

ANNUAL TOWN HALL MEETINGS AND PUBLIC FORUM

Annually, the Georgia Department of Labor (GDOL)/Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program conducts town hall meetings and public forums to address current trends and concerns, as well as changing demographics and legislation that impact the lives of people with disabilities. These events provide an opportunity for all public stakeholders -- interested citizens, consumers, employers, advocates, community partners -- to ask questions and engage in dialogue about VR services.

Topics of discussion during the 2004 public meetings included Reauthorizations of the Rehabilitation Act and Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the 1999 Olmstead Decision, special education and transition, Ticket to Work, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Assistive Work Technology, VR Counselor Vacancies, and partnerships with the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and the other four programs of Rehabilitation Services. Results of the 2002 National Longitudinal Study of Vocational Rehabilitation Programs were also discussed.

The 2004 Regional Town Hall Meetings were well attended by 297 constituents. In addition to VR staff, consumers, and parents, attendees included service providers, employers, CRP Directors/Managers, representatives from local Chambers of Commerce, Housing Authorities, Georgia Council of the Blind, Mayor's Committees, Community Service Boards, Goodwill Industries, Easter Seals, public libraries, centers for independent living, and special education directors and teachers from local school systems. Guests were given the opportunity to share their perspective on how VR can serve consumers and partners more effectively.

Two employers that have employed VR consumers attended the Region Eight (Columbus) town hall meeting. They provided testimony regarding their satisfaction with VR services and the consumers they have hired. Each employer also brought a manager from a business that had not used VR services before.

During the public meeting broadcast, each regional program called in to report on the highlights of the town hall meetings. Common topics of discussion, questions, and comments are included below.

Transition from School to Work

- Region Two has a large percentage of School Transition caseloads and works very closely with school systems to provide effective transition services. The importance of school transition and early interventions that lead to improved vocational outcomes was discussed.
- Region Twelve attendees were interested in VR policies related to approving college training for VR consumers, whether VR would consider exceptions to college training fees based upon the quality of accommodations at one school vs. another, specifically with respect to availability of interpreting services, and how VR would handle the lack of availability of interpreters at a school.

- A Special Education Coordinator (in Region One) bragged on VR and the services VR provides in her county school system. The county has had a DOE/VR counselor since the inception of the VR/DOE collaborative agreement and is one of the most vocal supporters of the collaborative. She did express a concern that VR's strong emphasis on employment may prevent severely disabled students from receiving needed vocational rehabilitation services. She feels this employment emphasis coupled with no longer allowing extended employment as a successful closure may lead VR counselors to screen out referrals from transition programs. The Special Education Coordinator was invited to the Region One Transition Conference (which is scheduled for April 1st) to express her concerns.
- Region Seven discussed the High School/High Tech (HS/HT) program. Region Seven HS/HT coordinators, the Richmond County School Systems, the Society of Human Resource Management, Walton Options, and local employers have initiated a program that connects high schools with employers in various settings, including job-shadowing opportunities. Sixteen high school students participate in the Region Seven HS/HT program. The Savannah River Plant, Medical College of Georgia, and Fort Gordon Military Base will provide internship opportunities for these students. Region Seven will also sponsor a Resource Fair at the University of Augusta athletic complex to encourage more parents to become involved with students as school-parental mentors. Dr. Lark, Superintendent of Richmond County Schools, fully supports the HS/HT program.

Community Collaboration

- VR needs to establish closer relationships with partner agencies to better utilize scarce resources. Partners in attendance highlighted potential shared resources including group intake and job clubs. The Hall County library offers Internet job search classes, has equipment for visually impaired consumers, and a satellite system for viewing educational telecasts.
- Region Six acknowledged the partnership with the Middle Georgia Consortium program where clients are given the opportunity to receive work adjustment training on the job. "It is an excellent program for our clients to learn good work habits in the real work world of getting to work on time and all aspects of the job market. The biggest task we have in getting an employer to agree to hire someone is the workers' comp issue and this program has been a real asset because it provides the workers' comp insurance and that has helped our clients overcome this obstacle."

Budget and Finance

- Formula for federal and state matching funds for public vocational rehabilitation agencies.
- Federal and state budget cuts and efforts to avoid interruption of VR services. Means of managing resources without denying client services. Cost saving suggestions for textbook purchases. Concern about the possibility of prosthetic and orthotics services being cut because of state budget cuts.

- A VR contract service provider suggested VR should keep providers better informed of funding issues. Funding reductions have decreased the provider agency's ability to provide needed services in the community.
- A vendor from Region Three expressed his concern with the amount of time it takes for invoices to be paid. Stating, "If I get paid in sixty days from VR, I think that's good. But in the business community that is poor business." When will the process for paying vendors be reviewed and improved?

Staff Development/CSPD

- Certification of distance learning programs.
- Region Twelve is making substantial progress towards having 100% of its Counselors obtain Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) credentials.
- Region Seven has seven staff enrolled in Master's in Rehabilitation Counseling programs. Two at Thomas University, four at Auburn University, and one at the University of Kentucky. Once completed, these staff will seek CRC credentials.
- Region Eleven currently has 10 staff members who hold a CRC. Six counselors are working to obtain a Master's in Rehabilitation Counseling and fulfill requirements to sit for the CRC, 3 staff members who are not counselors are working on advanced degrees and one Account Representative has been accepted into the University of Kentucky Master's in Rehabilitation Counseling program

Public Relations/Outreach

- Need for effective marketing strategies to promote public awareness of VR services.
- VR needs to do more PR in small communities with small businesses. VR is a well-kept secret, and should seek to make regular presentations to local civic clubs and Chambers of Commerce.
- Region Eight attendees discussed strategies for outreach to underserved populations.

Assistive Work Technology (AWT)

- Information provided regarding AWT, including residential, school, vehicle, workplace modifications, AWT equipment and funding, tax credits and deductions for AWT purchases.
- A former and returning VR consumer indicated the need for more technology training for persons with severe visual impairments. Existing technology is useless without adequate training. The client also shared favorable remarks about the vocational rehabilitation services he received.

Provider Services

- Region Eleven service providers had questions and learned that the Provider Outsourcing Manual is being revised.

- Contract/Provider Review Procedures explained.

VR Counselor Vacancies

- How are VR counselor vacancies affecting VR services on a statewide basis?
- How can services remain uninterrupted with the high vacancy rate of counselor positions?
- Would retired counselors from public school systems be qualified to fill vacant VR Counselor positions?

Provision of VR Services

- Region Ten responded to basic questions regarding how people find out about VR services, how the overall service delivery system works, how the work teams and individuals on the teams function, and how the rehabilitation process works - specifically referral, application, determining eligibility, and job placement.
- Provision of services within parameters of policy for referrals, application for services, eligibility determination, and job placement.
- How VR can help consumers retain their job when their career is being jeopardized by their progressive disability.
- Specialty services for blind and visually impaired consumers, i.e. technology needs and general mobility training even before the job.
- Region Three responded to questions about the TANF program and the difference between the provision of services to TANF recipients and regular VR clients.
- Concerns regarding the limitations placed on training and job possibilities due to requirement of an 8th grade reading level.
- Clarification regarding the grant received by Cobb County the provide “customized job matches” for persons with disabilities.
- The desire was expressed to have someone within VR who is specifically qualified to work with persons who are deaf-blind.
- There is a training scholarship program for rehabilitation teachers and for blind orientation mobility being offered to VR consumers and staff, and Independent Living staff would like to be included as well.

Other Topics of Discussion

- The VR and SRC partnership.
- Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act and the Workforce Investment Act.
- Region Nine attendees discussed Supported Employment, Community Work Adjustment, Transition, Employer Satisfaction, and Transportation.
- Social Security Reimbursement.

- VR consumer satisfaction including providers.
- Issues with the Business Enterprise Program.
- Services available through Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center.
- Need for adequate office space.
- Ticket to Work, Benefits Planning, Assistance & Outreach Program, and Employment Networks.
- Future of sheltered employment, and the inability to use sheltered employment as a successful employment outcome.
- Statistics on the average return of employment taxes from each successfully employed VR consumer.
- Statistics on the economic impact persons with disabilities in the workforce can make.
- Regions Four and Five reviewed the results of the RSA Longitudinal Study of VR services and how the results relate to the VR Strategic Agenda – 2005 & Beyond. Suggestions were made to include the survey results on the VR website, and to compare the results regarding people with disabilities to statistics of persons employed in the general public. A local Chamber of Commerce official suggested adding the survey results to their website to show employers favorable results of hiring people with disabilities.
- Proposed reauthorization of TANF with emphasis on increased significance of work participation.
- Closure status for home oriented work skills. Constituents suggested that there should be a separate closure for homemakers, and questioned the possibility of subcontracting homemaker referrals.

Consumer Comments

“Thank you VR for giving me my life back! On September 3, 1988, my left leg was amputated below the knee as a result of a motor vehicle accident. I came to vocational rehabilitation for assistance with replacing my seven-year old prosthesis that was in disrepair. It was in such poor condition that I developed blisters and risked damaging my residual limb if I continued to wear it. Not only did VR assist me with getting a new prosthesis, VR assisted me with attending ETI Career Institute where I received a certificate in Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC). I now work full-time for Aames Plumbing as a HVAC Technician making \$22.00 per hour, and supervise three technicians. VR’s intervention has made a difference in my life. Thanks to VR, nothing can hold me back!!”

VR Consumer (Region 3) – Atlanta, GA.

“Words cannot express the gratitude in my heart for all of your hard work and diligence in helping my son getting a job! I know you will say you were just doing your job, but I feel you went above and beyond your job. Thank you for seeing beyond my son’s problems and seeing

his potential. I'm sure that this will be a turning point for him. I feel your encouragement will keep him on the job.”

Parent of VR Consumer (Region 6) – Milledgeville, GA.

“I don't know how to thank you enough for seeing me AND helping me!!! With my new hearing aids it feels like a wall no longer exists between the person I'm talking to and me. This is really going to make a difference at work!!! Words cannot express how thankful I am, but maybe sounds can – like the ones blowing with the wind!! *VR Consumer (Region 8) – Columbus, GA.*

“This is a note of appreciation to staff in the VR Reidsville office for assisting me in obtaining employment with the Pineland Community Service Board. I have addiction and mental health issues. Because of the highly professional and caring support and assistance of the staff, I am able to support my wife and myself with a little more dignity and confidence. For that, I will always be grateful. I wish you all the greatest success and I know that your future clients will benefit as greatly as I.”

VR Consumer (Region 9) – Reidsville, GA.

“I am a 43 year old male living life with a disability. I have used VR services in the past and always had great results. With VR's help, I attained my Bachelor's of Art degree in Psychology from Albany State University and now own a van that I drive from my wheelchair. VR has given me an opportunity that I never could have received on my own and has made a dramatic change in my life. I am now fully employed and working as a case manager with other individuals with disabilities and I live in my own apartment. All because of the help offered to me by VR. VR has made a drastic change in me and I am grateful for the help.”

VR Consumer (Region 10) – Albany, GA.

Employer Comments

“I just wanted to let you know how much the associates and residents at Chaplinwood Nursing Home enjoyed working with you and the summer job participants. It was a good experience for everyone. Our associates always learn and improve when they are training others, and our supervisors always appreciate additional help. All in all, this was a “win-win” for everyone. Without a doubt, your close supervision and attendance are primary reasons for the success of this program.”

Chaplinwood Nursing Home – Milledgeville, GA.

“The VR Program, which has produced several outstanding workers, has blessed us with a dedicated, loyal and hard-working employee. This employee has brought both experience and maturity to a young retail staff. You only have to listen to this young man's life story for a few moments to know how this wonderful program has changed his life. His words and actions have inspired all of us to be thankful for every day of our lives. He is a man of faith, honor, and courage. He has not allowed his disability to slow him down. He continues to perform his duties in an exceptional manner and with a sense of pride. This is a credit to your preparation workshops for new hires being reconnected to the workforce. This young man's confidence and self-assurance were nurtured by your program.”

Hobby Lobby – Albany, GA.

Collaborative Partners Comments

“It is my pleasure to be the Related Vocational Instruction (RVI) Coordinator at Bleckley County High School. Through this position, I am privileged to work with exceptional VR staff who play a vital role in the lives of our special needs students. Their professionalism and compassion set them apart from their peers. It is through VR that many of our students first meet success in the world of work. VR staff ensures that our students have the skills and resources necessary to succeed in life. They have built a wonderful relationship with our system and we hope to continue working together to provide the special needs students of our area with all opportunities available to them once they leave our care.” *Bleckley County High School – Cochran, GA.*

“A special thank you for the support that VR gives our Related Vocational Instruction (RVI) students at Toombs County High School. With your help, we achieved ‘Outstanding School Recognition’ by the State Board of Education. Our school system increased percentage of exceptional students with post-graduation plans. With your teamwork this honor became a reality.” *Toombs County High School – Lyons, GA.*

“As both a contractor with VR in multiple service areas, an employer of many VR clients, and as a related entity also defined in the Rehabilitation Act, Walton Options for Independent Living values the relationship with VR and the opportunity to enhance that relationship in the last year. Our quarterly meetings not only enhanced our ability to communicate on contractual issues, but also have allowed us to sit as a group and brainstorm ideas to develop new areas of partnership and co-participate in programs in our community such as High School/High Tech, ADA Celebrations, and Ticket to Work consumer forums. We want to continue to encourage VR to utilize the expertise of Centers for Independent Living across the State and invest in those partnerships across all regions.” *Walton Options for Independent Living - Augusta, GA.*

“I would like to thank you for providing Southeast Georgia Rehabilitation (SGR), Inc., with the opportunity to be of service to VR during the past years. Since 1990, SGR has provided services to over fifteen counties in South Georgia. You have given us the chance to provide vocational evaluation, job readiness classes and work adjustment training to hundreds of individuals with disabilities. Our partnership has helped improve the quality of life for our customers by preparing them to be contributing members of society as they enter the workforce. Again, thank you for your confidence in our ability to serve you. We welcome the opportunity to assist you in your business and look forward to a continuing relationship.” *SGR, Inc., - Valdosta, GA.*

“As related entities both defined in the Rehabilitation Act, as amended, the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and Centers for Independent Living (CILs) value our relationship with VR and desire to enhance mutual opportunities to work collaboratively in providing the service needs of people with disabilities. In review of such, SILC and CILs would like to suggest some changes within the outsourcing manual that may provide opportunities for career goals and skill development of many consumers that enter the service arena first via CILs:

6003.00 Employment Skills Training

6003.01 Change the sentence, “Examples of areas, but not limited to, include forklift/warehouse, commercial cleaning, customer service, office

technology, and word processing/data entry.” To read, “Examples of areas, but not limited to, include forklift/warehouse, commercial/residential cleaning, customer service, domestic service, office technology, and word processing/data entry.

6004.0 Home Oriented Work Skills Training

6004.01 Change the sentence, “Home Oriented Work Skills Training is a service provided when homemaking is the vocational objective, and for those who need instruction in self-care techniques in order to pursue other vocational goals.” To read, “Home Oriented Work Skills Training is a service provided when homemaking is the vocational objective, and for those who need instruction in living skills in order to pursue other vocational goals.”

6004.03 Add one more qualifying factor, “C. Person with a disability that can demonstrate skills to be taught through real life experience and example.”

CILs would also support some format for closures that would alleviate the punitive aspects on measurements of performance outcomes for those who elect to pursue services through the Home Oriented Work Skills. Understanding that the closure status affects these performance outcomes, and those consumers electing this service impact those percentages, it seems necessary to establish a code that would be exclusive to this category so as not to reflect negatively on the positive impact and need for this service, while also not producing ratios that create a false impression of unsuccessful outcomes (low incidence) of those closures occurring in competitive work placement. *Submitted by Centers for Independent Living: Disability Connections, Region 6- Macon, GA and Walton Options for Independent Living, Region Seven - Augusta, GA. and the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia, Inc., Region Three.*