

Adult Career and Continuing Education Services -Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR) State Plan 2015 Public Comments

Adult Career and Continuing Education Services – Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR), in conjunction with the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), jointly developed the Amendment to the State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation Services and Supported Employment Services Program FFY 2015. ACCES-VR consulted with the SRC throughout the year on critical aspects of the State Plan development process, including the joint planning of the State Plan public meetings.

As part of the State Plan development, ACCES-VR solicited public comments from February 5, 2014 through March 7, 2014 regarding the State Plan amendments. Three public meetings were held, one each in the capital district, Manhattan and Poughkeepsie, and a statewide video-conference was broadcast to the Bronx, Buffalo, Hauppauge, Malone and Syracuse ACCES-VR district offices. The public meetings were designed to give participants opportunities to provide comment on ACCES-VR's State Plan, policies, future direction and how the VR Program could better assist individuals to obtain and maintain quality employment.

During the public meetings, ACCES-VR conducted a brief presentation on the State Plan and provided data and information related to the key questions. The focus of the meetings was to identify how to increase employment outcomes for individuals receiving VR services and how to promote greater engagement of individuals with disabilities in completing ACCES-VR services leading to employment. ACCES-VR staff facilitated the discussion and public participants were able to offer comments or recommendations on any part of the State Plan and its process, and to provide testimony and make specific statements. The public was also able to share written comments electronically and by mail.

Attendance at the public meetings was low this year, most likely due to severe weather interrupting travel. Six SRC representatives and nineteen consumers/advocates participated in the public meetings either in person or via video-conference. ACCES-VR staff included the Assistant Commissioner, who participated in the video-conference and attended the meeting in Manhattan; the Coordinator of District Office Administration, who participated in the video-conference; and the Coordinator of Service Delivery, who attended the Capital District public meeting.

The following themes emerged from the meetings, as well as from other verbal and written information obtained from participants:

- Applying for Services: Have a more user friendly application process and decrease wait time for consumer orientation and counselor meetings.
- Outreach: Increase both outreach services to underserved and unserved populations such as deaf and veterans, and the sharing of success stories.
- VR Counselors: Inform their consumers of the public state plan meetings; consistently inform consumers of their Due Process Rights throughout the VR process and at critical junctures in the process; and have increased cultural sensitivity.
- Transition: Improve transition coordination. It is helpful to have VR counselors in the schools. Counselors should have earlier connections with youth and keep students engaged in the VR relationship. Youth need to see people with disabilities in leadership roles for role models. Schools should focus on occupational studies earlier in their students' education and develop stronger programs to prepare the student to enter work.
- Partnerships: Increase/improve collaborations with state agency partners with local implementation. Local partnerships build awareness. Employment consortiums can help establish knowledge.
- Employers: Increase part-time employment opportunities; integrate workers with disabilities with workers without disabilities; provide mentoring programs, possibly with an individual who has a disability.
- Services: Increase benefits advisement, increase work try-outs and on-the-job training, enhance or add more job clubs, provide more pre-employment skills training.
- Training: Explore how targeted skill training might supplement/replace traditional academic training to prepare students for employment. Help consumers obtain GED, increase training opportunities for those who can't continue to work in their field. Review proprietary school training programs for costs, quality and placement outcomes.
- Supported Employment: Promote job coaching and increase coaching for individuals with mental illness and traumatic brain injuries; provide soft skills training.
- Core Rehabilitation Services (CRS): Providers concerned that their payments will be reduced by approximately 25 percent with the new CRS contracts as individuals with most significant disabilities may not reach milestones that make available additional funds to providers. They expressed concern that a job placement goal within six months is not realistic, given that the average unemployed person takes 35 weeks to obtain a new job, and those with little

or no employment history will be more challenged to obtain employment. Providers find that matching an employer with the employee is key to long-term retention, and want funding for making this match (discovery) expanded to all supported employment recipients. Vendors want to see the vendor report card so they can compare their outcomes to other vendors and improve their services.

- Self-employment: Increase the involvement of individuals with disabilities with the local Regional Economic Development Councils; create a separate certification for disability owned businesses similar to minority women businesses.
- Transportation: Need more available transportation to improve access to employment.
- Other: Develop an initiative similar to the National Governor's Association's "Better Bottom Line" and promote an "Employment First Policy". Make the State a model employer of persons with disabilities. Expand opportunities for people with disabilities to be employed in the State and at State colleges. Promote trial work, on-the-job training and education experiences through internships and job shadowing with State agencies.

ACCES-VR will consider these comments to improve employment services and increase employment outcomes. It has already addressed some of these concerns through its strategic planning initiative and the development of a statewide transition unit to work with youth. The recommendations were reviewed, shared with leadership and the SRC for consideration, and are posted on the ACCES-VR website.