STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL to the Connecticut Department of Rehabilitation Services - Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind

SRC ANNUAL REPORT FY 2018

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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 Rehabilitation Services (DORS)- 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 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 2018:

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

Technology:

To continue on the initiative started in the prior year, vendors of adaptive devices, software and apps were invited to SRC meetings to highlight the capabilities of their products. Demonstrations by Aira and Microsoft were coordinated and presented at two of the Council’s meetings in FY 2018. Additional product demonstrations are planned for FY 2019. The SRC views this as one of their highest priorities to ensure that Council members as well as staff of the Bureau are aware of the vast array of adaptive technologies that are available.

Transportation Options:

To continue on the initiative from the prior fiscal year, the SRC invited Lyft to give a presentation at the December, 2018 quarterly meeting. Lyft detailed their services, fees and an option that allows for the establishment of vendor accounts so that individuals do not need to pay directly for services but could instead have an organization such as the agency establish an account. This option was appealing to the SRC as it would allow for transportation services to be purchased for clients to participate in vocational rehabilitation services without the need to expend personal funds and then seek reimbursement afterwards from the agency. However, it was determined that in order to utilize this approach, the agency would need to agree to exclusivity conditions that would bar the agency from using the services of similar rideshare entities. That option was not possible. Therefore, the Council has concluded that while services such as Uber (a vendor that presented to the SRC membership in FY 2017) and Lyft are both viable options for clients to utilize for transportation that is needed to participate in vocational rehabilitation services, the only option that is presently available is for the agency to authorize the service to the client, for client to purchase these services individually, and to then seek reimbursement afterwards, consistent with the terms that were preauthorized.

Business Plan Development:

The SRC recognized the complexities of business plan development for clients who desire self-employment as an employment goal. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program policies include the requirement for the client to develop a comprehensive business plan. The SRC desired that the Bureau develop a step-by-step guide and business plan template. This was drafted, reviewed by the SRC and ultimately approved for use. The guide is available on the agency website and also provided to clients who wish to explore the option of self-employment as a career goal.

Programming and Sponsorships:

The State Rehabilitation Council continued its support for the Youth Leadership Forum (YLF), an annual week-long leadership training program for transition-age youth with disabilities. The SRC is an ongoing co-sponsor of this program and considers both its co-sponsorship and continued funding to be very important and worthwhile. This year’s model shifted from designated sponsorship levels based on funding contributions to an individualized, per-participant cost. There were two BESB clients selected to participate and three other clients who were provided with paid internship opportunities at the program.

VR Success Story:

During FY 2018, 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 to achieve 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 delivered and the successes that result.

Order of Selection Workgroup:

Recognizing the fiscal challenges experienced in the state, as well as the reduced level of funding received through the federal reallotment process in comparison to prior years, the SRC formed a joint workgroup with designated members of the Advisory Board for Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired. The workgroup was charged with making recommendations to the full membership of the SRC and the Advisory Board on strategies that could be utilized in an effort to stay out of an order of selection. What became evident to the workgroup members through their deliberations was that program costs were outpacing the availability of funding. While carry forward federal funds have helped to sustain the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, with the substantial decline in federal reallotment funds, it was clear to the workgroup members that difficult decisions would be required of the SRC and the Advisory Board if the goal for the Bureau was to continue to serve all eligible individuals into future years.

The SRC reviewed the proposals of the Order of Selection Workgroup, which included recommendations to modify policies in several purchased service categories that incur some of the higher program costs. Amongst these categories was post-secondary education. The SRC deliberated on using the State of Connecticut Community College System rate as the baseline for determining the level of funding for circumstances where course credits earned through the community college system could be applied towards the degree requirements. The SRC also recommended that formalized standards for reviewing and approving client requests to receive funding for graduate school be articulated in policy.

The policies for residential personal adjustment training programs were also reviewed. It was noted that these programs extend over several months and that costs for some programs can reach $8,000 per month. While the SRC recognized the importance and value of these services, it was also acknowledged that continuation of policies that allow for an open-ended, long-term provision of these types of services could not be sustained in future years if the Bureau wished to serve all eligible individuals. The SRC recommended several revisions to these policies, including the setting of a standard time frame for funding residential programs and clearly defining conditions whereby programs can be extended based on individual client circumstances.

The SRC also recognized that as new adaptive technologies become available, there is a trend toward selling monthly service plans to support the interactive features of these devices. While such options often come with lower costs for the purchase of the device, it requires a long-term investment of funds to maintain the interactive features of the device (such as online or cellular connectivity). Additionally, the expansion of accessible apps for mainstream devices such as Smartphones has created scenarios where the Bureau is being asked to maintain the monthly cellular service plans for clients who wish to acquire Smartphones. The SRC recommended that Vocational Rehabilitation Program policies clearly articulate that ongoing service plan costs are not the responsibility of the Bureau.

These proposed policy updates were put forth for public comment and were subsequently approved by the SRC and the Advisory Board, with an effective date of July 1, 2018.

In addition to the aforementioned policy updates, the SRC also participated in discussions with the Bureau Director on proposed reductions of program staffing levels through attrition and transfers to other programs within the Bureau where feasible. Through these combined actions, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program is now projecting sufficient funds to serve all eligible individuals through the completion of FY 2020. It is further hoped that as the newly adopted policy revisions are applied to new situations, that additional savings can be achieved, allowing for the continuation of services without the need for an order of selection in future years beyond FY 2020.

The SRC will continue to closely monitor the budget for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, recognizing that additional approaches may need to be considered.

State Plan Updates:

The State Rehabilitation Council, in collaboration with the Advisory Board dedicated significant time during the year to finalizing updates to the Vocational Rehabilitation section of the Unified State Plan for the State of Connecticut workforce system. Subsequent to a public comment period, the SRC approved the updates for submission to the federal government.

NCSAB / CSAVR 2018 Spring Conference:

The SRC Chairperson attended the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) national conferences in April. The Chairperson attended conference seminars as well as participating in the visit to Washington, DC to meet with Connecticut’s Congressional delegation to educate them on how the Vocational Rehabilitation Program assists people who are blind to achieve employment and self-sufficiency.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey:

The SRC commissioned the Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) to conduct a consumer satisfaction survey of Vocational Rehabilitation Program recipients for FY 2018. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the services that clients received from the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at BESB.  A complete summary of the findings are available on the Department of Rehabilitation Services website ([www.ct.gov/dors](http://www.ct.gov/dors)).

From the results of the Consumer Satisfaction Survey, CPPSR found that in comparison to the FY 2017 survey, four services gained in their overall levels of satisfaction while four serviced declined in their overall levels of satisfaction.

On a ten point rating scale, Personal Care Attendant Services experienced the largest increase in satisfaction levels, earning 10 out of 10 points. Small Business Services also achieved a perfect score of 10 out of 10 on the rating scale. Reader Services earned a satisfaction rating of 8.71 and Low Vision Services earned a rating of 8.75.

Transportation Services declined in the level of satisfaction in FY 2018, earning a rating of 7.57 out of 10 points. Higher Education Services also declined, coming in at a rating of 8.50. Skills Training Services decreased in client satisfaction to a rating of 7.75. Rehabilitation Equipment Services also experienced a decline, earning a rating of 8.42.

While 81 percent of survey participants responded that they would recommend BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program services to a friend, overall satisfaction with BESB services came in at 7.55 out of 10 points. The extent to which clients felt Vocational Rehabilitation Services met their needs was rated at 7.30. Client satisfaction with the extent to which services met their expectations decreased to 7.50. Finally, the extent to which BESB services met clients’ IPE goals also declined, coming in at 7.63.

The State Rehabilitation Council will be reviewing the results of this survey in depth in order to strategize with the Program staff regarding approaches that can be undertaken within these lean budgetary times to increase the levels of satisfaction with the services provided and purchased by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The Council recognizes that FY 2018 was a difficult year that experienced staff retirements, staff transfers and changes in policies pertaining to the delivery of several important services. As the Program has struggled to maintain sufficient levels of funding necessary to continue to serve all eligible individuals into future years, it is evident that levels of satisfaction have been impacted by the loss of staff and the refinements to policies.

# D.   MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE:

In FY 2018, the SRC said farewell to some of its most experienced members who served in officer positions over their two terms of service. In particular, the SRC recognizes the contributions of former SRC Chair Nyema Pinkney whose second term ended in June of 2018. Vice-Chair Diane Weaver Dunne and Treasurer Diann Murray also had their second term of appointment end in June. The SRC is extremely grateful to Governor Dannel P. Malloy and his staff for expediting the appointments of several new members whose terms began in FY 2018. Appointments were made in the categories of Client Assistance Program, Employer, Recipient of Services, Statewide Independent Living Council, Community Provider, and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor.

In the coming year, the State Rehabilitation Council will be seeking new members in the categories of Employer, Recipients of Services, and a 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, in order to replace members whose terms have or will be expiring.

# E.  BESB VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION HIGHLIGHTS FOR FY 2018:

* The Vocational Rehabilitation Program achieved 86 employment outcomes in FY 2018.
* Average hourly earnings for those who achieved employment in FY 2018 increased to $23.48, compared to $19.50 in FY 2017. Combined annualized earnings exceeded $3.4 million.
* The Bureau collaborated with all five of the Regional Workforce Development Boards to establish a physical presence of Vocational Rehabilitation Program staff at each of the primary American Job Centers, beginning in January, 2018. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are now active members on each of the regional Business Service Teams and assist clients of BESB in registering for services available through the American Job Centers and partner programs.
* During National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October, Vocational Rehabilitation Program staff collaborated with the Governor’s Committee on the Employment of People with Disabilities, the Department of Labor and Capital Workforce Partners in organizing a Disability Resource Fair.  Over 20 agencies participated with more than 150 attendees.
* The Vocational Rehabilitation Program also collaborated with the Department of Labor, and the Connecticut State Colleges to present two DiverseAbility Career Fairs during National Disability Employment Awareness Month.  The resource fairs consisted of job seekers, employers, and agencies that offered resources to both employers and job seekers.
* In collaboration with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Connecticut, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, the Department of Labor, and Capital Workforce Partners provided a job seminar as part of the NFB state convention in November, 2017.  The job seminar included presentations on services available through the Department of Labor, resume writing, and panel discussions.
* Thirty-one transition-age students participated in competitive paid work experiences in FY 2018.
* DORS-BESB transition-age students had an opportunity to attend a Disability Mentoring Day event at the UTC Aerospace Facility in Windsor Locks, CT. Eight students from BESB attended the exciting and informative program along with some of their parents.
* BESB successfully served all eligible clients in FY 2018 and projects that FY 2019 will also be a year that every eligible client can be served.

# F.  FUTURE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES:

In FY 2019, the Council will continue its role as a partner with the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program to ensure the delivery of services that afford clients the tools they need to prepare for, obtain, advance in, and maintain meaningful careers.   The SRC will work together with the Bureau to monitor the progress made to achieve the goals and objectives established in the FY 2018 updates to the BESB portion of the Unified State Plan. Additionally, the members of the Council will assess the results of the 2018 Consumer Satisfaction Survey in detail with a goal of recommending new strategies to address levels of satisfaction that experienced declines from prior years.

The Council will look forward to additional research on adaptive technology devices that are new to the market and that can provide for increased participation of Vocational Rehabilitation clients in job seeking activities using web-based search engines.

Perhaps most important, the Council will work with the Bureau to identify strategies to enable the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to continue its longstanding history of providing services to all eligible individuals.

# G.  MEMBERS OF THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL IN FY 2018:

The Council is required by federal law to ensure representation of the Bureau’s constituents and employers.  It is committed to seeking appointments of members most qualified to advise the State Director and the Council.  The Council is further committed to diversity in gender, race, disability, geography, and affiliation.  The Council continuously recruits prospective members who can enhance its diversity.  The Council has enjoyed success this year through an active membership, committed to the delivery of quality services to BESB clients.

Per the provisions of the Rehabilitation Act, membership comprises:

* One Statewide Independent Living Council representative
* One parent training and information center representative
* One client assistance program representative
* One representative of community rehabilitation program service providers
* Four representatives of business, industry and labor
* One vocational rehabilitation counselor (nonvoting)
* One representative of the State Education Agency with knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Act
* Director of Vocational Rehabilitation Unit (nonvoting)
* One State Workforce Investment Board representative
* One representative of a Section 121 Native American Vocational Rehabilitation Program
* 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 2018 Council members and their affiliations were:

Alan Gunzburg, Chair (Recipient of Services)

Diane Weaver Dunne, Vice-Chair (Community Provider)

Nathaniel Barnes, Secretary (Recipient of Services)

Diann Murray, Treasurer (Recipient of Services)

Gary Allen (State Independent Living Council)

Scott Baecker (Community Provider)

Michael Bartley (Labor Department Representative)

Steven Famiglietti (Community Provider)

Gary Gross (Recipient of Services)

Colleen Hayles (Department of Education)

Kathleen Marioni (Connecticut Workforce System)

John McNickle (Recipient of Services)

Patrick Melfi (Native American VR Program)

Enaida Mendoza (Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

Linda Mizzi (Client Assistance Program)

Nyema Pinkney (Employer)

Beth Reel (Statewide Parent Organization)

Brian Sigman, (BESB State Director)

Ellen Telker (Employer)

Kimberly Tindall (Disability Advocacy Organization)

# H. VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SUCCESS STORY

 

Dawn Russell works as a Quality Assurance Intake Facilitator for MARC, Inc. of Manchester. She has worked there in different capacities for over 24 years. With assistance from BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program, she has been able to maintain her employment with MARC. Experiencing a progressive vision loss since childhood due to retinitis pigmentosa, Dawn first reached out for services from BESB when she began having difficulty with reading information on her computer screen at work. She was provided with Zoomtext and training in how to use it. Since that time, Dawn has received an array of services including a CCTV magnifying device to help her maintain her employment. Dawn states: “when I first received services from BESB, all I needed was some assistance with my computer. But since that time, I have lost more vision and BESB has provided me with higher adaptive technology equipment that enables me to complete my job tasks independently. I am thankful and appreciative for all of the help that BESB has provided to me over the years.” Dawn has recently been appointed by Governor Malloy to join the BESB State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) in FY 2019.