at a minimum, the child's name, a description of the service or activity completed, the dated signature of the responsible educational official documenting the completion of the required service or activity, and the dated signature of the responsible educational official who transmits the documentation of the provision of transition service. SDE further ensures that none of the LEAs enter into contracts with an entity for the purpose of operating a program under which a youth with a disability is engaged in work compensated at a subminimum wage.

The MOU further addresses collaboration between BESB VR and SDE in coordinating, providing, and documenting the provision of pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. BESB VR provides vocational rehabilitation services to students and youth who meet the eligibility criteria. BESB VR staff assist the LEAs in providing transition planning for students with disabilities that facilitates the development and implementation of their IEPs and also work with the LEAS to develop an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) for each student eligible for BESB VR services before the student exits high school. BESB staff also provides consultation and technical assistance to assist the LEAs in planning for the transition of eligible students. For students with disabilities who seek subminimum wage from employers who hold special wage certificates under the Fair Labor Standards Act, 29 U.S.C. 214 (c), BESB VR offers pre-employment transition services, and an offer to apply for vocational rehabilitation services. If a student is found eligible for vocational rehabilitation services and has an IPE but is unable to achieve the employment outcome specified in the IPE, BESB VR can provide documentation of this outcome after obtaining a signed release of information.

Since BESB maintains a registry of all students who are legally blind or visually impaired within Connecticut, the process for identifying and referring students from the BESB Children’s Services Program to the BESB VR Program is streamlined and efficient. The electronic case management system for BESB has a built-in tracking system for identifying clients by age range to further facilitate the referral of students who desire to participate in vocational rehabilitation services. This system is unique in that it allows for BESB VR to be aware of and track every child in Connecticut who is legally blind or visually impaired and who is participating in public education.

The BESB VR Counselors work with the students, educators, parents or guardians and the Program’s Education Projects Coordinator to identify careers of interest, develop career exploration opportunities, work and job shadowing experiences, mentoring activities, and leadership development programs.

Through the MOU with SDE, staff from that agency assist BESB with the distribution of information for LEAs to provide to students who may benefit from BESB VR services. SDE staff also provides information about the availability of BESB VR services to the LEAs to share with school personnel. SDE further assists the LEAs in providing outreach and identification of students with disabilities who are in need of transition services and pre-employment transition services that can be offered by BESB VR.

**(k) Coordination with Employers. In accordance with the requirements in section 101(a)(11)(E) of the Rehabilitation Act, describe how the VR agency will work with employers to identify competitive integrated employment and career exploration opportunities in order to facilitate the provision of VR services; and transition services for youth and students with disabilities, including pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities.**

The primary goal of coordinated activities with employers is to bring about long-term partnerships that foster a mutually beneficial relationship for both the employer and the clients served by BESB VR, while at the same time avoiding a duplication of efforts. BESB VR is very aware of and sensitive to the time constraints of employers and seeks to work in collaboration with other partners in the Workforce Development System that also perform employer outreach to reduce the potential for overlap in job development efforts.

Transition services for youth and students with disabilities, including pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities is a priority for BESB VR. BESB VR does the following activities to promote and be able to work and coordinate with employers to provide transition services to youth and students with disabilities, which includes pre-employment transition services:

* Partner with high school and college Career Services Departments to access employers.
* Seek out work opportunities to utilize BESB VR’s OJT Internship Model to provide paid work experiences.
* Conduct outreach to employers to set up informational interviews, worksite tours, and paid work experiences based upon the individualized IPE goal.
* Engage and network with business organizations such as local chambers and BNI.
* Continue collaborating and making referrals to the local Workforce Boards.
* Conduct program outreach to employers to determine labor market needs to help establish future talent pools.
* Collaborate and partner with the VR general agency’s workforce team to identify job opening and business partners.
* Partner with CRPs to help identify employers for paid work experiences.
* Provide on-going Blindness Disability Awareness Training to businesses.
* Schedule two Pre-ETS events in partnership with businesses.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling Coordinator serves as the BESB VR team lead for outreach to employers and the gathering of job lead information. This includes establishing relationships with employers, with BESB VR receiving and disseminating job announcements. The BESB VR Counseling Coordinator also serves as the point of contact with the National Employment Team (NET), administered through the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). The NET utilizes a business approach to facilitate outreach to larger employers that have a presence across multiple states. The NET is a valuable resource to develop relationships with these national companies. The NET coordinator puts the local human resources representative from a large employer in contact with the Vocational Rehabilitation agency’s point of contact. The local staff meet to discuss specific services or recruitment needs at the local level. The needed services can vary from providing job candidates for local job openings or providing in-service training to front line supervisors on disability topics, to offering job retention assistance for workers with disabilities who have requested work site accommodations.

Within the NET, there is an employer database, referred to as the Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP), where only job seekers who are receiving services from a public Vocational Rehabilitation agency can access the portal. Employers can search for qualified candidates through this portal as well. This helps the employer recruit pre-screened qualified candidates who have a disability.

BESB VR Counselors are members of the Business Service Teams within each of the five workforce regions, sharing job leads and learning of the employer outreach efforts of other members of these regional teams. Furthermore, members from The Governor's Workforce Council Diversity Equity Inclusion & Accessibility Committee for Persons with Disabilities formed a committee that the VR Supervisor is a member of and part of the planning committee.  This committee developed the Integrated Resource Team (IRT) model. The IRT consists of partners of the American Job Centers (AJCs): Department of Aging and Disability Services both Bureau of Rehabilitation Services and BESB, Department of Developmental Services, and Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services.  The AJC’s will be providing a series of trainings in collaboration with all partners on the Integrated Resource Team (IRT) model. The IRT training equips workforce development professionals with the knowledge and tools to create wrap-around services for jobseekers, with multiple barriers to employment by leveraging resources, with more than one agency, to reach a positive outcome for all.  Building knowledge of the Integrated Resource Team (IRT) Model is to learn how to enhance cross-agency collaboration and communication to better leverage available resources to support jobseekers and meet cross-system/program common measures/performance outcomes.

In addition, two virtual presentations were conducted by all partners to an audience of 100 or more in attendance for each presentation to discuss core services from each agency.  More outreach events will be taking place to educate on the IRT model once fully implemented.

**(l) Interagency Cooperation with Other Agencies. In accordance with the requirements in section 101(a)(11)(C) and (K), describe interagency cooperation with and utilization of the services and facilities of agencies and programs that are not carrying out activities through the statewide workforce development system to develop opportunities for community-based employment in integrated settings, to the greatest extent practicable for the following:**

1. **State programs (designate lead agency(ies) and implementing entity(ies)) carried out under section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998;**

BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation program is the designated state unit for individuals who are blind within the Department of Aging and Disability Services, which is the designated state agency.

BESB works closely with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, the lead agency for the Connecticut Assistive Technology Act program, to provide outreach and referrals of clients who are deaf and blind so that clients who meet the eligibility requirements of the Deafblind Technology Grant can apply for and receive specialized adaptive equipment to increase their access to communication. In addition, a low-interest loan program is available to assist clients who desire to acquire adaptive equipment that is not vocationally related, or who may need a short-term loan to cover the cost of repairs to personally owned devices.

1. **Programs carried out by the Under Secretary for Rural Development of the Department of Agriculture;**

The Department of Agriculture sits on the State Workforce Board. This allows for continues conversations on partnerships for potential consumers in agriculture. Since VR is represented on the State Workforce Board, the BESB VR also has access to the full range of programs carried out through the Department of Agriculture since the State of Connecticut has no Agribility program.

1. **Non-educational agencies serving out-of-school youth;**

The Bureau continues to work with the LEAP Program in Vermont for the provision of transition programs for in-school and out-of-school youth. Programs include mentoring, leadership development, independent living skills trainings, and work experiences as camp counselors. This year the Bureau entered into an agreement working with Sky’s the Limit Communication to provide ACE Academy training opportunities both virtually and in person for transition age youth. There were two virtual opportunities offered for advocacy and financial literacy, as well as an in-person mentoring two-day event for mentors and mentees.

1. **State use contracting programs;**

At the Department level, the agency participates with the Office of the State Comptroller for a Purchase Card program that permits expedited purchasing of goods and services needed by clients to participate in the rehabilitation process. The Department has also established a fee for service contract model with community rehabilitation providers across the state that enables BESB VR to purchase services at consistent pricing levels, making budget forecasting a more consistent and reliable process. The agency also utilizes state use contracts made available through the Department of Administrative Services for services that have been competitively procured for statewide agency use. An example includes interpreting services for individuals who are deaf and deafblind.

1. **State agency responsible for administering the State Medicaid plan under title XIX of the Social Security Act (42 U.S.C. 1396 et seq.);**

Through a cooperative agreement with the Department of Social Services (DSS), recipients of Medicaid who have disabilities are made aware of the BESB VR program and BESB VR Counselors provide information and referral assistance for clients who express an interest in seeking services from DSS such as Medicaid benefits, and the Home and Community Based Services waivers.

Benefits Counselors from the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services are also available to assist clients of BESB VR with understanding how employment earnings and public assistance benefits interact so that clients can make informed decisions regarding employment. The Benefits Counselors also explore with clients the many options that are available within the state and federal government programs including how to apply for Medicaid and Medicare, as well as health insurance under the Affordable Care Act.

1. **State agency responsible for providing services for individuals with developmental disabilities;**

This Bureau has an active agreement with the State Department of Developmental Services (DDS). This cooperative agreement assists in the coordination and identification of training providers that have specific expertise when a client with a developmental disability and legal blindness could benefit from supported employment services. This working relationship also involves the utilization of DDS as a long-term third-party provider of funding. A coordinated system of customized employment services has been implemented, with joint development of vendor qualifications for the delivery of the components of customized employment.

1. **State agency responsible for providing mental health services;**

BESB has developed a working relationship with the State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Through this arrangement, individuals who have a mental health diagnosis, acquired brain injury, or an addiction diagnosis along with legal blindness can access services to assist them in achieving a competitive, integrated employment outcome, including supported employment opportunities, with DMHAS providing the third-party funding.

1. **Other Federal, State, and local agencies and programs outside the workforce development system; and**

BESB uses a wide range of contractual agreements with accompanying fee schedules that have been established through a competitive bidding process by the Department of Aging and Disability Services, the designated state agency for the Blind and General VR programs. This provides a statewide comprehensive set of program options and services to choose from.

Social Security Administration: The Bureau has an active cooperative agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA) that makes it possible to seek and receive reimbursement for certain costs associated with clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program that have achieved earnings at or above substantial gainful levels and have therefore transitioned off of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The process to seek reimbursement requires a combination of cooperative agreements at the state level. Client benefit status verification is obtained through an agreement with the Department of Social Services (DSS). A cooperative agreement with the Connecticut Department of Labor (DOL) makes it possible to review wage records of individuals who are participating in BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program to determine if their earnings are above substantial gainful activity (SGA) levels and would therefore qualify the Bureau to request cost reimbursement from SSA. Cost reimbursement would be for the cost of BESB purchased services as well as fees for administrative and tracking costs associated with a client’s case.

Native American Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program: The Bureau also has an active cooperative agreement with the Native American VR Program in Connecticut. This agreement has been developed to help both programs coordinate and provide services to individuals who are mutually served by the programs or who could benefit from these services if they were to apply and meet eligibility criteria. To maximize collaboration, a representative of the Native American VR Program has served as an appointed member of the BESB State Rehabilitation Council.

Connecticut VR-General Program: For individuals who are deaf and blind, BESB works closely with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS), Connecticut’s VR-General Program, for the coordination of services. Individuals who are deaf and blind can receive coordinated services from both public vocational rehabilitation programs. Through case conferencing, a determination is made as to which program will assume lead case management responsibilities, with the other program providing support services as needed. For clients who are receiving case management services through BRS, BESB offers vocational consultations, orientation and mobility services, and rehabilitation teaching assistance.

State Medicaid Agency: The Bureau has a cooperative agreement with the Department of Social Services (DSS) to ensure that recipients of Medicaid are aware of the services that are available through BESB VR, including the provision of information and referral services.

Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV): The Bureau has a cooperative agreement with the state DMV that implements a state law requiring the department to report on a quarterly basis to DMV the names of individuals aged 16 and older who have been declared legally blind in each preceding fiscal quarter. The DMV uses this information to notify such individuals that their driver’s license is no longer valid.

1. **Other private nonprofit organizations.**

BESB uses a wide range of contractual agreements with accompanying fee schedules that have been established through a competitive bidding process by the Department of Aging and Disability Services, the designated state agency for the Blind and General VR programs. Several nonprofit community-based rehabilitation providers are available through these contractual agreements for clients to select from. The services that are offered through the community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) in the state include trial work experiences, work readiness training, community placement opportunities and job coaching, among other related services.

The agreement with the CRPs allows a more individualized approach to job exploration and development. The CRPs have established sites for individuals to participate in a trial work experience and work readiness training that will ultimately lead to employment. The CRPs provide on-site evaluators as well as job coaches that give one on one assistance on the job to improve performance. BESB's VR Rehabilitation Technologists and VR Counselors provide training to the CRPs on common assistive technology devices as well as working with individuals who are blind.

BESB staff members conduct training seminars for CRP staff on blindness related topics such as orientation and mobility and the use of adaptive technology to ensure that programs and services are safe and accessible. Additional fee agreements have been established with private non-profit service providers in other states where it is identified that these programs offer specific vocational and independent living services for persons who are blind. These agreements include non-profit rehabilitation providers in Louisiana, Colorado, Maine, Arkansas, Maryland, Minnesota, and Massachusetts.

BESB has contracts with out of state training programs that offer adjustment to blindness training for individuals who are newly blind or have lost more vision. These programs assist individuals through residential and virtual programs in how to live independently with blindness skills that assist with skills such as orientation and mobility and technology. This ultimately will assist an individual to be independent so that they may get a competitive job in the community using their newly acquired skills. These programs also offer on-the-job training opportunities such as internships and paid employment.

Through a fee agreement with the National Federation of the Blind, the NFB Newsline is available for clients to access news, career information, and current events. This collaboration includes the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, which provides funding to cover a portion of the overall cost. The contract with Newsline assists individuals with access to print materials in an accessible way so that they are able to access jobs and information in the community.

**VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION CERTIFICATIONS AND ASSURANCES**

**CERTIFICATIONS**

| **States must provide written and signed certifications that:** | |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | The (enter the name of designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate,) is authorized to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan under title I of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act), as amended by title IV of WIOA,[[1]](#footnote-1) and its State Plan supplement under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act; |
|  | **Department of Aging and Disability Services, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind, Vocational Rehabilitation Program** |
| 2. | In the event the designated State agency is not primarily concerned with vocational and other rehabilitation of individuals with disabilities, the designated State agency must include a designated State unit for the VR program (Section 101(a)(2)(B)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act). As a condition for the receipt of Federal funds under title I of the Rehabilitation Act for the provision of VR services, the (enter the name of designated State agency or the designated State unit when the designated State agency has a designated State unit)[[2]](#footnote-2) agrees to operate and is responsible for the administration of the State VR Services Program in accordance with the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan[[3]](#footnote-3), the Rehabilitation Act, 34 CFR 361.13(b) and (c), and all applicable regulations[[4]](#footnote-4), policies, and procedures established by the Secretary of Education. Funds made available to States under section 111(a) of the Rehabilitation Act are used solely for the provision of VR services and the administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan; |
|  | **Department of Aging and Disability Services, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind** |
| 3. | As a condition for the receipt of Federal funds under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act for supported employment services, the designated State agency or the designated State unit when the designated State agency has a designated State unit, agrees to operate and is responsible for the administration of the State Supported Employment Services Program in accordance with the supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan[[5]](#footnote-5), the Rehabilitation Act, and all applicable regulations[[6]](#footnote-6), policies, and procedures established by the Secretary of Education. Funds made available under title VI are used solely for the provision of supported employment services and the administration of the supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan; |
|  |  |
| 4. | The designated State unit, or if not applicable, the designated State agency has the authority under State law to perform the functions of the State regarding the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, and is responsible for the administration of the VR program in accordance with 34 CFR 361.13(b) and (c); |
|  |  |
| 5. | The State legally may carry out each provision of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement. |
|  |  |
| 6. | All provisions of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement are consistent with State law. |
|  |  |
| 7. | The (enter title of State officer below) has the authority under State law to receive, hold, and disburse Federal funds made available under the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement; |
|  | **Carol Jenkins** |
| 8. | The (enter title of State officer below) has the authority to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and the supplement for Supported Employment services; |
|  | **Program Manager-Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind** |
| 9. | The agency that submits the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement has adopted or otherwise formally approved the plan and its supplement. |

**ASSURANCES**

The designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate and identified in the State certifications included with this VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, through signature of the authorized individual, assures the Commissioner, that it will comply with all of the requirements of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, as set forth in sections 101(a) and 606 of the Rehabilitation Act. The individual authorized to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement makes the following assurances:

| **The State Plan must provide assurances that:** | |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | **Public Comment on Policies and Procedures:** The designated State agency assures it will comply with all statutory and regulatory requirements for public participation in the VR Services Portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, as required by section 101(a)(16)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act. |
|  |  |
| 2. | **Submission of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and Its Supplement:**The designated State unit assures it will comply with all requirements pertaining to the submission and revisions of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement for the State Supported Employment Services program, as required by sections 101(a)(1), (22), (23), and 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act; section 102 of WIOA in the case of the submission of a Unified State plan; section 103 of WIOA in the case of a submission of a Combined State Plan; 34 C.F.R. 76.140. |
|  |  |
| 3. | **Administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan:**The designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate, assures it will comply with the requirements related to:   1. the establishment of the designated State agency and designated State unit, as required by section 101(a)(2) of the Rehabilitation Act. 2. either a State independent commission or State Rehabilitation Council, as required by section 101(a)(21) of the Rehabilitation Act. 3. consultations regarding the administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, in accordance with section 101(a)(16)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act. 4. the financial participation by the State, or if the State so elects, by the State and local agencies, to provide the amount of the non-Federal share of the cost of carrying out the VR program in accordance with section 101(a)(3). 5. as applicable, the local administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, in accordance with section 101(a)(2)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act. 6. as applicable, the shared funding and administration of joint programs, in accordance with section 101(a)(2)(A)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act. 7. statewideness and waivers of statewideness requirements, as set forth in   section 101(a)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act.   1. the requirements for cooperation, collaboration, and coordination, as required by sections 101(a)(11) and (24)(B); and 606(b) of the Rehabilitation Act. 2. all required methods of administration, as required by section 101(a)(6) of the Rehabilitation Act. 3. the requirements for the comprehensive system of personnel development, as set forth in section 101(a)(7) of the Rehabilitation Act. 4. the compilation and submission to the Commissioner of statewide assessments, estimates, State goals and priorities, strategies, and progress reports, as appropriate, and as required by sections 101(a)(15), 105(c)(2), and 606(b)(8) of the Rehabilitation Act. 5. the reservation and use of a portion of the funds allotted to the State under section 110 of the Rehabilitation Act for the development and implementation of innovative approaches to expand and improve the provision of VR services to individuals with disabilities, particularly individuals with the most significant disabilities as set forth in section 101(a)(18)(A). 6. the submission of reports as required by section 101(a)(10) of the Rehabilitation Act. |
|  |  |
| 4. | **Administration of the Provision of VR Services:**The designated State agency, or designated State unit, as appropriate, assures that it will:   * + 1. comply with all requirements regarding information and referral services in accordance with sections 101(a)(5)(E) and (20) of the Rehabilitation Act.     2. impose no duration of residence requirement as part of determining an individual's eligibility for VR services or that excludes from services under the plan any individual who is present in the State in accordance with section 101(a)(12) of the Rehabilitation Act.     3. provide the full range of services listed in section 103(a) of the Rehabilitation Act, as appropriate, to all eligible individuals with disabilities in the State who apply for services or, if implementing an order of selection, in accordance with criteria established by the State for the order of selection as set out in section 101(a)(5) of the Rehabilitation Act.     4. determine whether comparable services and benefits are available to the individual in accordance with section 101(a)(8) of the Rehabilitation Act.     5. comply with the requirements for the development of an individualized plan for employment in accordance with section 102(b) of the Rehabilitation Act.     6. comply with requirements regarding the provisions of informed choice for all applicants and eligible individuals in accordance with section 102(d) of the Rehabilitation Act.     7. provide vocational rehabilitation services to American Indians who are individuals with disabilities residing in the State, in accordance with section 101(a)(13) of the Rehabilitation Act.     8. comply with the requirements for the conduct of semiannual or annual reviews, as appropriate, for individuals employed either in an extended employment setting in a community rehabilitation program or any other employment under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as required by sections 101(a)(14) and 511 of the Rehabilitation Act.   (i) meet the requirements in sections 101(a)(17) and 103(b)(2) of the Rehabilitation Act if the State elects to construct, under special circumstances, facilities for community rehabilitation programs.  (j) with respect tostudents with disabilities, the State:  (i) has developed and will implement,  (A) strategies to address the needs identified in the assessments; and  (B) strategies to achieve the goals and priorities identified by the State, to improve and expand vocational rehabilitation services for students with disabilities on a statewide basis; and  (ii) has developed and will implement strategies to provide pre-employment transition services (sections 101(a)(15),101(a)(25), and 113).  (iii) shall reserve not less than 15 percent of the allocated funds for the provision of pre-employment transition services; such funds shall not be used to pay for the administrative costs of providing pre-employment transition services. |
| 5. | **Program Administration for the Supported Employment Title VI Supplement** **to the State plan:**   1. The designated State unit assures that it will include in the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan all information required by section 606 of the Rehabilitation Act. 2. The designated State agency assures that it will submit reports in such form and in accordance with such procedures as the Commissioner may require and collects the information required by section 101(a)(10) of the Rehabilitation Act separately for individuals receiving supported employment services under title I and individuals receiving supported employment services under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act. |
|  |  |
| 6. | **Financial Administration of the Supported Employment Program (Title VI):**   1. The designated State agency assures that it will expend no more than 2.5 percent of the State's allotment under title VI for administrative costs of carrying out this program; and, the designated State agency or agencies will provide, directly or indirectly through public or private entities, non-Federal contributions in an amount that is not less than 10 percent of the costs of carrying out supported employment services provided to youth with the most significant disabilities with the funds reserved for such purpose under section 603(d) of the Rehabilitation Act, in accordance with section 606(b)(7)(H) and (I) of the Rehabilitation Act. 2. The designated State agency assures that it will use funds made available under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act only to provide supported employment services to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including extended services to youth with the most significant disabilities, who are eligible to receive such services; and, that such funds are used only to supplement and not supplant the funds provided under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, when providing supported employment services specified in the individualized plan for employment, in accordance with section 606(b)(7)(A) and (D), of the Rehabilitation Act. |
|  |  |
| 7. | **Provision of Supported Employment Services**:   1. The designated State agency assures that it will provide supported employment services as defined in section 7(39) of the Rehabilitation Act. 2. The designated State agency assures that   the comprehensive assessment of individuals with significant disabilities conducted under section 102(b)(1) of the Rehabilitation Act and funded under title I of the Rehabilitation Act includes consideration of supported employment as an appropriate employment outcome, in accordance with the requirements of section 606(b)(7)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act an individualized plan for employment that meets the requirements of section 102(b) of the Rehabilitation Act , which is developed and updated with title I funds, in accordance with sections 102(b)(3)(F) and 606(b)(7)(C) and (E) of the Rehabilitation Act. |

**Appendix 1: Performance Goals for the Core Programs**

**Each state submitting a Unified or Combined State Plan is required to identify expected levels of performance for each of the primary indicators of performance for the first two years covered by the plan. The state is required to reach agreement with the Secretary of Labor, in conjunction with the Secretary of Education, on state-negotiated levels of performance for the indicators for each of the first two years of the plan.**

**Include the state's expected levels of performance relating to the performance accountability indicators based on primary indicators of performance described in section 116(b)(2)(A) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Vocational Rehabilitation Program | | | |
| Program Year: 2024 | | Program Year: 2025 | |
| Expected Level | Negotiated Level | Expected Level | Negotiated Level |
| Employment  (Second Quarter after Exit) 22 | **60.0%** | **60.0%** | **62.0%** | **62.0%** |
| Employment  (Fourth Quarter after Exit) 22 | **50.0%** | **50.0%** | **52.0%** | **52.0%** |
| Median Earnings  (Second Quarter after Exit [[7]](#footnote-7) | **$7,000** | **$7,000** | **$7,200** | **$7,200** |
| Credential Attainment Rate | **23.5%** | **23.5%** | **25.0%** | **25.0%** |
| Measurable Skill Gains | **52.5%** | **52.5%** | **55.0%** | **55.0%** |

**Additional Questions**

**VR Program:**

### **Describe how your entity’s existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.**

**Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (**[**20 U.S.C. 1228a**](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2020-title20/html/USCODE-2020-title20-chap31-subchapII-part2-sec1228a.htm)**) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education.  The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.**

[**GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package**](https://wioaplans.ed.gov/node/584561)

**State applicants must respond to four questions.**

**The first of four questions is:**

1. **Describe how your entity’s existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.**

The Connecticut Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind, within the Department of Aging and Disability Services, is an affirmative action employer and strongly supports all state, federal and Constitutional mandates and complies with all policies established by the Department of Aging and Disability Services pursuant to state mandates, laws, and regulations.

The mission of BESB is to be responsible for initiating, coordinating, and implementing the education and training of Connecticut's children who are blind or visually impaired in order to maintain their academic, physical, emotional, and social progress at age-level, grade level or diagnosed ability level. BESB serves Connecticut's adults who are legally blind through ongoing educational, vocational, and living skills programs in order to empower them to achieve employment success in their chosen profession and to enhance their self-sufficiency

The BESB VR Program is responsible for administering the vocational rehabilitation program for individuals in the State of Connecticut who are legally blind. All services will be provided in accordance with the appropriate federal and state statutes for Vocational Rehabilitation for individuals who are legally blind as described.

**The second of four questions is:**

1. **Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?**

BESB VR staff work diligently to educate employers and the public regarding the capabilities of visually impaired and blind consumers. However, public transportation and the access to public transportation presents a barrier to employment and services for the blind and visually impaired, especially in the rural areas of Connecticut. In addition, the inaccessibility to websites, educational platforms, software programs, databases, etc. also present barriers for consumers who are blind or visually impaired to be able to fully participate in educational settings, employment, and community inclusion activities.

**The third of four questions is:**

1. **Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?**

The Department of Aging and Disability services is committed to accessibility for all consumers. BESB VR is also working to make all forms accessible and electronic through the use of Jot Forms software. Access to public transportation will continue to be a barrier, but BESB VR is working creatively to provide consumers transportation services through their individualized plans for employment to reduce the barrier of access to public transportation in order to optimize the success of VR consumers in educational, employment, and community inclusion settings.

**The final of four questions is:**

1. **What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?**

BESB VR has already begun the creation and implementation of accessible electronic forms in VR through Jot Forms. The staff bandwidth for the creation of these accessible Jot Forms is limited, which will mean this project will take a couple of years to fully complete. BESB VR is also continuously working on transportation services and options for blind and visually impaired consumers. Through program outreach, BESB VR staff remain committed to educating the public on the abilities of blind and visually impaired consumers, which includes education to the public on accessibility and accessibility options for consumers. In addition, BESB VR staff have monthly program outreach requirements, which will continuously work toward these barriers.

**Supported Employment Program:**

### **Describe how your entity’s existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.**

**Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (**[**20 U.S.C. 1228a**](https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/USCODE-2020-title20/html/USCODE-2020-title20-chap31-subchapII-part2-sec1228a.htm)**) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education.  The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.**

[**GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package**](https://wioaplans.ed.gov/node/584561)

**State applicants must respond to four questions.**

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1. **Describe how your entity’s existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.**

The Connecticut Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind, within the Department of Aging and Disability Services, is an affirmative action employer and strongly supports all state, federal and Constitutional mandates and complies with all policies established by the Department of Aging and Disability Services pursuant to state mandates, laws and regulations.

The mission of BESB is to be responsible for initiating, coordinating, and implementing the education and training of Connecticut's children who are blind or visually impaired in order to maintain their academic, physical, emotional, and social progress at age-level, grade level or diagnosed ability level. BESB serves Connecticut's adults who are legally blind through ongoing educational, vocational, and living skills programs in order to empower them to achieve employment success in their chosen profession and to enhance their self­ sufficiency

The BESB VR Program is responsible for administering the vocational rehabilitation program, which includes supported employment services, for individuals in the State of Connecticut who are legally blind. All services will be provided in accordance with the appropriate federal and state statutes for Vocational Rehabilitation for individuals who are legally blind as described.

**The second of four questions is:**

1. **Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?**

BESB VR staff work diligently to educate employers and the public regarding the capabilities of visually impaired and blind consumers. However, public transportation and the access to public transportation presents a barrier to employment and services for the blind and visually impaired, especially in the rural areas of Connecticut. In addition, the inaccessibility to websites, educational platforms, software programs, databases, and etc. also present barriers for consumers who are blind or visually impaired to be able to fully participate in educational settings, employment, and community inclusion activities.

**The third of four questions is:**

1. **Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?**

The Department of Aging and Disability services is committed to accessibility for all consumers. BESB VR is also working to make all forms accessible and electronic through the use of Jot Forms software. Access to public transportation will continue to be a barrier, but BESB VR is working creatively to provide consumers transportation services through their individualized plans for employment to reduce the barrier of access to public transportation in order to optimize the success of VR consumers in educational, employment, and community inclusion settings.

**The final of four questions is:**

1. **What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?**

BESB VR has already begun the creation and implementation of accessible electronic forms in VR through Jot Forms. The staff bandwidth for the creation of these accessible Jot Forms is limited, which will mean this project will take a couple of years to fully complete. BESB VR is also continuously working on transportation services and options for blind and visually impaired consumers. Through program outreach, BESB VR staff remain committed to educating the public on the abilities of blind and visually impaired consumers, which includes education to the public on accessibility and accessibility options for consumers. In addition, BESB VR staff have monthly program outreach requirements, which will continuously work toward these barriers.

1. Public Law 113-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. All references in this plan to "designated State agency" or to "the State agency" relate to the agency identified in this paragraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. No funds under title I of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 101(a) of the Rehabilitation Act. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Applicable regulations, in part, include the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR parts 76, 77, 79, 81, and 82; 2 CFR part 200 as adopted by 2 CFR part 3474; and the State VR Services program regulations at 34 CFR part 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. No funds under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved supported employment supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Applicable regulations, in part, include the citations in footnote 4, as well as Supported Employment program regulations at 34 CFR part 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)