

**APPENDIX I*****REPORT OF PUBLIC HEARINGS  
ON THE FY 08 STATE PLAN  
110 - VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM***

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) for the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program of the Georgia Department of Labor held 10 public comment meetings across the State regarding the state plan for delivery of vocational rehabilitation services for fiscal year 2008. These meetings occurred May 7, 2007 through May 18, 2007.

Notices and press releases of these meetings and how to submit comments and request accommodations were sent in a timely manner (30 plus days) by the Georgia Department of Labor/Office of Communications and SRC member Linda Shepard of Parents Educating Parents and Professionals, Inc. (PEPP), to the media, disability organizations, governmental and non-governmental agencies, professional associations, consumers of services, school systems, parents, students and the general public. Additionally, Linda Shepard sent out multiple e-mail notices weekly to over 40,000 people in the PEPP database and each regional VR office disseminated announcements. Notices in Spanish were also e-mailed and copied for dissemination.

The Columbus Ledger-Enquirer placed a notice of the first meeting on page 2 of the May 7, 2007 newspaper. Fox TV of Albany attended and interviewed VR and SRC representatives at the May 8 meeting. They were featured on the evening news broadcast.

A total of 334 participants signed in and provided input at the various meetings and numerous written statements were received. One-hundred & thirty eight (138) people responded to a web based survey regarding the state plan established by PEPP.

At each meeting, handouts of the highlighted sections of the State Plan to be commented on and the entire draft FY 08 State Plan – 110 Vocational Rehabilitation Program was available in printed copies, large print, on floppy discs and CDs, and in some locations Braille. Additional information on VR and assistive technology was also available at each location. Sign language interpreters were provided at every meeting and interpreters for people who speak Spanish were provided at the Suwanee meeting.

Rehabilitation Services Assistant Commissioner Peggy Rosser and VR Program Director Carl McRae were present at the majority of the hearings, and VR regional directors and staff attended the session in their region. Also, Pedro Romero, Rehabilitation Services Administration, participated in the Savannah public hearing via teleconference. SRC members Linda Shepard, PEPP, and Joe Tedesco, Tech-Able, facilitated the meetings. Sue Koone of PEPP documented comments at each meeting in addition to the use of court recorders and written notes by VR staff.

Extensive outreach resulted in diversity among attendees. Attendees included people with visual impairments, learning disabilities, people who are deaf and hard of hearing and people with physical disabilities. In addition, people from minority groups were present including the Hispanic community.

Meeting participants represented various governmental agencies, school districts, professionals, disability providers, disability organizations and advocacy groups, students, parents, and clients from Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs), Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation (RWSIR) and the Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center (CSRC).

In all the meetings it was stated “VR is Georgia’s best kept secret.” Much discussion centered on misinformation, myths about VR and misconceptions about VR services. Statewide marketing of VR was discussed at every meeting. The need for training in all areas with all stakeholders was emphasized everywhere.

At every meeting, participants expressed appreciation to VR for holding the meetings and listening to them. One professional noted the leadership on the state level cares about employees and provides training and the opportunity to grow and develop. Staff appreciated the support for online training and video training.

Participants were asked to respond to highlighted sections of the State Plan and a summary of those comments and comments on additional topics follows.

### **1. PLANS TO ENHANCE SERVICES FOR CLIENTS WHO ARE DEAF, BLIND AND DEAF-BLIND**

#### **How can we improve services to increase employment outcomes for clients with sensory disabilities?**

*The statement voiced most often by all stakeholders was the lack of VR staff to assist clients and thus affecting employment outcomes. It was noted there is a high number of vacancies and it takes a very long time to go through the hiring process (6 months to a year). Many statements were received by clients and professionals on the need to hire staff whom are visually impaired and hearing impaired who could better relate and understand the needs of clients who are deaf, blind and deaf-blind. At every meeting, participants commented on the importance of training staff in these particular disability areas, on disability awareness and raising VR staff awareness of the resources needed and available. Several comments centered on the availability and need for sign language interpreters throughout the state. The delay in the availability of a sign language interpreter caused some job opportunities to fall through. Many comments indicated the need to educate employers about disability awareness and accommodations and supports that VR could provide. The problem with the timeframe to receive technology for the work place and/or college was repeated several times. One individual raised the issue of the lengthy time it took to have tuition paid resulting in being removed from the course.*

Caseworkers are overloaded – one person covering lots of counties.

We advertised the position for the Deaf for one year.

Need to provide specialized sensory disability training for staff. They need to understand the deaf culture.

One problem is people with these disabilities can't understand the system. If they look for a job, they can't do it...they don't understand work ethics, being on time...Help us (professionals) to know disabilities so we can prepare employers to accept them.

Need some type of statewide training...need counselors to tell clients what is out there.

There was a time when we had dedicated staff who were deaf that worked with deaf consumers. Is it possible to have a dedicated caseload now with an employee who is deaf?

We need staff in the area and not have to share a counselor with another area for the deaf.

Provide technology and training for individuals...the timeframe is too long to get technology and if it breaks, to get it repaired.

Problem is timeframe to get assistive technology – past the time when classes started and the payment process – VR did not pay college tuition timely.

Need certified interpreter in the area; they have to come from Atlanta and it could take weeks to get one.

All employer applications are not online and the hearing impaired don't have the English ability to do them and need someone to help them fill them out.

Educate employers on making applications available in multiple formats.

### **How can we enhance sensory services and develop additional service options at CRPs, RWSIR and CSRC?**

*The top two topics in all the meetings centered on funding and the poor conditions of the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation (RWSIR) and the Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center (CSRC). Stakeholders in every meeting commented additional funds are needed to provide skilled staff (sign language, orientation and mobility, specialized instructors), to repair and modernize the facilities and to provide needed equipment. The waiting list for CSRC was noted as causing delays for clients. Many comments were received about communication problems. Several commented on the need for ASL training and it was noted some area colleges are inquiring and/or offering ASL certification programs. Transportation was a major concern for clients to travel to RWSIR and CSRC. Several comments focused on the need for specialized, skilled staff who can work one on one with clients. These included staff that can perform evaluations for who are deaf-blind and more mental health services. Providing more job coaches was suggested. In all the meetings it was stated "VR is Georgia's best kept secret."*

Need more funding to pay for staff with sign language skills and orientation and mobility teachers to meet the needs of the students.

Need staff with good people skills and good communication skills with the students and who have positive communication and respect for the students they are teaching.

State should start long term planning for long term residential programs all over Georgia (For people with visual impairments) I'd like to see more development in rural areas and add to it. It's hard to move to another city because you lose your support system...(learn) how to get around.

Communication is the key – need people who can communicate by ASL.

Facility needs improvement. Facilities need updating.

Need classroom staff and dorm staff who can sign.

Need more staff who can work one on one with clients

Job coaches needed.

Provide better customer service during admission for clients to enter residential facilities.

VR is the best kept secret in the state of Georgia. Need to have VR listed in the telephone books and 411 directory. Need to give authority to local offices to do this.

CSRC is small and in a small town. Transportation is a nightmare and limited resources. Need facility in Atlanta.

There is a waiting list of 6 months for CSRC.

Need more communication types of equipment. CSRC needs internet service.

Have no one to do psychological for the deaf-blind.

Need mental health services in all communities.

### **How can we improve our recruitment results for specialized staff positions and for specialized service providers in Georgia?**

*All participants at all meetings were unanimous on improving salaries and making them competitive in the job market. It was noted certifications and job requirements had increased but pay had not. Requirements in particular for interpreters are changing and more demanding. Comments noted the lengthy approval process to hire someone which often resulted in losing that candidate and having to start over again. Repeated at every meeting was the need to have multiple dedicated staff recruiter positions who would implement marketing strategies on a nationwide level. One comment suggested recognizing and using the best practices in recruitment used by other states. The Sensory Unit proposed in the plan was praised. Many commented the need for training opportunities and loan opportunities in which staff could work it off. Other comments suggested reaching out to DOE and DOL centers to recruit and emphasizing the good benefits offered by VR.*

Salary is a huge factor.

Give them more money!

We require Master's level and CRC but we are not paying for it and losing people to school systems that pay better.

We have openings for a position and we interview the various candidates and the approval process takes so long that the person we recommended has found another job and we have to start the process over again.

New requirements for the field of interpreting which require certifications and now a degree requirement are pushing people away.

Have better access to training locally. We have to go to Atlanta or Macon.

Do direct recruitment with the university and dedicate staff to go out and talk about benefits of working for the agency. It would be nice to have a salary to attract people.

Broaden advertising base to reach nationwide to reach blind and deaf organizations and institutes and in the professional arenas.

Recognize best practices of other states – incorporate their strategies.

Emphasize benefits.

Like the idea of a Sensory Unit. Have a person who is a recruitment specialist who is part of the unit and their main function is to recruit for VR.

Have a full time recruiter.

Market VR to Career Centers at the Department of Labor Centers.

Approach DOE and offer scholarships for sign language.

Educate people about cultural differences. Let VR employees learn sign language. Work off state loan by working for the state.

## **2. PLANS TO ENHANCE SERVICES AT THE ROOSEVELT WARM SPRINGS INSTITUTE FOR REHABILITATION (RWSIR) AND AT THE CAVE SPRING REHABILITATION CENTER (CSRC)**

### **What are the benefits and value of these residential vocational rehabilitation programs?**

*The meetings were privileged to have consumers attend from the residential programs. Consumers of services at CSRC attended the Rome meeting. Consumers of services at RWSIR attended the Macon meeting and asked for someone to come to the institute to accommodate others. This meeting was arranged on May 29 to collect further comments. Comments received regarding benefits centered on learning the independent living skills, socialization skills, Driver's Education and certificate programs and training offered through the technical colleges. Clients commented on the benefits of the recreational activities and the very nice recreational facility at RWSIR. They further commented on having peer support and being in a place where others are like you. Leadership development was a plus as many from RWSIR were from the Student Council.*

CSRC teaches us as adults and individuals to learn how to fit into society and have normal jobs and a normal life. Independence is key.

Glad I came to CSRC because before I came here things were going bad, no money, no job and no where to live. It gave me a steady place I can call mine and have people around you who are like you and know and understand what you have been through.

The programs offer academics and GED programs to help students get their diploma. They give a better idea of work and what they require.

Teach independent living skills. At CSRC the atmosphere is a little different –you have to cook your own dinner.

Driver's education and CNA program.

Leadership skills.

Recreation is a plus. It is huge for them socially.

Peer support

West Georgia Tech provides a lot of feedback and help with RWSIR facility. A lot of programs are available here and you can take certificate programs. It gives you the feel of college life.

Job Skills Class teaches us how to write a good resume, prepare for the job interview etc.

### **How can we improve these residential program services to increase employment outcomes for people with significant disabilities?**

*Consumers were unanimous and adamant in stating the number one improvement would be to improve the facilities. They stated the facilities were old and have plumbing, electrical, roof leakage problems, and the furniture is old and often broken. Facilities are not modern and lack needed technology such as computers, communication systems, internet services, washer/dryer etc. Several people commented prisoners have better living conditions than the CSRC. A funding source was recommended to help clients with purchasing needed personal items. Others stated more staff is needed for one on one attention for clients. Specialized staff such as mental health workers, access to a medical consultant, behavioral specialist and staff psychologists are needed for support services. Give self-advocacy and disability/cultural awareness training. Expansion of programs and skills training were recommended. Comments recommended expanding services to other areas in the state and expanding programs to focus on industry certified training, offering foreign languages, and apprenticeships. It was recommended to look at programs like Job Corps and the Helen Keller Institute to incorporate in these programs. Programs should be expanded to allow opportunities for disability areas such as Asperger's, orthopedic and for students with higher intellectual functioning. Many commented on the transition between the residential facility and the community. It was suggested to have better coordination and communication between the facility and the community VR counselor. A strength noted was the teamwork concept and the accessibility of skilled staff.*

Improve the facilities. Prisoners in prison system live better than we do at CSRC.

Need better transition and communication between RWSIR and the VR counselors in their community so they will have a job waiting when they graduate.

Offer apprenticeships and give students real work experiences.

Add foreign language to the curriculum such as Spanish, sign language and maybe French. Teach conversational instruction so it will help get a job.

Break down the communication barrier due to different cultural backgrounds.

Need more services for persons with hearing and visual impairments.

Provide extra staff so we can give clients one on one attention and spend time with those clients who need small classroom settings.

Give self advocacy training.

Have access to medical consultant.

Need local mental health services and a staff psychologist.

Need psychologists who can evaluate deaf-blind.

Offer vocational programs (automotive, cosmetology etc) that meet industrial standards so employers know that students have met the standards.

Offer training in city areas and in multiple areas for consumers.

When people return from the residential program, offer job coaching to help them acclimate to the job.

Have additional supports for those with Asperger's. Add Behavior Specialist to help.

Expand CSRC program similar to RWSIR so students can go to tech schools and get degrees.

Provide more opportunities for those who have orthopedic limitations – most of our programs require physical ability.

Look at programs like Job Corps and the Helen Keller Institute to improve ours.

Emphasize the team concept – its value is tremendous. You have the support of individuals with specific skill sets and when you are focusing on the needs of the client and discussing and brainstorming and looking for strategies for employment, you are being helped with this.

Impressed with access to the job readiness person, assistive technology person etc.

Expand job sites in the community and the program opportunities. Don't limit to restaurant work or to stock or clean.

Need program for students who have high intellectual needs.

Correct the misinformation out there about VR and these facilities.

Provide a funding source for clients who can't afford to bring the things they need to RWSIR and CSRC. At CSRC counselors have had to purchase things clients need or beg from Goodwill.

Improve transition process so they don't go back home and sit and watch TV and fall back into old habits.

### **3. PLANS TO IMPROVE TRANSITION SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

#### **How can we improve transition services to increase the number of students with disabilities who become successfully employed?**

*A diverse group of stakeholders provided comments on transition. Several commented on IDEA changing the start of Transition Planning to age 16. Many commented this planning should take place earlier than the state's proposed regulations for entry into 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Comments suggested training and workshops for students and parents on the IEP process would encourage participation. Several stated students, parents, and school staff have misinformation about VR and emphasized strategies for more outreach to inform partners about VR services. Having a navigator meet and explain to families and the students could address the stigma issue that VR is only for special education and the issue that you would lose your SSI check. Many comments were received that referrals to VR by the school need to be made earlier and this should include those students under 504, IEP and SST. Numerous attendees suggested the involvement of VR counselors should be early in the writing of the IEP instead of at the end. More funding is needed for staffing counselors in the high schools so they could work with the students beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Barriers to providing services to students included VR staff not being allowed access to the student due to disrupting the classroom and not having a place to meet with them. The diploma issue received comments and some suggested focusing on functional skills and teaching job skills classes that could lead to employment. One group suggested reinstating the RVI teachers in all school systems. One comment suggested allowing students to keep assistive technology to transition from high school to college. Several comments centered on serving the more severe disabilities and suggestions included utilizing job coaches and better training programs geared toward this population. Communication issues were raised, especially for the Spanish speaking community. Several expressed the need for better collaboration between agencies to offer various job opportunities and grant funded job training programs for the significantly disabled.*

Give a class for students on IEPs. At the IEP meetings you should talk about what a difference you have made and what you achieved instead of what you haven't achieved.

Have parent transition workshop.

Offer job skills classes to seniors in high school.

Expose students in middle school to as many different careers as possible.

Provide job coaches for the more severe disabilities and better training programs.

Involve VR counselors early in the writing of the IEPs.

Being able to access the students and meet them and to have a place in the school to meet them. Sometimes I am told it is disruptive to take the students out of class.

With the No Child Left Behind law there is a problem getting into the schools and not a lot of time to work with them when they have to be in the regular class.

RVI teachers in Muscogee County have gone away and we need them back.

Need consistency for VR to be a part of the team.

Get referrals sooner. Educate schools to refer all disabilities and let us determine eligibility.

Hard to get school to refer all of those who are served under 504 Plan, IEPs and even SSTs.

Have VR counselor work with them from 9<sup>th</sup> grade and they can plan during all that time and get to know the student.

Have more VR counselors and reduce the number of schools on their caseload. Attend all IEP meetings.

As a parent and professional in the field I found a lot of parents don't know about VR and have misconceptions. All partners need to come together sooner. Parents need to get involved.

Some think it is a stigma to be served by VR.

Have a navigator to meet with the family and start talking to them about VR services.

Get SSI and don't work because afraid to lose checks. Need to educate families and student about the benefits.

There is lag with assistive technology while VR assesses student because DOE won't let the student take it with them. Need to have seamless transition to college.

Want to see Employment First in the state plan. It focuses on persons with disabilities who have always lived in institutions and looks at innovative and creative employment practices for those with significant disabilities.

Not sure all teachers and school staff know what services VR offers. Give packets to principals and special education teachers.

A good time for VR to meet and talk schools is the beginning of the school year before classes start.

Communication issues in dealing with Spanish speaking community. The child is not on track for regular diploma and parents don't understand.

Need to look at functional expectations instead of diploma type.

Have programs like High School/High Tech in place.

One system we serve has established CRP and they have transition diplomas and do job readiness sessions.

Training on disabilities would help. AWT helps and is the most positive tool.

**How can we improve collaboration with local school systems and the State Department of Education to increase the number of dedicated rehabilitation counselors located in high schools?**

*Numerous comments focused on the funding issue. A dedicated funding stream was recommended and educating schools about the funding costs of a dedicated counselor. One person expressed the need to hold the RVI and Transition Conferences together to better explain VR services and to offer SDU credits. Others acknowledged the need to rebuild trust and establish closer relationships between VR and school staff, including administrators. One educational professional noted that with the changes in IDEA requiring functional vocational assessments, better collaboration is needed with VR who has the knowledge to share with the school system. One barrier noted was the lengthy process in VR to hire a dedicated counselor. Another barrier identified was that some school systems no longer have an RVI teacher. Many agreed that the DOL heading on VR materials was misleading and lead to misconceptions about VR services.*

Need a dedicated funding stream for transition programs

Do RVI Conference and our Transition Conference together

Have closer relationship between school transition specialist and VR counselors.

At the state level, provide a seminar for special education teachers to explain the VR program. Offer SDU credits and incentives.

One challenge in the new IDEA is the requirement that all transition goals are to be based on age appropriate vocational transition assessments. Schools are struggling with this because we don't know about these assessments. It's hard to write Transition Plans without this data and the assessments. Need better collaboration and partnerships to do this and VR has knowledge to share with school system.

Educate schools on getting students in profound classrooms involved in the program.

In Regions 1 and 4 we have Transition Counselors in every school system. School administrators got together with VR and explained the benefits and now the counselor is going to IEP meetings and meeting families and teachers to explain our services.

Inform schools that we are not employment centers. We do education and job training.

The DOL letterhead is misleading for people. VR and DOL don't do the same thing.

Remedial training is needed but VR doesn't do this. There is a need to educate school systems and educators about what students need to do to participate in a training program.

Participate in the Interagency Transition Councils which include employers.

Need to rebuild relationship between VR and school systems.

School system decided not to hire dedicated counselor because they have Career Services Teachers are afraid their budget might be cut.

We lose people's interest during the long hiring process – took 7 months to get approved.

#### **4. PLANS TO CULTIVATE RELATIONSHIPS WITH MORE EMPLOYERS AND MEET THEIR WORKFORCE NEEDS**

##### **How can we enhance relationships with employers to increase the number of employers who hire VR clients for the first time?**

*Many comments acknowledged misinformation and myths about hiring individuals with disabilities and a lack of knowledge by employers about the supports and services available through VR. The need to educate employers about disability awareness, ADA and VR services was stated several times. Comments noted several barriers. These barriers included employers' reluctance to hire persons with a special education diploma, safety concerns, communication barriers and liability coverage. One person commented that the problem was the client retaining the job and addressing retention skills. Several commented the VR Rehabilitation Employment Specialist (RES) should explain and clarify to the employer how VR benefits the employer by offering supports to address these issues. Acknowledging the huge turnover in VR staff, several suggested training programs for VR staff on disability awareness and VR services and supports. Many suggested VR staff (RES) do job analysis samplings and other strategies to discover the job skills needed by the employers in that community and look at job carving. Several remarks on creating marketing strategies were received. One suggested doing a marketing blitz during October which is Disability Awareness month. Comments focused on the need to fund more positions to promote VR and to recruit jobs for individuals with disabilities. Building relationships with employers and employer groups was repeated often. VR staff should be involved in employer committees and organizations.*

Tell employers the positive skills and abilities the potential employee has first.

Dispel myths about hiring individuals with disabilities and educate them on VR supports and reasonable accommodations. Address safety concerns.

When client is placed with employer, make sure that client is qualified and will have success. That employer will pass that on to other employers.

Job retention of clients is a more significant problem than finding an employer to hire them. The client could become disinterested, may have family concerns or concerns about losing benefits.

Explain and show clients the job they are doing now provides good experience and skills that will lead to a better position.

Use one employer to refer VR to another employer to get your foot in the door.

Training VR staff is needed because we have a huge turnover. They need to learn about disabilities.

RES and training is the main key for employers. Need training on how to go to employers and get them to hire people with disabilities.

Market directly to employer's needs. Train RES to do job analysis surveys. Do ADA training.

RES must communicate exceptionally well and have high level of professionalism.

Minimize caseloads so staff can react quickly when employer wants to hire someone.

Prepare clients to have all the skills they need to complete the job – training and preparation is key.

Problem is special education diplomas; employers won't hire clients with a special education diploma.

Employers are afraid of the liability and need to offer worker's compensation.

We have 15% administrative fee to give to the employer to cover that costs. They take the fee but unsure if they can use it for worker's compensation.

Do marketing blitz maybe one time a year in October as Disability Awareness Month with TV spots, billboards.

Address language barrier when client needs interpreter.

Look at video conferencing to provide relay services which employers will see as business solution.

Have more staff to recruit and promote VR.

Have relationships with employer committees and organizations.

**How can we improve collaboration with employers and technical schools to develop skills training programs to meet workforce needs, especially for jobs in high demand with higher salaries?**

*Comments received focused on educating and informing employers and technical school staff about VR services and supports. Multiple comments noted the importance of maintaining good communication and disseminating information and holding joint meetings. Several comments expressed the need to have marketing and rehabilitation specialists to work with employers and technical schools. One barrier noted was the turnover of the disability coordinators in the technical schools. A suggestion addressing this was to do combined training with the disability coordinators. Many commented on the importance of employer input and identifying the job skills needed by employers and ensuring the technical school provides training addressing these needs. Clients noted the need for remedial instruction for reading and math skills which impacted their ability to obtain higher salaries. Another barrier was not being able to access training and programs due to having a special education diploma. It was suggested programs should be coordinated between high school and the technical school to learn specific job skills. Several comments about the assessment process were received and input suggested finding a way to accommodate and improve training so the disability would not be a hindrance and to offer programs that fill in the gaps for students to acquire skills and be able to get a job.*

Emphasize reading and math skills and teach them.

Make more tech programs available for students with the special education diploma. Work around it and teach them job skills.

Offer tech programs in high school for students getting the special education diploma.

Make sure VR representative is giving out all the information about VR.

Hold joint meetings.

Have dialogue continuously.

Depends on the school and the disability coordinator. Coordinators turn over and you have to start all over again.

Do combined training with disability coordinators.

VR would be well off to have full time marketing people to go to employers; suggest 4 statewide positions in a tri-regional area.

Educate employers about VR and have employers educate us about their jobs and job skills needed.

Develop a program of study with the tech school for that employer's job and this would eliminate problems like the safety issue.

When schools are developing programs for students, make sure employers are there and involved and give input.

Need to do apprenticeship programs.

Encourage individuals with disabilities to look at starting own business.

Sometimes a student shows interest in a particular career but the assessment proves they don't have the skills to pursue that career. If it is a matter of training, then find a way to accommodate and improve where the disability won't be a hindrance. Offer a program to fill in the gaps so they can acquire those skills and get a job they have a passion about.

#### VETERAN'S ISSUES

Need to address needs of reservists and National Guard who had jobs before serving and are being injured and can't do those same jobs now.

Need to collaborate with VA to provide services for veterans they can't do. Reach out to Ft. Benning.

Veterans will have a lot of mental health problems, physical problems and we need to know when they are coming back and what they will need so we can start preparing for them.

They (veterans) will need to be rehabilitated to go back into society – they have come back from combat.

#### OTHER COMMENTS

I wouldn't be as independent as I am without the help of Vocational Rehabilitation. I am currently employed as a receptionist.....live in own apartment and just got a car.

For those with autism, it is recommended that a transition IEP occur no later than age 14. In the transition IEP planning process, it is critical to have representation from the state's

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and its Division of Developmental Disabilities/Mental Retardation.

(From client with a visual impairment) Vocational Rehabilitation paid for my college with no holds barred and I have never had a problem with the high level of service and professionalism that I encountered....I have several other disabilities as well but vocational rehabilitation has facilitated my compensatory skills to over come and be successful despite the disabilities.

I would like to see more collaboration between VR and centers for independent living (CILS) across the state. We are both working to challenge people with disabilities to live independent lives...let's work together more often. We get very few referrals form VR but we do have consumers who have been VR clients come in for assistance.

My daughter and I would like to thank you for your informative meeting about the new state plan. We would like to be kept abreast of any new information regarding the plan.

I want to suggest a Client Handbook that is better organized and written on a more functional level for the clients. Many of the clients have lower reading abilities and it is difficult for them to understand the contents. Also offer handbooks in a variety of formats accessible to the clients such as electronic (reading out loud or video).

I would like to comment as a TANF Employment Services worker. Our vocational rehabilitation workers have always been excellent in their service delivery. The job coaches are a wonderful asset to this program especially with a person who has a mental disability.

It was with a great sense of pride, accomplishment and gratitude that I received my Bachelor of Science in Applied Biotechnology in December 2006. I was diagnosed with a learning disability in the summer of 2004, and the accommodations provided to me through the university's Disability Resource Center and the financial assistance provided by Vocational Rehabilitation helped me to get back on track with my studies and ultimately graduate.

The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities has reviewed the State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation and appreciates the opportunity to offer comment on the plan....GCDD was disappointed to see no mention of innovative employment practices, such as expanding the use of the Discovery or Portfolio learning process in lieu of the traditional Vocational Rehabilitation Work Evaluation, or of customized employment or job carving, employment practices that are taking hold in many parts of the country, in many cases in partnership with state VR agencies, and with great success. (Referring to successful rehabilitation outcomes) The plan states as a goal to improve that outcome by 5% or 47 students. This is insufficient. The GCDD also finds it insufficient to limit blind students to mentoring or "career exploration" in the Blind Enterprise Program (BEP). In short, the GCDD finds the VR state plan long on intent and woefully short on detail and specific, innovative strategies to actually innovate the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities in the state.

**Written Comments**

1. Ms. Cynthia Wilson, Mr. Rick McClung, and Mr. Al Weiss were all profiled in the "2006 State Rehabilitation Council's Annual Report" as becoming self-employed through the Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Self-Employment Program; however, I was unable to locate the Program in the State Plan. Inasmuch as self-employment is a viable employment option for people with disabilities; I believe the Program should be a part of the State Plan in compliance with 34 CFR 361 and RSA-TAC-00-02.

2. The 2006 Annual Report, in part, states: "...under the heading, Coordination of Efforts. To avoid duplication of efforts and to enhance the number of individuals served, the SRC is federally mandated to develop working relationships and to coordinate activities with other Georgia councils. The SRC continues to maintain productive relationships with the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia, Inc. (SILC), the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (DD Council), several Mayors' Committees on Employment of People with Disabilities, the Georgia Mental Health Planning Council (MHP), the Georgia Workforce Investment Board (WIB), the Georgia Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Inc., the Georgia Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Trust Commission, the Georgia Department of Labor's Employer Committee, the State Advisory Panel for Special Education, the National Federation of the Blind of Georgia, the Council on American Indian Concerns, the Georgia Independent Living Network and other Georgia service agencies."

Although these organizations work closely together, the scheduling resulted in unintended meeting conflicts. On Friday, 18 May 2007, while one public hearing was taking place, in the city of Atlanta; another meeting was taking place on the North side of the city; additionally, a workshop was being conducted on the South side of the city. See the web pages below:

<http://www.peppinc.org/Portals/0/Voc%20Rehab%20Public%20Hearing-%20All%20Info.pdf>

<http://www.silcga.org/>

<http://www.peppinc.org/Default.aspx?tabid=70>

3. While it is true "Parent Educating Parents Inc.," did a good job (on their homepage: <http://www.peppinc.org/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx>) of providing notice to the public of the GA Department of Labor, Vocational Rehabilitation Public Hearings, I believe it would have been beneficial to the citizens of Georgia had the notice also been published on VR's own homepage:<http://www.vocrehabga.org/>

4. I, an individual living with a disability, attended the 10:00am -1:00pm, May 18, 2007, session at the Sloppy Floyd building. I thought it odd not one person in a wheelchair was in attendance. Even though the meetings had some flexibility time wise, I am concerned that trying to attend two different public hearings (VR and the Statewide Independent Living Council), in different sections of the local area, may have been too strenuous or too much of a financial burden for some members of the disability community who desired to attend and who had a vital interest in being present. I am also concerned about parents who may have needed to be home when their children arrived

from school, who had to choose between attending a critical workshop and participating in an important public hearing. I am concerned that all the citizens of Georgia did not have a fair and equal chance to attend the public hearings. I believe the citizens in the Atlanta Metro Area should be provided another opportunity to have their voices heard. Such an opportunity could be provided through teleconferencing and still have the State Plans consolidated and submitted within the allotted time. I hope in the future, organizations that work closely together serving people with disabilities will ensure that multiple meetings are not held in the same local area, on the same day, so as to not put an undue burden on an already taxed community

5. During the May 18, 2007, 10:00am session, I was most alarmed by what was said by two participants. The first was a woman who spoke of being an older person with a disability, who hoped she was not dead before her counselor provided her with assistance to reach her desired employment goal. I heard in her voice the pain and suffering she has experienced, over a long period of time, at the hands of those paid to assist her. I have endured and know her pain all too well. The second person was a woman who works for the Coweta County School System, struggling to obtain information to assist our youth. She spoke of the impossible task of obtaining information from VR's staff about the available services that would enable her to serve her clients. I heard in her voice the agony of being put in VR's vicious, catch-22 cycle. I share in her experience of repeated, agonizing, defeat in a quest for information. In light of the "School to Prison Pipeline" trap (<http://www.aclu.org/crimjustice/juv/24704res20060321.html>) that our youth are falling into, such unprofessional, unqualified staff behavior is unconscionable.

6. At the session I attended, parents described deplorable, horrifying conditions that our young adults are living in at the Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center. The descriptions I heard sounded as if the place was not fit for dogs to live in, and certainly not an environment the officials of VR (who were present) would allow their loved ones to be exposed to. Dilapidated buildings do not occur over night so this situation has been a prolonged problem. Managers who are accountable must have been fully aware. Not one of the VR employees who were present said a word on this topic; so at best, I can say they gave no to false hope. As a reasonable accommodation request, I asked that the department publish a public notice of plans being implemented to correct the problem, with instructions, so that other citizens encountering such problems will be able to expeditiously have the problem rectified, for justice delayed is justice denied!

7. The DOL/VR Commissioner, Michael L. Thurmond promised the citizens of Georgia, if he was re-elected he would reform the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Will someone please tell the Commissioner, "the king has on no clothing and his closest advisors refuse to tell him."

8. We as citizens have a responsibility to help our elected officials. We as people living with disabilities, need to fulfill our civic duty to assist our Commissioner fulfill his campaign promise. We will not sit around, but stand ready to join together to remove barriers that stand in the way of productive, gainful employment "consistent with our unique strengths, resources, concerns, abilities, capabilities and informed choice." Such employment will lead to a higher quality of life equal to that of any one competing in the labor market.

Patricia 'Ajike' Williams, Fellow  
The Organizing Institute  
P.O. Box 420404  
Atlanta, GA 30342  
404.567.4343 Office  
404.255.3744 Fax  
email: [reformgavocrehab@yahoo.com](mailto:reformgavocrehab@yahoo.com)  
Patricia "Ajike" Williams  
Organizing Institute Graduate  
[reformgavocrehab@yahoo.com](mailto:reformgavocrehab@yahoo.com)

9. My daughter and I would like to thank you for your informative meeting about the new state plan. We would like to be kept abreast of any new information regarding the plan. Please let me know if there is anything (i.e. volunteering) that I can do to help. If the business survey idea comes to fruition, I would be more than happy to personally deliver and pick up the surveys from local (Athens) businesses.

Thanks so much. Please keep in touch.

Sincerely,  
Bonnie Mayes  
706-546-0893

10. Hi Linda,

It was nice meeting you yesterday. I wanted to let you know that I rec'd this TODAY, a day late. Glad Kevin's mom had told me about it. Good luck with the rest of the "tour". You did a great job.

This is what I wanted to send. It came from Relay. Wonder why they waited to the last minute. Perhaps this is why turnout was so low!

Mary LaLiberty  
Employment First Georgia  
678-772-5845

11. Peggy, Carl, Linda and Sue,

Thank you so much for your wonderful comments about The MIGHTY 12TH! I'm so glad we could help the State of Georgia's VR program look good! I have to say that y'all (Carl, Peggy, Linda and Sue) deserve a HUGE helping of praise yourselves for setting the tone and atmosphere for a fantastic meeting. You inspire us to do our best! I was so thrilled that our staff here in the region had a chance to spend some quality time with you and get to know you as people. It's all anyone has been talking about today--how much fun they had with you all yesterday! You've made our morale boost up to an all-time high!

Thanks for everything!  
Allen Beall

12. I would just like to comment as a TANF Employment Services worker in Chattooga County that our voc rehab workers have always been excellent in their service delivery.

It is great having them in our county 2 days per week to see all of our customers that have disabilities and are looking for work or to retrain. The job coaches are a wonderful asset to this program especially for a person with a mental disability. We would benefit from having them in our county 3 days per week but I realize that workers cover more than one county.

I can only say that they have helped so many of our people in Chattooga County to become employed.

Thanks

13. Hello Linda,

My name is Donna Baxley and I am the Center Director for disABILITY LINK NW Center for Independent Living in Rome. Because we are having our Georgia Independent Living Network Annual Conference May 17-18 in Atlanta, I will be unable to attend the Rome meeting. I guess what I would like to see more of is collaboration between VR and CILs across the state. We are both working to challenge people with disabilities to live independent lives...let's work together more often. We get very few referrals from VR...but, we do have consumers who have been VR clients come in for assistance.

Thank you,

Donna Baxley, Center Director

14. I trust that the citizen of Georgia do not expect the Commission to do the work without the help of the stakeholders.

15. Comments on the Vocational Rehabilitation State Plan

The Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities has reviewed the State Plan for Vocational Rehabilitation, and appreciates the opportunity to offer comment on the plan.

The GCDD has many intersecting interests and relationships with Vocational Rehabilitation, and shares the goal of successful employment for people with disabilities, in particular, people with cognitive and significant disabilities. The GCDD partners with Vocational Rehabilitation and DOE on conferences, the Statewide Transition Steering Committee and in the Employment First Georgia Institute all of which provide information to parents and teachers on transition and employment for young people with disabilities.

GCDD receives numerous phone calls from parents, and even educators, expressing their frustration with VR's efforts to obtain meaningful post-school employment for their young adults. One of the biggest frustrations is assessments that lead nowhere, in the words of one advocate. The traditional vocational assessment is time consuming, expensive, and sometimes stressful, and if the results indicate that the candidate is "Pre-employment" or "not ready to work" or even, sadly, "not employable" then that student cannot receive job coaching or support from VR. Absent a waiver, or the school system providing individual job support, the student leaves school to go home and sit.

**Innovative Practice:**

That is why the GCDD was disappointed to see no mention of innovative employment practices, such as expanding the use of the Discovery or Portfolio learning process in lieu of the traditional Vocational Rehabilitation Work Evaluation, or of customized employment or job carving, employment practices that are taking hold in many parts of the country, in many cases in partnership with state VR agencies, and with great success. The GCDD has been excited with the learning that has occurred from the federal grants that the state has received in the last few years from ODEP that have enabled us, and a wide range of partners to actually use these innovative employment practices to get severely disabled people, individuals who had never worked before, even individuals who had spent years institutionalized settings, employed in creative, competitive, individualized work. VR has been a partner in some of those arrangements, as have the Work First Centers and WIA network. Yet the proposed VR State plan does not include the teaching, training, disseminating, implementation or evaluation of any of these practices.

**Collaboration:**

Georgia has the opportunity to be a state that assumes employability. With the help of national experts, and in preparation for the continuation of a 4 year ODEP grant, stakeholders interested in improving the employment outcomes for people with disabilities drafted an "Employment First Policy," which I have attached here, and invited the four commissioners, Community Health, Human Resources, Education and Labor / VR to express their support by signing it. We have yet to get the signature of the Commissioner of Labor. VR is a partner in the Employment First of Georgia Institute, created with a fifth year of sustainability funding under the ODPE Jobs for All grant when most states were cut off. Employment First is an institute without walls, comprised of a wide range of existing entities around the state to spread the availability of creative employment options to parts of the state that have not had access before. We hope the Institute will become a valuable resource developing best practice, providers, transition processes and resource development toward better employment rates and outcomes for people with disabilities.

We cannot do this work without VR, or instead of VR, and we feel collaboration around the Employment first Initiative should be formalized in the VR State Plan, supported by the Commissioners.

**Parent Training:**

In regards to the recommendation that VR partner with Parents Educating Parents and Professionals (PEPP) to train students, parents, and professionals on VR services, eligibility requirements, and policy, the State Team for Transition Planning that just completed work on the state plan for transition also recognizes the urgent need to cross train school and adult support services staff, and parents and students on the services and criteria for services from VR. However, PEPP is but one of several avenues through which this objective could be achieved. The GCDD supports the Parent Leadership Coalition, (of which PEPP is a member) a group of 10 parent information and referral agencies or organizations that meet regularly, have technology assistance from Parent to Parent of Georgia, and a cadre of "Navigator Teams" that move in 2 dozen Georgia communities, conducting outreach, training and triage for individuals with disabilities and the families

that support them. These entities could also work with VR and with PEPP to be vehicles for imparting training on the services and resources that VR has to contribute.

**Outcomes:**

According to the plan, in FY 2006, over 5,900 students with disabilities received services through the VR Program and 760 achieved a successful rehabilitation outcome. This is a 12% success rate. The plan states as a goal to improve that outcome by 5% or 47 students. This is insufficient. There is a good chance that the remaining 5,000 students will go home to sit and watch TV after the state has paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for them to be educated in the least restrictive environment. The GCDD also finds it insufficient to limit blind students to mentoring or “career exploration” in the Blind Enterprise Program (BEP). What if a blind student doesn’t wish to be a vendor? Where are the objectives in the plan to help a blind student explore other career opportunities?

**Assistive Technology:**

One of the barriers for successfully transitioning students with disabilities from high school to work or further education is the inability to take the assistive technology device they may have had to support their education to the workforce or continuing education. The VR state plan makes no mention of strategies to provide a seamless transition of technology devices between education and labor or higher ed. GCDD believes the plan should at least recognize that transitioning assistive technology devices is crucial to seamless transition from education to work, and VR should express intent to work on this issue with DOE and other partners.

In short, the GCDD finds the VR state plan long on intent and woefully short on detail and specific, innovative strategies to actually innovate the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities in the state. Most people want to work. Work is a major life activity that provides people with financial security, discretionary income, purposeful contribution and a social network. Recognizing the dismal statistics for employment for people with disabilities, VR should capitalize on the learning that has occurred in the past four years of federal grant funding, and incorporate strategies for developing, disseminating and implementing these practices.