

# Annual Town Hall Meetings and Public Forum

The 2005 Regional Town Hall Meetings were attended by 374 constituents. In addition to VR staff, consumers, and parents, attendees included State Rehabilitation Council members, service providers, employers, Community Rehabilitation Program Directors/Managers, representatives from centers for independent living, mental health programs/facilities, education professionals of local school systems, local Department of Family and Children Services, Department of Labor Career Centers, Georgia Learning Resource Centers, Psychoeducational Learning Centers, local colleges and technical schools, Easter Seals, and Department of Corrections Transition Centers.

The town hall meetings opened with an overview of the VR Program Strategic Agenda, eligibility criteria for service; regional and unit initiatives, goals, and achievements; and staff/position roles and responsibilities in the delivery of client services. Guests were given the opportunity to share their perspective on how VR can serve consumers and partners more effectively. Consumers also shared stories of successful transition and employment outcomes. Employers that have employed VR consumers provided testimony regarding their satisfaction with VR services and the consumers they have hired. Collaborative partners shared information about their program services and role with VR.

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

## Performance

- *VR Strategic Agenda and Performance Rating:* The Georgia VR Program conducts an annual assessment that is carried out in accordance with evaluation standards and performance indicators established by the U.S. Department of Education/Rehabilitation Services Administration. Several regions discussed the federal standards and indicators that are used to:
  - Assess the effectiveness of services
  - Guide strategic planning activities
  - Identify areas for improvement
  - Support requests for funding, and
  - Compare Georgia VR's performance to other public VR programs nationwide.

Several regions discussed their regional performance and initiatives to meet and exceed the federal indicators.

- Several regions shared their production rates including status 26 successful closures. Some VR clients whose cases were closed status 26 – successfully rehabilitated - were present to share their story.

## Support Groups

- Two consumers with disabilities in Region 2 discussed the need for information on what is available in the community and their desire for a support group. The Access Center for

Independent Living sponsors a Spinal Cord/Brain Injury Support Group and talked about the difficulty in keeping support groups going.

- Region 12 (Savannah area) piloted a program called "Saving a Good Employee." The program helped caseload consumers maintain their job with the City of Savannah when their disability interfered with their ability to perform their normal duties.

### **Extended Employment Transition Services**

- Region 4 is currently working with the Griffin Community Workshop (Griffin) and New Ventures (LaGrange) to serve clients who have been in sheltered work environments.

### **Transition Services for Ex-Offenders**

- Region 4 (LaGrange Unit) and Region 10 (Albany Unit) are working with the Department of Corrections Transition Centers to assist ex-offenders to transition, upon release, from the prison system to society and the work force. Region 4 expects to serve approximately 150 ex-offenders through this collaborative.

### **Transition from School to Work**

- Regions discussed the provision of transition services to high school students with disabilities through the DOE/VR collaborative agreement.
- It was emphasized that after VR consumers who receive transition services complete their post-secondary training, they will continue to receive on-going supported employment services until the services are no longer needed.
- The purpose and effectiveness of Interagency Transition Councils was discussed.
- Department of Labor Career Center Manager in Columbus, Georgia presented an overview of services available at the center. The center will be having a seminar entitled "Education Rocks!" to be presented to high school counselors that promote transition services for high school students.
- Several guests expressed concern with VR transition services being limited to high school seniors with disabilities. It was recommended that high school juniors with disabilities be included in the service population.
- There was a suggestion to provide VR Counselors with a referral list of upcoming seniors for transition services prior to their senior year.
- A teacher from the Henry County School System (Region 3B) who advocates for students with orthopedic impairments expressed that vocational post-secondary options for kids with physical impairments need to be greater. She was also concerned with the decline of transition services after students graduate from high school.
- The High School/High Tech (HS/HT) Coordinator in Region 7 (Augusta) reported on the mentoring job shadowing opportunity that ten HS/HT students received at the Westinghouse

Savannah River Company. Each student was provided the opportunity to mentor in two departments, including engineering, procurement, legal, law enforcement, education outreach, human resources, design, ecology, and robotics. A special treat was having lunch with the Vice President of Westinghouse. Sixty local employers (members of the Society of Human Resources Management) are involved in the HS/HT program and provide ongoing job readiness classes. A total of 75-80 students are involved in the Augusta/Richmond county program.

### **Assistive Work Technology (AWT)**

- Information was provided regarding AWT, including residential, school, vehicle, workplace modifications, AWT equipment and software, tax credits and deductions for AWT purchases, and how AWT can save a client's job.
- AWT team representatives shared local changes in service areas to better serve people with disabilities. Providing coverage for multiple regions by AWT staff often delays the length of time it takes for VR consumers to be provided the AWT equipment needed for school and work.
- Shared consumer success stories illustrated how AWT solutions are often based on staff expertise and require minimum equipment purchases.

### **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)**

- VR Counselors in Region 8 gave an overview of services provided to referrals from the DFCS TANF program. The current fiscal year contract is to serve 85 TANF recipients within the 16 counties of VR Region 8, of which 54 will be served from the Columbus Units and 26 from the Americus Unit. Counselors explained the assessment and evaluation processes that identify eligible applicants, related employment barriers, and factors suggesting ability to perform work. It was also noted that VR is able to offer services to persons with Borderline IQ diagnoses.
- It was noted that DFCS caseworkers often need VR Counselor assistance to motivate TANF recipients to stick to their work plan and pursue successful employment.

### **Budget and Finance**

- President Bush is proposing to cut approximately 150 federal programs. Governor Purdue is proposing budget cuts to the Medicaid Waiver Program, which may force people with disabilities into nursing homes as opposed to being served in the community. Consumers and advocates are encouraged to contact their federal and state representatives to gain their support of people with disabilities. It is important that we remind our legislators that the VR Program pays for itself, through the successful employment of our consumers. For every one dollar that is spent on VR services, approximately \$12 is returned in federal and state income taxes through the successful employment of our consumers.

- Reduction in state funds also reduces the amount of federal funds that VR receives. With the increasing costs of medical and educational services, reduction in federal and state funds will also reduce the number of consumers that VR can serve.

### **Careers in Vocational Rehabilitation**

- Several college students enrolled in Master's of Rehabilitation Counseling programs expressed interest in pursuing careers in rehabilitation counseling with the GDOL/VR Program. However, they are concerned with the salary disparities among employment with state and federal government, and private industry. The student attendees were encouraged to consider employment with the GDOL/VR Program; however, comparable salaries with the federal government and private rehabilitation agencies are unlikely.
- GDOL/VR continues to recruit new counseling staff from institutions of higher education. Regular contact with colleges and universities, and participation in job fairs to discuss paid internships and career opportunities within the Georgia VR Program have been extremely beneficial. VR provides paid internship opportunities to students in a Master's in Rehabilitation Counseling program. Upon completion of the intern's degree and internship, if appropriate, the intern is offered the opportunity to apply for vacant positions with the VR Program.

### **Ticket to Work**

- Benefits Specialists of the Georgia Rehabilitation Outreach Program were in attendance at town hall meetings within their local areas. They provide information about the "Ticket to Work" Social Security program. This program is designed to give recipients of SSI/SSDI greater choices in receiving employment services. These services may allow SSI/SSDI recipients to earn enough money from working that they will no longer need Social Security cash benefits.
- Over 1,859 "tickets" have been assigned in Georgia. With 1,635 ticket assignments, Georgia VR retains the highest rate of ticket retention among eligible service providers. The remaining 18 Employment Networks received 224 ticket assignments.

### **Services for the Visually Impaired**

- VR services for the visually impaired were compared with veteran's assistance services for the visually impaired. Collaboration with Veterans Affairs was explored. It was explained that there are many services through the VA Program that VR might be able to utilize.
- Employment opportunities for visual impaired consumers at Air-Tran were shared.
- Region 7 discussed their regional coalition for the blind in Augusta.

## Other Topics of Discussion

- *Employer Services* – An employer questioned how VR educates employers about the benefits of hiring persons with disabilities. Rehabilitation Employment Specialists explained that VR provides employers with job analysis, a two-week trial work period, community work adjustment, tax credits, accessibility surveys, and disability awareness training.
- *Service Signs in Public Establishments* – "No Pets or No Dogs" policies in public establishments do not apply to service animals that provide assistance to blind and visually impaired consumers.

*Customized Employment and Job Carving* – VR provides customized employment and job carving. It is based on a match between the unique strengths, needs, and interests of the VR consumer with a disability, and the identified business needs of the employer. The job carving contains one or more, but not all, of the tasks from the original job description.

- *Work Adjustment Training* - Through collaborative efforts with a network of community rehabilitation programs and local businesses, VR consumers receive formal hands-on/work adjustment training within the context of "real" work. The program offers participants the opportunity to learn: new job seeking skills, realistic and effective approaches to job applications and interviews, problem solving on the job, universal employer expectations, and other important issues essential to securing and maintaining employment. Work adjustment training is also included in the IEP of VR's transition students and is available for college students on the VR caseload.
- *VR Counselor for the Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing* - Consumers in Region 6 (Macon) area are concerned about the upcoming retirement of Janet Storey (VR Counselor for the Deaf). Region 6 is conducting nationwide recruitment efforts to hire a replacement counselor who has extensive experience working with deaf/hard-of-hearing consumers. To ensure continued delivery of appropriate services, Janet is meeting with other VR counselors who will be covering her caseload until her position is filled. The VR Statewide Coordinator for the Deaf/Hearing Impaired will also meet with clients as needed.
- *Services to employers* – The availability of tax credits, incentives, and services to employers who hire consumers with disabilities were discussed.
- *Legislative Issues* that impact VR including Reauthorization of the Rehab Act, IDEA, WIA, and President Bush's proposed 2006 budget cut of federal programs.
- *Local Economics* - The employment success of VR consumers living in Central and South Georgia continues to be challenged by limited employment opportunities with comparable wages.

- *Public Relations* - VR continues to experience a low profile with the general public. Many people have the misperception that VR primarily focuses on providing services to veterans. Attendees were provided more clarification regarding the eligibility for provision of services.
- *Contracted Service Providers* - Many of VR services are outsourced to professional service providers. These services include job coaching; supported employment; transportation; vehicle and home modification; driver's training; and medical, psychological, and vocational assessment and evaluation. The procedure for being an approved VR service provider was explained.
- Community resources for independent living services

### **Consumer Comments**

The Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation/Vocational Rehabilitation Unit is like heaven. The staff is willing to help and provide you with anything you need, including job skills and training that help persons with disabilities go to work. RWSIR has saved my life because I found friends and people who care about my program, my future, and my life. Without RWSIR, I would not have received the help I needed or learned how to become independent.

*(RWSIR/VRU Student)*

My experience with the Georgia VR Program has been very positive and satisfying. With the help and encouragement of my VR Work Team, I found a wonderful job at Home Depot. They worked with staff at Home Depot to familiarize them with my skills and disabilities, which allowed me the chance to prove my capabilities and value as a capable employee. My VR Work Team worked hard to provide information about services for the blind and visually impaired. My counselor personally drove me to the job fair and interview, and talked with the Home Depot Human Resources Director to ensure that I got the job. The AWT team made adjustments to my personal computer so that I could see the screen better and use it more effectively. I have a job that I am enjoying, and feel more productive than I've felt in many years. I am indebted to my VR Work Team for their skills and hard work on my behalf. *VR Consumer (Region 1 - Jasper, GA)*

"Thank you on behalf of my sister for your wonderful staff, especially her counselor. My sister (who is deaf) enrolled in a Certified Nursing Assistant program at a local technical college. The class was most challenging for her. With the help from her counselor and VR, we were able to ensure that she received interpreting services for her hospital clinical. Her counselor not only provided the services and equipment needed, she also gave her a 'listening ear.' Her interest in my sister's progress was inspiring and motivating. My sister graduated with a 96 average and is anticipating working with elderly deaf in the near future. She would not be the success that she is without your wonderful staff and services. *Sister of VR Consumer (Region 6 – Macon, GA)*

"The VR Program has literally given me a new lease on life. As a mother, I had always encouraged my twins to be high achievers. For me, this goal included a higher education. Being married with two children and twelve years of disability, I felt that I was unable to lead my

children by example. I felt trapped in my circumstances and was unsure how to pull myself out. It was not until I became a part of the VR Program that I began to realize that I had the opportunity of a lifetime to complete my undergraduate degree and change my future. My VR Counselor was instrumental to my success at Georgia Southern University (GSU). I graduated May 2004 with a Bachelor of Science degree in Sociology. It was one of the proudest days of my life. I will forever be grateful to VR, not only for the financial assistance but also for the emotional support my counselor provided throughout my journey at GSU. This program was truly a blessing to my family and me. I am currently working at Concerted Services in Reidsville, GA and I am having the time of my life. I look forward to working on a Master's in Social Work in the near future. My twins are in college and are doing well. I know that my opportunity to return to college had a tremendous impact on their lives and I will forever be grateful to my Counselor and VR.

*VR Consumer (Region 9 – Vidalia, GA)*

"VR has done wonders for me. As a quadriplegic, VR helped to make my life better and easier. They provided me with home and vehicle modifications, and assistance with getting my Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology from Albany State University. As a college student, VR equipped my van so that I could drive and now it has become a major part of my life. After graduation, I acquired a job as a case manager with the Albany Advocacy Resource Center where I coordinate services for ten individuals with differing disabilities. I am able to make home visits and transport my consumers when needed. VR's help and continued support has made a difference in my life and has helped me make a difference in other's lives." *VR Consumer – Region 10 (Albany)*

### **Employer Comments**

"Thank you for the job assistance program through the Georgia Department of Labor/Vocational Rehabilitation Program. This program has allowed us to hire an employee with a visual disability who is absolutely wonderful. He is a hard worker and a pleasure to work around. My hat is off to the State of Georgia and your agency for helping Georgians of all situations to find employment." *Guest Services Manager, Perry Holiday Inn (Region 6 – Perry, GA)*

"Over the past ten years I have had the privilege to employ several people from vocational rehabilitation. Some of these employees have stayed, and some have moved on to other employment. I have one employee that has gone from living at home with his parents and riding a bicycle to work (no matter what the weather) to buying a house and car, getting married, and having a family. This is just the determination and pride that I have seen in several of my employees from VR. All they want is a chance to prove themselves. The jobs I offer are repetitive. I've found that once they get it down, they are very good employees. Working with VR has been a pleasure for me as an employer. All the people I have been in contact with have been nothing but professional in every sense of the word. Any problems that have come up we could always workout. I look forward to many more years of working with VR and all of their great employees." *Facility Manager, Johnson Controls, Inc. (Region 8 - Columbus, GA)*

"The Albany Herald printed its first newspaper on October 24, 1891, and circulates over 27,000 newspaper daily. Over the past two years, the Albany VR office has assisted our company

tremendously in securing more than fifteen qualified employees. The referral services provided by VR have allowed our mailroom to shorten its applicant screening and hiring process. In many instances, applicants referred to us from VR can be immediately put to work. Currently we have five VR clients employed part-time. One client was recently promoted to full-time employment and is currently working as an apprentice pressman. He was also the Department Employee of the Month for October 2004. Our relationship with VR has proven to be rewarding for both our company and our employees. Often times we notice clients sharing stories about their disabilities with other co-workers that raises their awareness of people with disabilities. We strongly encourage other businesses to utilize your services and to hire persons with disabilities. We feel confident in saying that they too will find, as we have, a valuable asset. *Mailroom Manager and Production Manager, Albany Herald Newspaper (Region 10 – Albany, GA)*

### **Collaborative Partners Comments**

"The Georgia Department of Corrections Albany Transition Center has partnered with the Georgia Department of Labor/Vocational Rehabilitation Program to provide services to offenders with disabilities to prepare them for obtaining and maintaining employment upon their release. Services provided by the two agencies are designed to provide offenders with the skills to obtain employment as well as educate them on the work habits necessary to maintain employment. The collaboration by the two agencies has the potential to impact the reinstitution rate, as probationers/parolees who are gainfully employed and self-sufficient are more likely to remain tax paying, law-abiding citizens. *Superintendent, Albany Transitional Center (Region 10 – Albany, GA)*