



December 15, 2022

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 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, the Governor of Maryland and, most importantly, the people of Maryland.

For the fiscal year 2022:

Eligibility Determination Unit

During the pandemic, DORS' Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors who performed in-person Career Assessment evaluations were not able to perform their usual duties. Instead, DORS put these counselors to work under a new initiative, helping with the intake and eligibility decision-making process. During this initiative, the feedback from DORS' Office of Field Service (OFS) and Office for Blindness & Vision Services (OBVS) VR counselors in the field was very positive.

As a result, DORS made the decision to create a permanent Eligibility Determination Unit (EDU). The VR counselors who staff the EDU are now DORS' eligibility experts, who accurately place individuals into the correct service category. With this part of the VR process removed from their duties, the OFS and OBVS field counselors can focus their time on working with each consumer on the development of their Individual Plan for Employment. The long-term goal of the EDU is increased efficiency, resulting in a higher number of individuals exiting DORS' VR program into jobs that put them on paths to enduring employment.

DORS Pay Plan Initiative

Even prior to the pandemic, DORS was having difficulty recruiting and retaining staff, especially in areas of Maryland where the cost of living is high. As changes occurred in the workforce, DORS, like employers nationwide, began to see a mass exit of seasoned employees. This loss was especially high among VR counselor and supervisor positions. The Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) new State Superintendent (July 2021), Mohammed Choudhury, took this personnel loss seriously and instructed DORS to undertake a comprehensive salary study of VR counselor and supervisor positions nationwide.

Once the study was completed, the results indicated that DORS needed to raise these salaries to be competitive. MSDE and DORS began working with the Maryland Department of Budget and Management. A review of federal and State funding determined that DORS could support a new salary structure. As a result, current VR counselors and supervisors were given, on average, a 20% salary increase, and the starting salary for new hires in these positions increased by over \$12,000.

The Waiting List

With the pay plan initiative stabilizing the VR counselor positions, DORS reopened Category 2, and was able to bring more than 300 consumers off the Waiting List. As individuals are brought off the list, DORS will continue to monitor counselor caseloads to ensure that these do not become overwhelming.

Community Outreach

To better engage with the disability community, DORS has increased its outreach efforts.

DORS wanted to hear more from parents and students about their involvement with DORS and how the Division could improve services. As part of this effort, DORS contracted with the Parents' Place of Maryland, the federally funded parent advocacy organization, to conduct a series of statewide virtual listening sessions soliciting feedback about DORS services. These sessions included separate sessions with parents and students who represent Maryland's Hispanic population. In December, Parents' Place issued a draft report; once the report is finalized, it will be posted on the DORS website.

Additionally, as part of DORS' 2022 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment recommendation to address underserved populations, DORS reviewed its federal 911 Report demographic data. This data shows that DORS was serving about 6% of Maryland's Hispanic/Latino community. However, this population is approximately 10.5% statewide, and in several Maryland jurisdictions the overall Hispanic/Latino population approaches 20%. As part of an effort to improve service delivery to this community, DORS has joined a series of listening sessions with organizations that work closely with this population. Through this effort, DORS hopes to learn ways to expand and improve services to Maryland's Hispanic/Latino community.

Commission to Study the Division of Rehabilitation Services

The Maryland General Assembly passed legislation during the 2022 session to set up a Commission to Study various aspects of, and service delivery by, DORS. The Commission is charged with reviewing 10 topic areas that include how DORS works with the Developmental Disabilities Administration, the time it takes to receive services, the eligibility criteria, and the possibility of moving DORS to another Maryland State entity. The Commission's final report and recommendations are due in March 2023.

Sincerely,



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

By The Numbers

In 2022, the Division of Rehabilitation Services:

- Provided VR Services to 19,500 individuals with Significant or Most Significant Disabilities
- Served 9,902 Youth and Students with Disabilities
- Assisted 974 individuals with Significant or Most Significant Disabilities to achieve Competitive Integrated Employment
- Made 6,063 eligibility decisions