



Florida Rehabilitation Council

Andy Houghton, FRC Chair
TEAMS Meeting, December 6, 2023

Members:

Andy Houghton, Tammy Davis, Delaina Parrish, Allison Klein, Matthew Motko, Lisa Mason, Matti Wieczorek, Victoria Gaitanis, Christopher Romero

VR Staff:

Kim Thomas, Roy Cosgrove, Libby Moody, Emilia Murphy, Michael Newsome, Monica Edwards, Derrinita Walker, Victoria Aguilar

Guests: Patricia Parrish, Tess Crowder, Jane Johnson, Howard Bell

The following represents a summary of deliberations, advice, comments and motions that comprise this FRC quarterly meeting.

Call to order-Quorum established

The council approved the minutes from 10.24.23 with minor edits and the minutes from 11.15.23.

Development of State Plan Recommendations

Additional information on #5, page 2 of the CSNA will be provided by VR staff.

Recommendation 1-Counselor Recruitment and Retention

After discussion, the council replaced the previously drafted recommendation with:

- Work towards increasing pay and non-pay incentives for all staff.
- Create more in-person training opportunities.
- Build a stronger connection between administration and field staff to help improve the capacity of staff and address the recruitment and ongoing retention concerns.
- Report on the efficacy of these initiatives during quarterly FRC meetings.

Recommendation 2-Transition

VR shared that General Council is working through background screening requirements for peer mentors.

After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendations:

- Continue to promote early contact and assistance to all students with disabilities under an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan.

- Continue to expand and increase offerings of career paths to include vocational exploration, technical training, registered apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships, encouraging transition students to consider early identification of post-secondary options.
- Evaluate and report on policies and practices that could potentially create barriers when transitioning from education to employment. These include restrictions that might be in place when receiving specified services.
- Reestablish peer mentoring projects throughout the state for youth and students with disabilities and identify service provider/s to help implement the projects statewide.
- Identify the opportunities to develop marketing collateral to better target all students, ESE directors, teachers, school counselors and parents (including digital and other materials).
- Explore the expansion of Project SEARCH sites across the state as resources allow.

Recommendation 3-Business Outreach Strategies

After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendations:

- Evaluate the existing system for VR to strengthen efforts with business leaders to improve median earning jobs and retention in career-oriented employment, including increasing partnerships.
- Remain focused on participants' strengths and develop tools to communicate effectively and succinctly to potential employers.
- Consider including registered pre-apprenticeships as well as registered apprenticeships.

VR's Acting Director shared that the Launch It program, through Brevard Achievement Center, helps train individuals with autism in IT-related skills. The pilot is scheduled to conclude in early 2024 and VR can request a report to the council in the spring on this.

Recommendation 4-Rights and Conflict Resolution

After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendation:

- Ensure all VR staff and participants are aware of and provided their options of the services of Disability Rights Florida, Client Assistance Program (CAP), and the VR Ombudsman's Office provided through increased collaboration and additional engagement, including VR staff collaborating with CAP and providing decision letters with appeal rights and policies.

Recommendation 5-Public Awareness and Outreach

VR's Communications Director said plans for social media need to be approved by the department. VR's approved LinkedIn and YouTube channel are good options. A council member added that getting to parents is critical so LinkedIn can be a powerful tool but it also needs to be updated and maintained.

After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendations:

- Prior to release of marketing materials, engage VR marketing staff to review for person-first language and authentic representation of persons with disabilities.
- Explore collaboration with the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS) to better reach students with disabilities and their parents.
- Explore collaboration with healthcare entities to expand awareness of VR.

Recommendation 6-Individuals with the most significant disabilities

VR's Acting Director discussed Florida WINS, a system that is being designed to integrate service applications. A council member discussed the need for participants' understanding of benefits planning and resources. After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendation:

- VR is encouraged to examine creative ways to address transportation barriers to better support employment outcomes for VR participants.

Recommendation 7-Overall agency performance

After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendations:

- Explore ways to be more transparent in the reporting of data to improve VR performance in targeted areas including rapid engagement and unserved and underserved participants.
- Increase the quality of employment outcomes for VR participants from primarily low pay and unskilled jobs that have historically high turnover rates to higher median-earning jobs and retention in career-oriented employment.
- Increase coordination with federal and state agencies including creating a system that integrates information and services.
- Ensure benefit planning services are provided to VR participants as well as youth and students prior to exiting secondary school so that they can have the requisite knowledge to make informed decisions related to pursuing self-sustaining employment.
- Reconstitute quarterly or semi-annual partner meetings throughout the state to increase and improve communication and the working relationship between VR and CRPs.
- Track, monitor and review the demand versus the capacity of fulfilling the referral for rehabilitation engineering services categories by service type and geographical area.
- Increase or enhance synchronization of provisional services and billing processes with VR authorized employment services providers and vendors.

Recommendation 8-Self-employment and Job customization

After discussion, the council drafted the following recommendations:

- Evaluate and compare current self-employment services with other entrepreneurship-centered programs in Florida to better meet VR participants' employment goals. Consider ways to streamline and expedite the provision of self-employment services.
- Further build capacity for job customization and Innovation and Expansion projects to include unserved and underserved populations.
- Ensure benefits planning services are provided to VR participants so that they can have the requisite knowledge to make informed decisions related to pursuing self-employment and entrepreneurship.

Introduction:

After discussion, the council agreed on the following introduction.

The Florida Rehabilitation Council (FRC) provides the following feedback and recommendations to the VR services portion of Florida's 2024-28 Combined State Plan. These recommendations (among others) are designed to promote the development and retention of VR staff, encourage rapid engagement and plan development of services and to help make VR the recognized leader in providing individualized, participant-driven services for people with disabilities leading to successful high quality employment outcomes.

The FRC emphasizes the need for VR to increase the quality of employment outcomes for VR participants. One concern is that a high number of direct VR service and provider placements are primarily occurring in low-pay and unskilled jobs that have historically high turnover rates. Additionally concerning is the length of time it currently takes for VR participants to move through the plan development and eligibility determination process of VR applicant to IPE.

The FRC applauds the FY 2023 budgetary increase in compensation for VR staff and recognizes it is too early to determine whether the increase will result in improved recruiting, hiring and retaining staff. To identify the impact of this increase, the FRC recommends that VR conduct ongoing correlative monitoring related to recruiting, hiring and retaining staff. Although the FRC views the compensation increase as a positive step, VR is encouraged to explore additional pay increases for all staff and to invest in reestablishing the organizational culture, values and institutional knowledge impacted by Covid.

The FRC encourages VR to reinstitute quarterly or semi-annual partner meetings throughout the state to increase and improve communication and the working relationship between VR and community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) including the synchronization of provisional services and billing processes.

The FRC looks forward to reviewing VR's progress and hopes to see tangible improvement and outcomes for the communities they represent. The FRC is ready to meet the challenges with VR as a partner.

The council voted on and approved the recommendations, the introduction and the Customer Feedback Survey items to be included in the State Plan.

Additional discussion:

- VR's Acting Director discussed the VR Rule 6A-25.021, F.A.C., (Service Provider Registration and Quality Assurance Requirements) to clarify fee-for-service provider requirements. Feedback was incorporated into the next draft (which will be shared) of the intra-agency agreement between the Division of Public Schools, DVR and DBS. Overtime was approved and occurring throughout the state. It is hoped that payments will be up to date by the holidays. Improvements to the systems will occur the first of the year. RSA will be on-site for monitoring in mid-February and has asked to meet with select council members.
- A council member discussed the possibility of adding additional time to the February meeting to conduct a council planning session; however, there were no favorable responses. Andy suggested drafting a proposed agenda for a future planning meeting.
- The council approved the VR Communications Director to select the data included in the one-pager which is sent to legislators each year. Council members are not currently approved to conduct in-person legislative visits but that can be looked into for future visits. After review, the council approved the updates in the annual report.
- The council approved the nominated candidate as temporary Evaluation Committee Chair.

VR's Acting Director suggested a general overview of VR programs be provided at the February meeting with more detailed follow-up at future meetings.

No public comments

Adjourned