2244STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL (SRC)

CT Department of Aging and Disability Services (ADS)

Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB)

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program

SRC ANNUAL REPORT FY 2022

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# A.  COUNCIL PURPOSE:

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

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

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

# B.  COUNCIL DUTIES:

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

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

(A) eligibility (including order of selection);

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

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

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

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

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

Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services Administration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# C. COUNCIL ACTIVITIES IN FY 2022:

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

State Plan Development:

The State Rehabilitation Council reviewed the results of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and the Consumer Satisfaction Survey to gain a clear understanding of the unique needs and areas of focus that should be factored into the submitting updates to the state plan.

services. The Council has formed a work group that was joined by members of the Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired to assist the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in the update of the BESB VR section of the Unified State Plan.

The work group helped revise the state plan goals to meet the current needs of the program. In particular, the members are interested in the implementation of techniques and strategies that will result in stronger engagement by clients of the program utilizing virtual options in combination with in-person.

Another area of focus was around updating and improving the BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Programs marketing materials and online presence. Also developing a goal to improve the technology available through the program’s technology lab and technology available for assessments.

NCSAB / CSAVR 2022 Conferences:

This year, the SRC Chairperson was able to attend both the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) national virtual conferences in the Spring along with the Vice Chair of the Council. 8 BESB staff members were also able to attend the virtual conference.

In the Fall CSAVR offered an online portion of the conference in which the Chair and six of the BESB staff were able to participate. The Fall Conferences of CSAVR and NCSAB were back to in person in San Antonio and the VR Supervisor and VR Counselor Coordinator were in attendance.

Best practices that were shared at these conferences have broadened the perspective and understanding of national trends, concerns, and priorities in the field of vocational rehabilitation, enabling the chair to bring this information before the membership for future planning.

VR Client Achievements Presented at SRC meetings:

During FY 2022, the State Rehabilitation Council continued its initiative for a client of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to come before the SRC at each quarterly meeting to explain the type of work they are involved in and how BESB services assisted them in achieving their career goals. The SRC members value this component of each meeting agenda as it provides the members with an opportunity to learn directly from clients about the services that can be provided and the successes that result.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey:

The SRC once again commissioned the Center for Community Engagement and Social Research at Central (CCESR)Connecticut State University (CCSU) to conduct the FY 2022 consumer satisfaction survey of Vocational Rehabilitation Program recipients. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the level of satisfaction with services that clients received from the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at BESB.

Satisfaction with the services received was measured on a 10-point rating scale, with a rating of “10.00” representing the highest level of satisfaction. As presented below in its entirety, CCESR reported the following results from the FY 2022 Consumer Satisfaction Survey:

BESB continues to receive high marks from clients for their Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and counselors. Nearly all clients (96%) reported that they would recommend BESB VR services to a friend. Overall satisfaction with BESB services, as rated on a scale from 1 to 10 points, remains strong.

Following a year in which all eight services showed an increase in mean satisfaction ratings, fiscal year 2022 showed more mixed results. Three services saw an increase in satisfaction ratings, four saw a decline, and one remained unchanged from 2021. Small Business Services (8.20, up 1.7 in mean rating) saw the largest mean satisfaction increase across all services. This service, however, attracted the lowest number of respondents, making the mean subject to volatility. The service seeing the second-best improvement in mean satisfaction rating was Skills Training Services (9.33, up .33), followed by Rehabilitation Technology and Adaptive Equipment (8.93, up .18). Notably, Skills Training Services notched a historic high in mean satisfaction.

Satisfaction ratings for counselors increased in all nine categories surveyed in 2022. In contrast to the mixed results in 2021, where some areas improved while others declined, the 2022 satisfaction ratings were strong overall and showed increases across the board. In fact, the 2022 satisfaction ratings represented the highest, or very close to the highest rating, on record for all nine categories surveyed. The largest increase in mean counselor rating was observed in counselors’ ability to help clients understand their VR rights and responsibilities (9.20, up 1.04 in mean rating), followed by counselors’ ability to help clients identify their career goals (8.93, up .97). This dimension of counselors notched its second-best rating in the history of the survey.

Clients identified the services that they received from BESB in the past year. As in previous years, the two most frequently used services were Rehabilitation Technology and Adaptive Services (85%, up 5 percentage points from 2021) and Low Vision (81%, up 1 percentage point). Skills Training and Higher Education Training Services were consumed less often, with usage in 2022 at 52% (up 12 percentage points) and 28% (down 2 percentage points), respectively. The least-commonly utilized services included Reader (15%, up 2 percentage points), Transportation (15%, down 15 percentage points), Personal Care Attendant (11%, up 1 percentage point), and Small Business Ventures (11%, up 4 percentage points).

Overall, usage of BESB services in 2022 was slightly higher than average. Relative to 2021, usage increased for all but two of the eight services. Skills Training increased most noticeably, while only very modest increases were observed for Low Vision, Personal Care Attendant, Reader, Small Business, and Rehabilitation Technology Services. The two services that saw a decline in usage were Transportation (down 15 percentage points), and more modestly, Higher Education Training (down 2 percentage points). The sizable decline observed in Transportation Services may be due to the increasing societal acceptance of telework and telehealth. Notably, 2022 usage rate for Transportation Services (15%) was only slightly below the historical average for the survey(18%). This suggests that the usage rate for 2022 was closer to “normal,” and that the 2021 rate (30%) was unusually high.

This fiscal year, the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program had 72 clients who achieved employment outcomes, an increase of 56 from 2021. This returns the number of clients to near pre-pandemic levels; for example, the 2020 report noted that 77 clients achieved employment outcomes.

Generally speaking, this report finds notable increases in satisfaction across key areas surveyed. To varying degrees, this speaks to BESB’s efforts to help clients adjust to the re-opening of Connecticut’s economy. While the pandemic is not completely in the rear-view mirror, many sectors of the state’s economy have returned to normal, or near-normal, operation. To some extent, it is hard to untangle the general satisfaction that reopening presents to clients from direct improvements that BESB has made in its VR program.

Finally, it should be noted that it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions with a client population of this size. While the increased number of clients achieving employment outcomes since last year helps to ease this concern a bit, some data breakdowns, such as the Eastern territory in the regional analysis, still present small sample sizes.

D.   MEMBERSHIP:

In FY 2022, appointments to the SRC were made in the categories of Client Assistance Program

In addition, BESB leadership is working with the Department of Labor to recruit members from the categories of State Workforce Investment Board.

# E.  BESB VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION HIGHLIGHTS FOR FY 2022:

The Vocational Rehabilitation Programs has moved into a hybrid approach to providing services. Over the past year staff have been participating in more in person events, meetings with employers and clients. While some events and meetings remain virtual.

For National Employment for Individuals with Disabilities Awareness month in October the VR staff helped organize three events. One event was a Resource Fair for organizations in the Northern part of the state, drawing over 300 participants in person. Another event was a Resource Fair focusing on transition services for families of students with disabilities in the southern part of the state also drawing a large number of families in person. The last event was a virtual event in honor of Blind Americans Equality Day on October 15th, formally White Cane Safety Day. This event focused on Orientation and Mobility with presentations from LEAP VT, BESB staff on the history of White Cane Safety Day and participants experience using AIRA.

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

Through innovation and expansion funds the Rehabilitation Technologists have worked on upgrading our technology lab and technology available for assessment through the state. The program has purchased three Braille Displays (Orbit Reader, Mantis Q 40, BLX 40). A Reveal i16 portable CCTV, Clover Book pro portable CCTV and a Merlin Ultra CCTV. And an OrCAM Eye Pro.

FY2022 9/30/21 to 10/1/22 VR had 75 case closures (compared with 60 the previous year)

FY2022 Average Hourly Wage: $23.31 (compared to $24.17 the previous year).

Annualized Earnings calculated to $2,845,207.56 (compared to $2.5 the previous year).

Virtual opportunities for workplace learning experiences were completed by 39 transition-age youth served by the BESB VR Program, which included 13 paid work experiences.

Collaboration with the five Regional Workforce Development Boards continues to be a strong focus of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in FY 2022.

During the past year Counselors went back to in person co-location on a part-time basis at all five of the American Job Centers at the same rate before the pandemic. After the onset of the pandemic, most activities were shifted to a virtual model and have slowly opened up providing hybrid services with some appointments and trainings in person and some remote.

BESB VR Counselors maintained a strong focus on employer engagement, reaching out to businesses both in person and virtually. Throughout the year, national companies who offer remote work opportunities were invited to speak to the Counselors, Direct Employers, and IFB Solutions.

BESB successfully served all eligible clients in FY 2022 and projects that FY 2023 will continue to be a year that every eligible client can be served.

# F.  FUTURE COUNCIL ACTIVITIES:

In FY 2023, the Council will continue its role as a partner with the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program to ensure the delivery of services that afford clients the tools they need to prepare for, obtain, advance in, and maintain meaningful careers.   The SRC will work together with the Bureau through specific workgroups to continue to work on the goals, objectives and priorities for the current Unified State Plan for Connecticut.

The SRC will take an active role in updating the annual Consumer Satisfaction Survey as well as in FFY 23’s Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment in order to analyze and utilize the reports to assist the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in the development of the next plan’s content, priorities, and goals.

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

# G.  MEMBERS OF THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL IN FY 2022:

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

The Council would like to thank Brian Sigman for his year’s of service for BESB, Mary Burgard for her tremendous help and support in the absence of a Director, Cheryl Cepelak for stepping in as interim Director until a new Director was hired, and Commissioner Porter for her work and dedication to move BESB forward on a solid foundation.

Per the provisions of the Rehabilitation Act, membership comprises:

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

The FY 2022 Council members and their affiliations were:

1. Dawn Russell, Chair (Employer)
2. Gary Allen, Chair (State Independent Living Council)
3. Phil Magalnick, Vice Chair Recipient of Services)
4. Scott Baecker, Treasurer (Community Rehabilitation Provider)
5. Lucretia Jones, Secretary (Recipient of Services)
6. Enaida Mendoza (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor) ex-officio
7. Brandy Altergott (Employer)
8. Jay Brown (Department of Education)
9. Frank Buonomo (Community Rehabilitation Provider)
10. John Carnemolla (Recipient of Services)
11. William DeMaio (Employer)
12. Jennifer Jenkins (Client Assistance Program)
13. Frank Losquadro (Employer)
14. John McNickle (Recipient of Services)
15. Deborah Reed (Disability Advocacy Group)
16. Beth Reel (Statewide Parent Organization)
17. Dennis Regan (Recipient of Services)
18. Nicole Rico Serrano (American Indian Vocational

Rehabilitation)

1. Kendra Valente (Representative of an Individual

who is Blind, has Multiple Disabilities, and has Difficulty Representing Himself or Herself or is Unable due to Disabilities to Represent Himself or Herself)

# H. VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SUCCESS STORY

A person sitting at a desk with a computer and a fruit

Description automatically generated with low confidence

My name is Marchele Davis and I have been a client of the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) since childhood. I was born with detached retinas. I was a client of Oak Hill School for the blind (in Hartford, CT), before becoming mainstreamed into the New Haven public school system. It was around then that I started receiving services from BESB. I grew accustomed to their education funding, employment assistance, assistive technology, and general support. My experiences with BESB have been rewarding to say the least.

Besides working with BESB, I have worked with Marrakech, the New England Assistive Technology (NEAT) Center, American Job Center in New Haven, a short time with the Kennedy Center, BHCare and several other vendors. What I found most helpful was the sense of self-sufficiency they provided. Technology such as JAWS was an invaluable tool on my journey to finding employment and overcoming discrimination/adversity.

Early in life, I developed a passion for people. I graduated from Southern Connecticut State University in 2005 with a bachelor’s degree in Social Work. Admittedly, being visually impaired was challenging! However, being a single mother of 4 was all the encouragement I needed to persevere. My love for my family empowered me to overcome the doubt that I always felt my peers, educators, and potential employers had regarding my ability. Time was not infinite, and I often felt discouraged, fearful, and driven to tears. I wasn’t getting any younger and I still couldn’t find any reliable, competitive employment. So much time had passed that I eventually returned to school and received a second associate degree (this time in Drug and Alcohol Counseling). I participated in several situational assessments. Some of them offered some much-needed experience. That said, despite my education, effort, and passion, I still failed to find anything I could call a career. I remember going for an interview at a particular agency where I know I could have been an asset. There was no mention of needing a driver’s license, however, the interviewer adamantly enthused its necessity. In addition, the interviewer informed me that I could look forward to a second interview. Unfortunately, that second interview never came to fruition. The position was later revamped, a driver’s license became nonnegotiable, and I never heard from this company again. It saddens me to say that this is only one example of countless disappointing interviews I have faced in my past. Eventually, my children had grown up and found reliable means to support themselves. While I was forced to “ask for assistance” reading rejection letter after rejection letter. The ideology that I was some form of misfit became a part of my personality. I had truly believed myself to be a failure.

Despite the rejection and discontent, I continued to relentlessly apply for any opportunity that I truly believed I could succeed in. It wasn’t until 2019 that a position opened at the American Job Center in Bridgeport. The pandemic had struck and the position was frozen. Then in 2021, I was referred to a staff member at the American Job Center again. The staff remembered my name from the previous interview. While the agency was the same, the position was different. That was when I interviewed for the position of Career Navigator/Case Manager with the Jobs First Employment Services (or JFES, a subset of the American Job Center). I finally found myself gainfully employed on May 24th of 2021.

This position is designed to provide training and employment to struggling families. The goal is to help individuals remain employed, independent, and free of government assistance. Some of my responsibilities are to reserve appointments with clients, coordinate various trainings, research different resources, facilitate virtual meetings, and run Care4Kids subsidy groups. The bulk of this opportunity is reliant upon the CT Hires website. The site was initially very difficult to navigate, however, with diligence and attention to detail, I can successfully find, monitor, and store vital information from over 85 clients a week.

In conclusion, I would like to give thanks to Charlotte Copenhaver, Enaida Mendoza, Christiana Tyma and the BESB staff at large. I would also like to thank Barbara Green from the AJC in New Haven who also had faith in my abilities and supported my job search in so many ways. In my life, not only have I achieved competitive employment, but I have gotten married to a wonderful supportive husband. I also have been serving as president and chairman for the Center for Disability Rights of West Haven for the last five years; I have served as chapter president for the Southern Chapter of Milford; I have served as the secretary for the National Federation of the Blind State Affiliate of Connecticut. It goes without saying that I am quite busy these days. However, I’m still active with the NFB of Connecticut and nationwide. Life can be rather ironic. I was once a person who was on government assistance, in desperate need of training, and desperately needed employment.

Respectfully submitted,

Phillip A. Magalnick,JP

Chairman, FY22–23

Connecticut State Rehabilitation Council, ADS-BESB