

State Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies

As Change Agents



Systems Change Information Bulletin #7:

The Role of State VR Agencies in Working With Transition-Age Youth

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This is the seventh in a series of INFORMATION BULLETINS on the general topic of State VR agencies serving as systems change agents. In addition to the primary role of providing VR services to persons with disabilities (particularly those with the most significant disabilities), Congress expects that State VR agencies will perform the role of change agent within the state to enhance employment opportunities for persons with disabilities. The INFORMATION BULLETINS are located at the following website:

http://disability.law.uiowa.edu/lhpdc/rrtc/vr_syschange/.

The CSAVR website includes a link to this website.

The purpose of SYSTEMS CHANGE INFORMATION BULLETIN #7 is to share the experiences of selected State VR agencies in working with transition-age youth. Recent reauthorizations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Rehabilitation Act have emphasized the important role played by State VR agencies, in partnership with secondary and post-secondary institutions, in the transition of youth with disabilities to higher education and employment. The critical role played by State VR agencies in youth transition was particularly prominent in the bill passed by the U.S. Senate (S. 1021) during the 109th Congress.

Overview and Examples of Roles Performed by State VR Agencies, in General

State VR agencies are using a variety of administrative

approaches to accomplish systems change designed to improve youth transition. These approaches include:

- Mentoring youth and young adults,
- Building partnerships with local educational agencies, community colleges and four-year institutions of higher education,
- Providing training and technical assistance to local educational agencies, community colleges, and four-year institutions of higher education,
- Embedding VR counselors in the high schools,
- Conducting resource mapping across agencies,
- Providing user-friendly, practical information to students, families, and other stakeholders, and
- Supporting career and employment initiatives in high school/high tech programs.

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State youth transition initiatives highlighted in this INFORMATION BULLETIN include:

- California
- Connecticut
- Delaware
- Iowa
- Mississippi
- New Mexico
- Ohio
- Vermont
- Wisconsin

California

The **California** Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) is pursuing three related transition initiatives:

- The California Mentoring Initiative
- The Transition Partnership Project
- Technical Assistance Training-Education.

The California Mentoring Initiative (CMI) focuses on mentoring youth and young adults with disabilities ages 16-26 years old who are applicants or clients of DOR. DOR was awarded a five-year demonstration project funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services. The objectives of the project are to increase the academic outcomes of in-school youth as measured by completion of educational objectives and academic progress, improved enrollment and completion of post-secondary education, improved employment outcomes, and improved self esteem of participating youth.

Public and non-profit agencies have been selected to receive funding for the marketing, recruitment and screening of mentors, mentor/mentee matching, and the subsequent supervision of the mentor relationship. The project will:

- Determine if having a mentor increases the likelihood of high school graduation, access of post secondary education, increase in employment and a positive effect on quality of life issues.
- Determine if having a mentor who has received specialized training in disability awareness and sensitivity makes a significant difference in outcomes as measured above.
- Conduct a research and evaluation study to inform policy decisions around the efficacy of mentoring as a rehabilitation service.
- 50 matches have been made to date.

Web site: <http://interwork.sdsu.edu/moodle>. Contact: Loran Vetter lvetter@dor.ca.gov

The Transition Partnership Project was designed to build partnerships between local education agencies (LEAs) and the Department of Rehabilitation for the purposes of

successfully transitioning student- DOR clients into meaningful employment and/or secondary education. Statewide, there are 85 programs administered through cooperative agreements with local school districts, SELPAs and County Offices of Education.

Under these contractual agreements, DOR assigns vocational rehabilitation counselors to be actively involved as a liaison to the program. DOR opens cases and provides enhanced vocational rehabilitation services for at least one year prior to the student-consumer leaving high school. The LEA provides exclusive training and enhanced programming to enable consumers to achieve employment utilizing community based instruction, vocational and work-site training, job placement, and follow-up services to exiting student-consumers.

On a statewide basis DOR outreach and intervention strategies for transition aged youth have proven to be highly successful. Highlights from DOR outcomes include:

- Over 37,000 transition-aged students-consumers (ages 14-24) are currently served by DOR, representing 32% of DOR's total caseload. Over 9,000 of these consumers receive SSI, SSDI, or both.
- Over 50% of the consumers served are Black, Hispanic or Asian American, historically underserved populations nationally.
- Historically transition aged consumers (14-24) constituted over 30% of DOR's total successful placements.
- Two-thirds of the transition aged consumers, successfully placed in competitive employment, had salaries that were greater than substantial gainful activity (SGA). 54% of the consumers on SSI/SSDI earned greater than SGA.

Contact: Jeff Riel jriel@dor.ca.gov

Funded by an interagency agreement between the Ca Departments of Rehabilitation and Department of Education, training and technical assistance is available to the local education cooperative programs as well as other local DOR/education partnerships that emphasize collaborative vocational rehabilitation services and supports. Training and technical assistance is designed to represent best services practices, meet the individual needs of local programs, and build capacity to maximize successful employment outcomes for the transition age consumers served. Training is customized to meet geographic and special needs of individual cooperative programs, as well as those of regional cooperative partnerships in multiple counties.

Modules offered:

- Building Consumer Capacity for Employment.
- Job Development, Placement, and Retention.
- Consumer Choices for Job Development, Placement, and Retention.
- Employment Success & Illness Management: The Impact of Substance Abuse, Medications, and Psychiatric Disability.
- Benefits Planning.

Contact: Loran Vetter lvetter@dor.ca.gov

Connecticut

The **Connecticut** VR agency and the State Department of Education share in the salary for an education consultant to assist in the coordination of transition services. The State VR agency is pursuing several initiatives around transition. First, the State VR agency has embedded six transition counselors in the inner city schools to better serve minority youth and connect more strongly with school to work initiatives for all youth of school age with disabilities. In addition, the State VR agency has linked with the state “Katie Beckett Waiver,” a home and community based service waiver under the Medicaid program, for children who otherwise would be living in institutions as well as the Connecticut Medical Home Program (which provides coordination of care to medically fragile children). The purpose of this collaboration is to identify and serve more youth who are significantly physically disabled (identified by schools as “Section 504” [of the Rehabilitation Act] but not special education students).

The State VR agency has also developed a statewide initiative to begin working with youth, as young as 14, who have multiple disabilities, and in need of significant interventions and collaboration in order to prepare for transition to work or post-secondary training. It is the State VR agency’s hope that this will help retention of transitioning youth to their system and prevent some youth from accessing benefits prior to graduation.

Further, the State VR agency has instituted a Transition Committee comprised of State VR agency embedded counselors, representatives from liaison counselors (all counselors have relationships with schools), supervisors, regional directors, and consultants for Transition from BRS, Special Education and Assistive Technology. This committee has developed measurable goals and objectives for transitioning youth; employment plans standards and will continue to take the lead in advising administration issues.

In addition, the State VR agency has developed an Autism Spectrum Disorder Committee to work with consumers, their family members, the VR counselor and others who are asked to assist in discussing and strategizing methods to assist these young adults in accessing and retaining employment. The State VR agency pays for a neuropsychologist to be part of the committee with a VR consultant, 1 regional VR director, a parent advocate, autism spectrum disorder consultant from DMR, and a VR counselor.

Through the National Governor’s Association Policy Academy Connecticut received a Technical Assistance Grant to conduct an analysis of resources available to youth with disabilities who are transitioning into employment or post-secondary school. The State VR Director took the lead as chairperson to coordinate 11 state agencies that work with young adults from 14-30 years of age and develop a usable document to map the resources that are available. The State VR agency developed an MOU with these agencies and hired a consulting firm to do *resource mapping*. This tool will now be used to help determine where transition services are provided; the type of services provided, and the overlap and gaps in service provision. For more information contact: Brenda L. Moore @ 860-424-4848 brenda.moore@ct.gov or Amy Porter @ 860-424-4864 amy.porter@ct.gov.

Delaware

The **Delaware** VR program has a new partnership with the Community College System which provides additional academic supports for students who did not meet admission standards for entry into degree or certificate programs. The program provides individualized academic support and accommodations on campus, to develop academic skills for students and enables them to complete remedial course in the community college environment, and then successfully matriculate into degree or certificate programs. The program brings the college and community based educational resources together in a classroom setting. These transition students in the past were referred to community based facilities or entry level employment. The program is in its first year, and to date, all students participating are successfully completing their academic coursework. These students are entering certificate or degree programs thus raising their potential for obtaining careers and higher wages. Contact: Edwin.Tos@state.de.us. 302-761-8275

Iowa

Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services administers Improving Transition Outcomes, a grant funded project specific to youth with disabilities ages 14-24 with the goal of creating a community-wide system of inclusion, support, and engagement for youth as they transition into their adult roles. Products include innovative community demonstrations that are sustaining and replicating; MyTransitionIowa.org, a statewide website specifically for youth and family members; and an on-line data collection system categorized by the Guideposts for Success. Outcomes include significantly increased referrals to VR, youth-directed vocational exploration resulting in pursuit of employment or post-secondary education, and transition focused community collaboration teams. For more information contact Connie Ehlers (Connie.Ehlers@iowa.gov; (515) 281-0275).

New Mexico

The **New Mexico** VR Agency is the recipient of a RSA funded project, the Mentoring Diverse Abilities Program, which is working with transition age youth, chiefly juniors and seniors in High School. The program targets four school districts in New Mexico; Bernalillo High School, Gadsden School District in Anthony,, the Las Vegas School District, and the Tohajiilee Community School, a small federally funded Navajo High School west of Albuquerque. Beginning in October 2004 the program established partnerships with each school to provide Mentoring services and paid work experiences for youth with disabilities. Intergenerational mentoring services are contracted through the Aging and Long-Term Services' Gold Mentor Program. NMDVR employees provide mentoring at the other sites. Two Youth Leadership Forums offered during the summer. The students spend 4 to 10 days living on campus to simulate the full college experience of living away from home. This past summer 12 students completed the Youth Leadership Forum through the Institute of American Indian Arts (IAIA) in Santa Fe, NM and the Highland University Program in Las Vegas New Mexico. For more information, contact Mary Modrow (email: Mary.Modrow@nm.us).

Ohio

The Ohio VR agency has adopted several strategies to expand and improve on the provision of transition services for youth with disabilities in the state, including interagency agreements, mentoring projects, transition weekends, user-friendly materials, and joint training.

Interagency Agreements with the Ohio Department of Education- Office for Exceptional Children-provide for coordination and planning in the delivery of transition services for mutually-eligible students and funding for joint transition activities such as career awareness weekends. Contacts: Darlene Britford, darlene.britford@rsc.state.oh.us. Bill Baker william.baker@rsc.state.oh.us

Interagency Agreement with the Ohio Board of Regents- focuses on the provision of auxiliary aids and services to students receiving services from college or university's disability services office. Contacts: Michael Kinney, michael.kinney@rsc.state.oh.us

E-Mentoring Project- in partnership with the Nisonger Center, The Ohio State University, an electronic mentoring model utilizes a self-determined approach to transition planning and related academic proficiencies, leading to employment and/or post-secondary education. Contact: Michael Kinney, michael.kinney@rsc.state.oh.us

Transition Weekends- partially-funded through the Interagency Agreement with the Ohio Department of Education, these programs for high school students focus on the areas of: independent living, career development, and the transition to employment and/or post-secondary education. Contacts: Deaf and Hard-of Hearing- Grace Grabler, grace.grabler@rsc.state.oh.us Visually Impaired- Sharon Schmidt, sharon.schmidt@rsc.state.oh.us. Ohio Youth Leadership Forum- Pamela Schneider, pamela.schneider@rsc.state.oh.us. Mental Retardation and DD – Leslie Alloway, leslie.alloway@rsc.state.oh.us

Transition Guidelines and Best Practices, Second Edition- a publication for students, families, advocates, and professionals that provides an outline of the transition process. A collaborative effort between ORSC, Education, Mental Health, independent professionals, consumers, parents, and advocates Contacts: Darlene Britford- darlene.britford@rsc.state.oh.us. Bill Baker- william.baker@rsc.state.oh.us

Joint Training Activities with local Special Education Regional Resource Centers- training at the regional level on transition issues and services for VR and education professionals; parents/consumers and other agency staff focused on transition services to youth with disabilities Contacts: Darlene Britford, darlene.britford@rsc.state.oh.us. Bill Baker, william.baker@rsc.state.oh.us

Biennial Topical Conference (1994 – 2007) A Quality Future for People with Disabilities: Statewide Career, Vocational, Transition and Employment Conference for VR professionals, educators, parents and students with disabilities (over 500 attendees). It is cosponsored by Kent State University, Rehabilitation Services Commission, Ohio Department of Education, Ohio Department of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Ohio Department of Youth Services, Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities, Ohio Department of Mental Health and other state associations and professional organizations for

youth with disabilities. The conference is schedule for May 2-3, 2007 in Columbus, Ohio. Contacts: Darlene Britford, darlene.britford@rsc.state.oh.us. Tami Thornburg, tami.thornburg@rsc.state.oh.us

South Carolina

The **South Carolina** Vocational Rehabilitation Department sees working with transition aged youth as a priority and as such has focused time and resources to improve these services. The State VR agency has an active Memoranda of Understanding with each of the state's 85 school districts. Every high school in the state has an assigned Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor whose responsibility is to identify and recruit transition-age youth for services. The State VR agency has added a new role - that of the Transition Employment Coach in most areas statewide to focus on providing supported employment services to transition students who are eligible for those services.

In four school districts, an additional agreement is in place which provides funding to the school district for a Transition Employability Specialist (TES) whose role is to assist in the identification, referral and service provision of students served in TMD, EMD and self-contained classrooms. The TES is an employee of the school district but works on behalf of SCVRD. For more information, contact Linda Lieser (email: LLieser@SCVRD.state.sc.us or telephone (803) 896-6571).

SCVRD is also implementing the High School High Tech program (HS/HT), a program designed to promote technology-based careers and education for youth with disabilities. HS/HT is a nationally recognized program that has been supported by the US Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. In South Carolina, the HS/HT program is supported through a work agreement with our state Workforce Investment Board. For more information contact Linda Lieser (email: LLieser@SCVRD.state.sc.us or telephone (803) 896-6571).

Vermont

In FY 2000, the Vermont General Assembly appropriated funds to the **Vermont** VR Agency to develop the School to Career Transition Project. The project aims to improve employment and postsecondary education outcomes for participating youth (both in and out of school) between the ages of 14 and 23, with most VR funded services occurring approximately 1-2 years prior to the student's exist from school.

The project is staffed by full-time specialty VR counselors who have dedicated caseloads of transition-age youth. Each VR Transition Counselor is assigned to one or more schools within the VR district where he or she is based. A Senior VR Transition Counselor coordinates the Project on a statewide basis. All current positions are sustained with full funding from VR. Currently there are 15 Transition Counselors and the service is available statewide.

The team of counselors has created a guide to best practices entitled *Nothing But the Best* which is used as a training tool for new counselors as well as a coordination tool for all.

VR Transition Counselors also convene local Core Transition Teams. The function of Core Transition Teams is to increase capacity at the local level to develop, provide, and manage

an effective transition process for students. These teams involve special education and transition/adult services staff who meet on a regular basis to assess both individual student needs and systems improvement.

In 2003, Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation was the recipient of a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy for the purpose of improving transition outcomes for Vermont youth with disabilities. The Career Start Initiative activities have included statewide resource mapping, multi-year demonstration projects, one-year pilot projects, review of past studies and reports and coordination and collaboration, culminating in a "white paper" entitled *Successfully Transitioning Vermont's Youth with Disabilities from High School to Employment, Further Education and Independent Living*. This report articulates the nature and scope of the challenges facing Vermont youth with disabilities as they transition from high school to adulthood and suggests strategies that will address these challenges.

A standing Inter-Agency Task Force on Youth with Disabilities, a Youth and Family Advisory Council and a VR central office School Transition Project Director all ensure that these activities are coordinated with other transition initiatives.

For more information about Vermont's initiatives, contact Renee Kievit-Kylar at renee.kievit-kylar@dail.state.vt.us

Wisconsin

The **Wisconsin** Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, assigns a transition counselor to every high school in the state. Transition services begin, by Wisconsin law, at age 14. In addition, Wisconsin has 14 vocational rehabilitation counselors who specialize solely in H.S. transition caseloads. Wisconsin DVR has developed an interagency MOU which was drafted in collaboration with the State Rehabilitation Council and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in April 2004. The MOU is being updated for 2007. The DVR/DPI MOU not only complies with federal legal mandates under the Rehabilitation Act of 1998 and IDEA, but serves as a user-friendly piece aimed at providing practical information and guidance regarding transition services to:

- school district special and regular education teachers, nurses, psychologist and guidance counselors,
- vocational rehabilitation counselors, and
- students and their parents.

The MOU clarifies in simple to understand terms the "common customer" service roles and responsibilities of school districts, DVR and the parents and students by providing brief explanations of "What to expect from the School and DVR" accompanied by a statement of responsibility for the Student/Parents. A "Commonly Asked Questions and Answers" section geared to students and parents is included in the MOU. School personnel, DVR staff, and parents of HS transition services were co-trained on the MOU and its implications for transition service delivery and outcomes. The MOU can be found at:

http://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/pdf_files/dpi_interagency_agreement_2004.pdf

SSA-FUNDED YOUTH TRANSITION DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS

In September 2003, the Social Security Administration (SSA) awarded cooperative agreements in six states—California, Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, Mississippi, and New York—to develop service delivery systems to help youth ages 14-25 who receive either SSI or SSDI benefits, or are at risk of becoming beneficiaries. According to SSA, the goal of this project is to study the impact of waivers to SSI program rules and enhanced coordination of services for youth on their ability to start work or to increase earnings and achieve self-sufficiency. These projects worked collaboratively with many partners, including educational institutions, labor, VR agencies, and other organizations, to build sustainable improvements in the delivery of transition services and supports for youth. These projects demonstrated how communities can integrate services and resources to support the successful transition of youth with disabilities from high school to post-secondary education or employment with a goal of maximizing economic self-sufficiency.

Two of these projects were awarded to State VR agencies—**California** and **Mississippi**. The *Bridges to Youth Self Sufficiency Project* (Bridges) is administered by the California Department of Rehabilitation (DOR) as a Research and Demonstration project. DOR was awarded a five-year demonstration project funded by a grant from the Social Security Administration. The Bridges Project has been implemented in five demonstration sites. The premise of the project is to build upon the existing DOR /education infrastructure of employment services. Benefits counseling and intensive service coordination are the primary services provided by this project. Other specific program components are benefits training and education, outreach to specialized populations, early intervention (as early as 14 years old), local partnering, youth incentives, local and state oversight bodies, and a data driven research study.

Each site serves a minimum of 50 SSI/SSDI eligible or at risk youth at any given time.

- Over the five-year period of the grant a minimum of 625 youth will be served
- Of the 369 current participants (in and out of school), 181 are employed either full of part time

Web site: www.allenshea.com/bridges.html; Contact: Loran Vetter lvetter@dor.ca.gov

In 2003, SSA awarded to the **Mississippi** Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) one of the seven SSA funded Youth Transition Demonstration (YTD) Projects. MDRS' Mississippi Model Youth Transition Innovation (MYTI) Project was funded as a demonstration project, not a systems change project, although it has evolved in that direction. Key components of MYTI include serving youth between the ages of 10 and 25 with the most significant disabilities using a customized employment process, SSA waivers of federal regulations, and interagency collaboration. As a result of these partnerships with the Mississippi Department of Education, the Department of Labor's One-Stop Center, and MDRS' Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, these agencies are viewing services in a different light and thereby making changes that will ultimately improve employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

The Mississippi Model Youth Transition Innovation Project addresses the following issues: (a) the need for development of a model transition process that will facilitate optimal passage from school to work; (b) the elimination of barriers when feasible to effect transition at the local, state, and federal levels through interagency collaboration and elimination of policies, procedures, regulations, and statutory requirements that impede progress; and, (c) the development of natural and new/innovative supports at all levels as needed.

The interventions of the MYTI Project focus on individual person-centered employment planning, including the use of individual student accounts to empower students and families. Student accounts emphasize the shared role of other government and personal resources to contribute to participant employment outcomes, including the development/encouragement of Incentive Saving Accounts or Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) for asset building as funded through an Assets for Independence grant. Other interventions include benefits planning with students and families, discovery of critical employment related information on students, development of vocational profiles, student budgets, and employment plans. Many of these interventions are the foundation of Customized Employment, such as discovery and planning which direct customized work experiences, career paths for school curriculum, and jobs in the community. The customization of jobs may lead into self-employment for youth seeking those types of opportunities.

A Local Management Team representing all local parties addresses issues that impede the ability to accomplish project objectives and facilitates barrier removal or suitable support development as needed. A State Level Management Team with representatives from all required partners and many other agencies, including several consumer groups and advocacy agencies, further addresses identified barriers and sets policy.

Through the technical assistance provided to YTD projects, MYTI staff persons were afforded networking opportunities with other YTD states in the form of annual training conferences and on site visits. After an on-site visit to California, partners in MYTI are considering changes such as off-campus educational services, new transition counselor's role, and increased jointly funded transition positions. Several products were developed for MYTI which the Department of Education is reviewing for possible inclusion in Special Education guidance of services.

At least for the school districts participating in MYTI, changes in the way transition services are provided to youth with disabilities will be implemented because of the impact of the MYTI project. One school participating in MYTI is a self-contained school program for students with significant developmental disabilities and other significant disabilities. Although expectations of employment for students in this school are low, employment was customized for three of their students who have now sustained employment for better than two years through the use of MYTI interventions. While both labor and time intensive, MYTI is making positive changes in the lives of MYTI participants and, hopefully, in the agencies involved in the project. A MYTI (*mighty*) bright future is in the making.