

Maryland State Rehabilitation Council

December 31, 2024

As Chair of the Maryland State Rehabilitation Council (MSRC), it is an honor to serve the people of Maryland. The MSRC is the people's champion for employment of Marylanders with disabilities, for enhanced awareness of the capabilities of students, youths, and adults with disabilities, and for promotion of State and national policies that support those goals.

The MSRC is appointed by the Governor of Maryland, in compliance with federal law, to monitor, advise and oversee the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS). Established by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, the Council reports its findings annually to the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), the Governor of Maryland and, most importantly, the people of Maryland.

For Program Year 2024

New Assistant State Superintendent for Rehabilitation Services

MSDE Assistant State Superintendent for Rehabilitation Services Dr. Erik D. Bonner joined DORS on October 16th as its new Director.

Dr. Bonner has extensive experience in Education, Special Education, Administration, Operations, and Leadership. He began his career as a teacher, became a special educator and school administrator, then progressed to director positions in Boston, Chicago, and Houston, where he focused on advancing equity and achievement for all stakeholders.

Dr. Bonner holds a bachelor's degree, two master's degrees, a doctorate from the University of North Texas, and a master's in management studies from the Yale University School of Management.

During his time at Boston Public Schools, Dr. Bonner spearheaded initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for students with diverse learning needs, particularly those in special education programs. He was instrumental in designing and implementing transition programs to ensure students successfully moved from school into post-secondary opportunities, whether higher education, career training, or the workforce. His leadership in these areas significantly contributed to better preparedness and long-term success for students with disabilities.

His work as Executive Director for the Office for Students with Disabilities with Chicago Public Schools further reflects his deep commitment to fostering inclusive environments. Most recently during his time in the Houston Independent School District, he focused on improving effectiveness by building capacity and leadership.

Dr. Bonner has a passion for public education and for vocational services for students and adults with disabilities. This, along with his strategic vision, collaborative approach, and focus on data-driven outcomes, position him as a fitting new leader for DORS. He is excited to bring his expertise to his new role, where he will continue to champion equity, innovation, and excellence.

Acting Assistant State Superintendent, Jody Boone

The MSRC and DORS extend their sincere appreciation to Senior Executive Director for Planning, Operations, and Field Services, Jody Boone, who served as Acting Assistant State Superintendent during the search for a new DORS Director.

DORS Updates

Reallotment: In addition to the \$51.6 million in federal funding originally received for Fiscal Year 2024 from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, DORS received a reallotment in the amount of \$4.95 million.

MPPI Grant: The five-year Maryland Pathways to Partnership Initiative (MPPI) grant was awarded to Maryland through RSA's Disability Innovation Fund. MPPI partners DORS with four local education agencies (Allegany, Caroline, Charles, and Washington Counties), four Centers for Independent Living (Bay Area CIL, Independence Now, Resources for Independence, and Southern Maryland CIL), the University of Maryland Center for Transition and Career Innovation, MSDE Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services, Abt Global, the Parents Place of Maryland, and the Maryland Department of Disabilities.

CSAVR: DORS staff represented Maryland at the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) the week of October 19 – October 24, 2024, in Seattle, Washington.

Counselor Caseloads: Over the next year DORS Office of Field Services will continue working to address the imbalance of rehabilitation counselor caseloads statewide. On average, the number of consumers on DORS counselor caseloads continues to be two to three times higher than the national average.

Waiting List: The waiting list for DORS services continues to be monitored and individuals moved off as quickly as possible. Each month the Quality Assurance (QA) staff evaluate the total number of Referrals received, Applications for Service completed, Eligibility Determinations made, and the number of eligible individuals added to the waiting list to determine if there are enough resources and staff capacity to move individuals off the list and into active service.

When conditions support moving individuals from the waiting list, the QA staff work with DORS Executive Team to identify eligible individuals in order of their application date, and contact them to confirm the individual is still interested in receiving DORS employment services. Then, a rehabilitation counselor will work with the new consumer to create an Individualized Plan for Employment detailing the next steps in their program.

Workforce & Technology Services: DORS Workforce & Technology Services has been working on implementing several community-based workforce programs over the past year including:

- Running a year-round CVS retail training program, in collaboration with Prince Georges Community College, in Laurel. The placement rate for the first two classes has exceeded 70%.
- Being selected by the National Restaurant Association, Education Foundation to be a primary partner in their Restaurant Readiness program. WTC will be receiving a national curriculum and connections to State Restaurant Association members who will provide training sites and primary hiring pathways.
- Launching an Autism Job Club pilot program in Columbia that includes employment readiness and soft skills components.
- Adding a new component to the Work Readiness program: Functional Independence for Employment. This program focuses on executive functioning, compensatory cognitive skills, and education and training in physical endurance and proper body mechanics.
- Taking the lead on DORS new non-adapted computers pilot program by configuring computers and orienting consumers across the state to their new systems.

MSRC Activities

Annual Retreat:

The MSRC held their annual retreat on October 7, 2024. Agenda items included discussions on the federal budget, staffing new positions, quality assurance measures, the waiting list, and future MSRC goals.

National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC):

Two members of the MSRC attended the October NCSRC meeting in Seattle, Washington.

DORS By the Numbers:

In program year 2024, 1,174 Marylanders achieved competitive integrated employment through DORS public vocational rehabilitation program.

In addition:

- DORS provided employment services for 17,292 Marylanders with disabilities.
- DORS served 10,597 students with disabilities, ages 14-21, with pre-employment transition services.
- DORS worked with 13,732 Social Security beneficiaries with a goal of returning to the workforce.
- Moved 1,581 individuals off the waiting list and into active service.
- Worked with 240+ partners and community organizations, providing education and information.

Concluding Thoughts

The MSRC and DORS continue to work on the six recommendations of the 2023 House Bill 660 Commission. Since the Commission's report was issued, DORS has:

1. Strengthened its partnership with the Developmental Disability Administration (DDA) and is providing more training opportunities to DDA providers.
2. Streamlined internal processes and policies to decrease the time taken to provide services.
3. Reduced number of vacant rehabilitation counselor positions.
4. Increased and strengthened partnerships with local, statewide, and national employers.
5. Revised communications materials to be in plain language and available in multiple languages.
6. Created informational videos detailing DORS services.

It is with great confidence that I state that Maryland's Division of Rehabilitation Services is a champion in partnering with Marylanders with disabilities to develop employment opportunities.

Sincerely,



Dr. Katherine L.R. Jones, Chair
Maryland State Rehabilitation Council