

**Maryland State Rehabilitation Council**  
**Maryland's Advocates for Public Vocational Rehabilitation**  
**2011 Annual Report**

**INSIDE FRONT COVER**

**The Maryland State Rehabilitation Council**

**Who are we?**

The Maryland State Rehabilitation Council (MSRC) is made up of individuals interested in the success of Maryland's public vocational rehabilitation (VR) programs. Members are appointed by the Governor and include representatives from education, rehabilitation, employment, industry and consumer advocacy groups. The MSRC believes that employment is critical to the quality of life of people with disabilities in Maryland. A majority of Council members are persons with a disability.

**What is vocational rehabilitation?**

VR prepares people with disabilities to go to work, stay on the job and remain independent in their homes and communities. In Maryland, public VR is provided by the State Department of Education's Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS).

DORS statewide rehabilitation counselors provide for services that may include career counseling, assistive technology, vocational training and job placement. DORS provides personalized support and employment services so individuals with disabilities can plan a path to a successful career and independent living.

## **What do we do?**

The MSRC takes an active and visible role in how Maryland's public vocational rehabilitation program is administered.

- We review, analyze and advise DORS regarding performance of its responsibilities and quality of its services.
- We ensure that the needs of individuals with disabilities are identified and addressed by state and federal legislators, service providers, employers and the community.
- We collaborate with organizations and other state councils to promote services to underserved and unserved populations.
- We develop and review State goals and priorities, and assist in the preparation of Maryland's annual State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation.

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Maryland State Rehabilitation Council  
Daniel Frye, Chairperson  
Josie Thomas, Vice Chairperson

December 2011

To the Citizens of Maryland:

The Maryland State Rehabilitation Council (MSRC) serves as the people's collective champion for employment for disabled Marylanders, for enhanced awareness of the capabilities of disabled people, and for promotion of State and national policies that support those goals. Accordingly, the Council, in compliance with Federal law, monitors and oversees Maryland's Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), the

State agency that provides public vocational rehabilitation (VR) services and is responsible for helping disabled people to find and retain jobs. As set out in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Council reports its findings annually to the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration, the Governor of Maryland, and the residents of the state.

This annual report will chronicle the work that DORS management and staff and the members of the MSRC have jointly undertaken to achieve this mission during the last year and will set the stage for our ambitions during the year ahead. After reviewing this report, I am confident that readers will observe that everybody involved is hard-working and invested in promoting a strong rehabilitation program in Maryland. Toward this end, DORS contributed to the successful, competitive employment placement of 2,437 disabled Marylanders during the last fiscal year, representing an increase of 1.2% over the previous reporting period. An achievement of this magnitude is especially noteworthy during a depressed economic climate and while DORS struggles to function under the constraints of a state hiring freeze and other human and financial resource limitations.

As the newly elected chairman of the Maryland State Rehabilitation Council, I am keen to preside over the work of a transparent, responsive, and active MSRC that is dedicated to strengthening services to disabled Marylanders looking for employment and that is genuinely engaged with agency management to shape the future of Maryland's rehabilitation program. I believe that these objectives can be best accomplished through a close, collaborative, and substantive relationship between the members of the MSRC and the management and staff of DORS. Drawing on the Council's

diverse membership, I believe that we can provide agency management and staff with a fair representation of the perspectives that program consumers and other stakeholders possess. Consistent with our Federal and State mandate, the MSRC will be involved with agency policy oversight and development, dedicated to informing DORS programs and practices with the empowered perspective of program stakeholders, and committed to profiling the compelling purposes of DORS to State and Federal leaders.

In closing, please know that I, along with the other members of the MSRC, invite people to communicate with us about their interactions with DORS (positive or negative) so that we can be of optimal service to individual Marylanders and to the Maryland rehabilitation program generally. Thank you for reading this year's annual report and for working with the MSRC to help us achieve our goals.

Sincerely,  
Daniel B. Frye  
Chairman, Maryland State Rehabilitation Council

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### **Concerns of the Council**

For a number of years, the Council had to sound the alarm about a growing waiting list crisis caused by federal funding shortfalls. By the start of FY 2009 DORS had over 5,000 people with disabilities on a waiting list for services – for some of them, it was a year and a half before they could even start the rehabilitation process to go to work! Thanks to additional funding allocated by the Governor and Maryland General

Assembly, as well as the one-time boost from the federal American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA, “the stimulus”), DORS was able to eliminate the waiting list for those individuals judged to have “most significant” disabilities, and reduce the waiting list for those with “significant” disabilities to 1,000 people with a delay in the start of services of less than three months at the start of FY 2010.

However, now at the start of FY 2012 the waiting list for Marylanders with significant disabilities has risen to 2,883 people, all of whom can expect to wait up to 13 months before they can begin needed services to return to work. This new expansion of the waiting list is being caused not only by limited financial resources this time, but also by a lack of human resources. As these difficult economic times drive more individuals with disabilities to seek DORS services to rejoin the workforce, DORS has fewer resources available to help them.

## **Financial Resources**

In 2009 and 2010, DORS programs were aided substantially by ARRA funding, but in 2011 the reality of the federal funding shortfalls returned. Across-the-board federal budget cuts continue to whittle away at the pool of funding available for public vocational rehabilitation services nationwide. Ongoing problems with the antiquated funding formula that determines how much of that money is given to each state ensures that Maryland will always be in the bottom three of all states for the amount of those dollars allocated per working-age person with a disability.

In September 2009, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report to Congress (GAO-09-798) that

studied the funding formula used to distribute federal funds to states for the administration of the public VR services program. As the MSRC had been reporting for a number of years, Maryland is in the bottom tier of states in the allocation of these funds because the formula disproportionately compounds a state's per capita income. The GAO report made clear that Maryland has the third most poorly-funded state VR program; only Connecticut and Massachusetts are more poorly funded.

In that 2009 report the GAO reported that Maryland received \$97 per working-aged person with a disability. Compared to other states in the region: Virginia \$118; Pennsylvania \$122; West Virginia \$125; Delaware \$141; District of Columbia. \$240. Nationally, compare to North Dakota \$277; Wyoming \$250 per person with a disability.

The GAO reported that “the formula does not account for differences among states in the proportion of people with disability or the costs of providing services.” The GAO identified three new funding formulas that would distribute funding equitably, any one of which would benefit Maryland. However, it will require an act of Congress to change the funding formula. Given the current state of Congress, this appears highly unlikely in the near future.

In the meantime, Maryland's federal funding remains insufficient to prevent the continuing buildup of the waiting list.

## **Human Resources**

DORS VR Counselors are experts in disability, employment and independent living issues. They provide one-on-one counseling, guidance, job development and placement

services, and referral. They know what jobs exist in the community and help people make informed choices about their futures. Many have specialized in providing these services to people who are blind or deaf, have severe mental illness or are high school students with disabilities transitioning to the adult world. To provide these services to consumers with the level of quality, efficiency and dignity that these consumers deserve, rehabilitation professionals generally agree that VR counselors should carry an open caseload of no more than 120 people, and even fewer – up to 80 – for special populations such as deaf and blind. In order to try and serve all the out-of-work Marylanders with disabilities who need DORS services, some VR Counselors have been carrying caseloads nearly twice that size.

Due to the State Hiring Freeze and other initiatives to reduce the size of the State workforce, there aren't enough VR Counselors to properly serve the thousands of Marylanders with disabilities wanting to go to work.

Every time an employee leaves State employment, their agency must apply for an exception to the Hiring Freeze for permission to fill that position again. Many times, after a long wait while the position remains vacant, permission is not given and that position is abolished. The State Employee Voluntary Separation Program this past January, which encouraged long-time employees to take early retirement buy-outs, abolished an additional 12 positions. Since 2003, DORS has lost 102 positions – 20% of its workforce.

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### **Going Forward**

The MSRC continues to request the following of the Governor, the General Assembly and the Citizens of Maryland:

1. Eliminate the Hiring Freeze on DORS VR Counselors and other direct service delivery personnel and allow existing positions to be recruited as soon as they become vacant. Keeping these primarily federally funded positions open indefinitely has no benefit to the State beyond driving up the size of the waiting list for services.
2. Hold DORS harmless should any upcoming layoffs, Voluntary Separation Programs or other personnel actions become necessary. Consider the 102 positions DORS has already given up.

On the national level, the MSRC intends to continue working with Maryland's Congressional delegation and with state rehabilitation councils and VR agencies in other states to bring attention to the federal funding inequities brought out in the GAO report in the hopes that one day legislation can change the funding formula to one more equitable to Maryland.

DORS is a proven, nationally recognized VR program, a program that helps people get jobs, creates new taxpayers, takes people off public assistance and returns millions of dollars each year to Maryland's economy. DORS has been long recognized as having one of the best programs in the country for providing a path to employment and economic self-sufficiency for persons with disabilities. In order to continue, DORS needs the resources to be able to hire the best people and retain the best people so that the agency can continue to offer a quality path to employment and self-sufficiency to all Marylanders with disabilities who want to go to work.

## The Maryland State Rehabilitation Council

Thomas Barkley

Division of Special Education, Maryland State Department of Education

Michael Bullis

Executive Director, The IMAGE Center, Center for Independent Living

Earl Cooper

Public Advocate

Charles Crawford

American Council of the Blind

Tim Daly

Public Advocate

Laurie Elinoff

Maryland Statewide Independent Living Council

Paulette Epps

Director of Vocational Rehabilitation Services Division, Alliance, Inc.

Dan Frye

National Federation of the Blind; MSRC Chair

Beth Lash

Regional Director, former Client Assistance Program Director, DORS

Carol Lewis  
Rehabilitation Counselor, DORS

Kali Mallik  
Public Advocate

Mary Manzoni  
Vocational Services Director, Humanim, Inc.

Suzanne R. Page  
Assistant State Superintendent in Rehabilitation Services,  
Maryland State Department of Education

Anne Rea  
Director of Employment & Resource Management Services,  
Way Station

Rashid Reyazzudin  
Business/Industry Representative

Barry Shaw  
Public Advocate

Alfred Sonnenstrahl  
Public Advocate

Josie Thomas  
Executive Director, Parents' Place of Maryland, Inc.; MSRC  
Vice Chair

Jennifer Whitcomb  
Executive Director, Deaf Independent Living Association, Inc.

Michael Whitehill  
Business/Industry Representative

## **What is VR's return on investment?**

- If DORS past record is any indication, of the 2,437 DORS participants who went to work in 2011, 84% will still be working a year from now – the highest retention rate of any Maryland workforce program. These new workers will contribute over \$35 million to Maryland's economy in their first year of work.
- The average cost for a person with disabilities to achieve successful employment with DORS is \$4,413. This cost is paid back through taxes and reduced reliance on public benefits in just two to four years.
- At the time of application, only 14% of DORS consumers list “wages” as their primary source of income. After receiving vocational rehabilitation services from DORS, nearly 80% report that wages are their primary source of income.
- The Social Security Administration estimates that when disability benefits recipients go to work, they generate a savings to the Federal treasury and Social Security Trust Fund of \$7 for every \$1 spent on their VR services.

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### **DORS VR Programs 2011**

- DORS matched 2,437 qualified individuals to job openings in Maryland businesses. These new workers contributed more than \$35 million to the State economy.
- DORS assisted 78 Maryland businesses with worksite reviews so they could hire new employees or keep valued ones.
- 170 individuals who are blind or visually impaired were successfully employed. Their average wage was \$17.24/hour.
- DORS served 9,228 students with disabilities to prepare them to move from high school to employment, higher education or career training.
- DORS helped 1,044 people with significant disabilities move from receiving public benefits to becoming employed taxpayers.
- After taking part in career training and rehabilitation technology programs at the Workforce & Technology Center, 498 individuals went to work.
- WTC served 840 high school students with specialized residential and day programs designed to help them reach their work and independent living goals.
- Despite a hiring freeze, 62 DORS consumers were newly hired or able to retain their jobs in 29 Federal agencies in positions ranging from clerk to biological scientist and aeronautical engineer.
- 25 individuals with brain injuries achieved employment as part of the Governor's Employment Initiative for Persons with Acquired Brain Injuries, bringing the total number of employment outcomes in the program's five years to 151.

- 317 high school students with disabilities earned work experience in paid summer employment.
- 24 DORS consumers completed the annual Governor's QUEST Internship Program, which provides three-month internships in State government.
- 258 consumers took part in expanded employment services for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals at WTC. Employment outcomes for this often under-served population have increased by more than 50%.
- For FY 2011, the public VR program exceeded the Federal performance standards for both employment outcomes and minority access to services.

For more information about DORS and vocational rehabilitation in Maryland, please visit: [www.md-dors.org/report](http://www.md-dors.org/report).

## **DORS Expands Access to Work Incentives Counseling**

DORS had found over the years that many people with disabilities who rely on public benefits such as Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicare and/or Medicaid are afraid to try going back to work or working for the first time. Some worry if they work a part-time job to ease their way into the workforce, they will lose all their benefits immediately. Others fear if they start a job but find they can't keep it due to their disability, they will have to apply for benefits all over again – a process that for some took a year or more the first time. And for some, it's not about cash benefits – they're terrified of losing their healthcare!

The good news is, there are Work Incentive programs in place to help allay these fears, such as:

- Trial work period allows an SSDI recipient to test his ability to work for at least nine months without affecting benefits.
- Extended period of eligibility means a recipient who earns enough after the trial work period to lose SSDI, but then has earnings drop within three years, can ask the Social Security Administration (SSA) to restart benefits. No need to reapply.
- Continuation of Medicare maintains eligibility for at least eight more years if a recipient stops getting SSDI but does not have other insurance.
- Maryland's Employed Individuals with Disabilities Program allows a worker with disabilities to keep Medicaid by paying a monthly premium.
- 1619(b) allows a person earning too much to keep SSI to retain Medicaid if earnings stay below a set amount. If she loses her job, 1619(b) lets her get SSI benefits back just by calling SSA. No need to reapply.

However, this good news was not getting out to many of the Marylanders who needed to hear it most. While SSA's Work Incentives Planning & Assistance Program had some community coordinators trained to counsel recipients about their benefits and work incentives options, their limited funding did not enable them to serve everyone statewide.

In 2011, DORS instituted an innovative program where certified Benefits Planning Counselors would be encouraged to set-up shop statewide, available upon referral to provide one-on-one consultation with any DORS consumer receiving benefits from SSA. There is now a network of more than 30 experts from Salisbury to Cumberland. Each is trained by SSA as well as the Maryland Department of Disabilities. Now Marylanders with disabilities who receive public benefits have the information they need to help them plot a course to an independent future.

## **The Work of the MSRC**

### **Review, analyze and advise DORS regarding performance of its responsibilities and quality of its service**

- Public meetings were held throughout Maryland, including one meeting by teleconference, to gather feedback on DORS performance from consumers and stakeholders, and to discuss topics of concern to the participants, including:
  - Budget & Capacity issues affecting waiting list
  - DORS Fee-for-Services Benefits Planning Counseling Program
  - DORS services for Individuals who are Blind/Visually Impaired
- Council monitored the increasing size of counselor caseloads and the growing waiting list for DORS services. Discussions including an analysis of the turnover of the counselor workforce and ideas for counselor retention.

- Council reviewed the annual DORS consumer satisfaction survey. 86% of consumers who received VR services reported overall satisfaction with their experience.
- The Public Relations & Quality Assurance Committee reviewed the current methodology of the satisfaction surveys and explored ways to expand rate of return and reach under-represented populations.
- The Blindness & Vision Services Committee worked with the University of Maryland on the satisfaction survey given to consumers of DORS Office for Blindness & Vision Services (OBVS). In the most recent, 87% reported satisfaction with OBVS services.
- Council reviewed the Client Assistance Program, which advocates for consumers in Maryland's public VR program in disputes and hearings.
- The Policy & Planning Committee reviewed new ethics requirements for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors and agency recommendations for professional disclosure statements.

**Ensure the needs of individuals with disabilities are identified and addressed by state and federal legislators, service providers, employers and the community**

- Council members paid calls on their State senators and delegates to discuss protecting DORS budget from further budget and staffing cuts in order to shorten DORS waiting list for services and in support of extending the Disability Employment Tax Credit (SB 850).
- Council leadership met with the Executive Director of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation for an update on the future reauthorization of the federal

Workforce Investment Act and its ramifications for the Maryland public VR program.

- A letter in support of continued funding for public vocational rehabilitation was sent to Maryland Congressional Representative Chris Van Hollen of the Congressional Super Committee.
- The Blindness & Vision Service Committee includes ad hoc members from the major advocacy groups for the blind/vision impairment community who act as advocates within their communities to network job opportunities and promote employment. This committee acted as an intermediary for some individuals who are blind in resolving concerns that had arisen about services provided by a community rehabilitation provider.
- The Council hosted presentations on partnership programs with community service providers or other agencies, such as supported employment programs, AbilityOne and Employment First.

### **Collaborate with organizations and other state councils to promote services to underserved populations**

- The Chair of the MSRC Policy & Planning Committee wrote a chapter in the 36th Institute on Rehabilitation Issues “The Vocational Rehabilitation – State Rehabilitation Council Partnership: Working Together Works” sponsored by The George Washington University Center for Rehabilitation Counseling Research and Education.
- Council members attended the biannual meetings of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and participated with the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils.

- MSRC joined other Chairs, Vice-Chairs and VR Directors from the state rehabilitation councils of the Mid-Atlantic region in a Learning Community to share best practices about the SRCs' functions in each participating state.
- The Council was also represented at meetings of the National Federation of the Blind, American Council of the Blind and the Maryland Rehabilitation Association.

### **Develop and review State goals and priorities, assist in preparing the State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation**

- As required by the Rehabilitation Act, the MSRC contributed to the State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation. Among the Council's recommendations in the Plan, some of which were based on stakeholder feedback gathered at the public meetings, were that DORS:
  1. Expand and enhance services for Deaf-Blind consumers.
  2. In partnership with the MSRC Public Relations & Quality Assurance Committee, review the methodology of satisfaction surveys and explore web-based surveys and other alternative response methods. Consider strategies to expand sample size, reach under-represented groups and preserve anonymity.
  3. Emphasize the Counselor's role in working with college Disability Support Services offices and developing appropriate individualized college supports, including those for individuals with autism-spectrum disorders. Also, explore policy changes related to college students' non-adaptive computer needs.
  4. Continue to implement outreach and liaison strategies to more fully engage non-special-education secondary students (those with 504 plans and serious health

conditions) with disabilities population of transitioning youth.

5. Continue collaboration with local providers, the Maryland Department of Disabilities and the Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) at the state and local levels as related to the Employment First initiative. Explore programmatic barriers to success and cross-agency training.
6. Consider various means to address transportation needs of consumers, including identification of organizations that might provide vehicles for consumers.
7. Continue partnership with the State's Skills2Compete initiative and address the use of private vocational schools for consumers.
8. Continue to explore, identify and implement innovative practices in job development and placement.
9. Finalize efforts toward implementing changes recommended for services for deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers in the Model State Plan.

## **BACK COVER**

### **Belief Statement**

The Maryland State Rehabilitation Council (MSRC) believes that employment is critical to the quality of citizenship of people with disabilities in Maryland.

The MSRC advocates in Maryland for:

- Increased employment for people with disabilities.
- Increased awareness of individuals with disabilities and their employment capabilities.
- State policies that encourage and support employment.

## **2012 Meeting Schedule**

February 10, 2012  
Legislative Event  
Annapolis, Maryland

April 2012  
Statewide Public Meetings

May 9, 2012  
Workforce & Technology Center  
Baltimore, Maryland  
4:00-7:00 pm

August 2012  
Executive Committee Planning Meeting

September 12, 2012  
Workforce & Technology Center  
Baltimore, Maryland  
4:00-7:00 pm

November 14, 2012  
Workforce & Technology Center  
Baltimore, Maryland  
4:00-7:00 pm

For more information about the Maryland State Rehabilitation Council, its meetings and activities, or if you would like to be considered for membership:

Maryland State Rehabilitation Council

2301 Argonne Drive, Baltimore MD 21218  
410-554-9437 • TTY 410-554-9411  
Fax: 410-554-9412 • Toll Free: 1-888-554-0334

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