



Florida Rehabilitation Council

Andy Houghton, FRC Chair

Quarterly Meeting Minutes-October 24, 2023

Members:

Andy Houghton, Tammy Davis, Brent McNeal, Delaina Parrish, Allison Klein, Jose Morales, Christopher Romero, Matthew Motko, Denis Roy, Lisa Mason, Matti Wieczorek, Victoria Gaitanis

VR Staff:

Kim Thomas, Roy Cosgrove, Libby Moody, Felicia Hines, Emilia Murphy, Terry Hoffman, Andrea Schwendinger, Monica Edwards, Derrinita Walker, Victoria Aguilar, Amanda Freeman, Horace Brown, Veronica Ebuon, Thomas Clemons, Kimberly Richie (DOE)

Guests: Patricia Parrish, Tina Herzig, Tess Crowder, Emily Hough, Lucas Halverson, Ingrid Wagner, Heather Beaven, Mikey Wiseman, Kim Paige, Tony Farinella, Nikki D'Agostino, Steve Batchelor, Joey D'Souza, Kara Tucker, Paul Edwards, Hilary Boland, Tamala Dowl, Daphine Jones, Jane Johnson, Ingrid Wagner, Chris Sanchez, Christine Iglesias, David Volper, Danny, Donna, Melanie Provenza, Howard Bell, Miriam, Lisa Parlapiano, Christine Parker, Arthur Moody, Cheryl Vincent, Sashy O'Connor, Jim Atkinson, Drew Parker

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, budget report, action items and correspondence.

The council reviewed the process for developing the recommendations for the State Plan. Recommendations will be finalized at the December 6th meeting, after reviewing the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA).

Recommendation 1-Deaf and Hard of Hearing: After discussion, the council voted to continue to receive updates on progress as a follow-up but to delete the recommendations in the Plan. Libby suggested adding this and other topics that they want to receive progress on to the Director's Report.

Recommendation 2-Counselor Recruitment and Retention: After discussion, the council approved the following language:

- The council applauds efforts by VR and DOE to increase compensation; however, the council would still like to monitor and encourage VR to work towards improving counselor recruitment and retention by increasing recruitment incentives and non-pay incentives. (Rework)

Training is tracked by the LDO section and recorded in counselors' files. The council would like to analyze the correlation between training and retention; Terry said the data is available. Metrics might include average length of time a position stays open and the vacancy rate before and after salary increases. Progress can be reviewed in a format similar to the recommendations worksheet, adding an additional column for status updates, as well as inclusion in the Director's Reports.

Recommendation 3-Transition: Tammy discussed that there should be more of an emphasis on career paths through post-secondary education. Derrinita relayed that the post-secondary education counseling service has been expanded to include campus tours, informational interviewing, etc. No data is available yet as the service is evolving. After discussion, the council approved 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, apprenticeships and encouraging transition students to consider early identification of post-secondary options.
- Evaluate 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.
- Continue to emphasize peer mentoring in Florida. Increase access to training opportunities for providers so there is a larger network of proficient providers and supports. (VR will report if this is a feasible option.)
- Develop collateral to better target all students, ESE directors, teachers, school counselors and parents. (Derrinita discussed that a strategy could be developed to ensure the appropriate individuals were targeted to receive the materials.)

Recommendation 4-Business Outreach Strategies

Derrinita discussed that there is data available from last year, and there will be data from this year, on business outreach efforts. After discussion, the council approved the following recommendations:

- Evaluate the existing system for VR to strengthen efforts with business leaders to improve employment opportunities and meaningful careers, including increasing partnerships.
- Remain focused on customer strengths and develop tools to communicate effectively and succinctly to potential employers.

Presentations: Kara Tucker and Tyler Morris

- Kara Tucker, Chief of Disabled Services, City of Jacksonville, discussed that their team ensures the City of Jacksonville is ADA compliant; goal is to improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities in Jacksonville. Funding comes from the Disabled Parking Enforcement Program. The agency provides scholarships for students with disabilities, conducts community events, builds wheelchair ramps and provides information and referrals. The Mayor's Disability Council, which Jose Morales is the Chair, was created in 1989 and is comprised of 13 members, over 50% being persons with disabilities. The council's purpose is to raise awareness and participate as technical advisors and resource personnel as pertaining to the needs and issues relating to the disability community. Kara said practices are shared with disability coordinators in other areas at monthly meetings. She encouraged members to attend disability coordinator councils in their area.

- Tyler Morris, Executive Director of the Center for Independent Living (CIL) Jacksonville, thanked the council for allowing the CILs to be a part of the discussion. The Jacksonville CIL was chartered in 1978 with the help of Senator Wise, Stan Carter and Reverend Winn. One of their programs, Brookes Temporary Loan Closet, loans durable medical equipment at no charge for up to 90 days, which saves individuals \$250K each year. They are a provider for Florida Telecommunications Relay, Inc. (FTRI), which provides free amplified technology for individuals who are deaf or have a speech disability and Florida Alliance for Assistive Services and Technology (FAAST), which loans out assistive technology equipment to try out before purchasing. 60 contractors provide ASL and CART services. They are also a Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) provider; Employment Services (ES) provider; and Career Camps provider. The Deaf Empowerment Program assists with 1:1 services and social events; Victims Advocacy Program assists those who are victims of crime. Ready to Achieve mentoring program connects youth with disabilities with mentors to assist with soft skills. Tyler encouraged all to visit their Facebook page, CIL Jacksonville, to see the accessible costumes created for youth who use wheelchairs. The team is also involved with the Abilities in Art, Paint on Canvas project, emergency preparedness and engaging elected officials in the discussion on disabilities. Tyler invited all to attend the ADA event they will be hosting on July 26, 2024. He will send the invitation to Roy/Kim to disburse to members.

Recommendation 5-Rights and Conflict Resolution

Allison Klein discussed that some VR staff have been advised to not speak to the Client Assistance Program (CAP) if there is a pending hearing, when some cases could be resolved through discussion. Regarding decision letters, counselors have said there is no way to input a detailed explanation as to why a case has been determined to be closed. Allison said the biggest complaint CAP gets is about communication and who to contact if there is an issue. After discussion, the council approved the following recommendation:

- Ensure all VR staff and clients are aware of and provided their options of the services of Disability Rights Florida, the Client Assistance Program 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 6-Public Awareness of VR

Delaina discussed that person-first language is not always used in VR materials and suggested they be reviewed prior to release, particularly related to surveys. Derrinita said it would be helpful to have some guidelines for a base level review and also feedback from the council to ensure there's no accidental ableism conveyed. Delaina will forward some materials to Derrinita to assist. Regarding the online application, Derrinita discussed that through the REACH Act, a single, online application (Florida WINS) is being developed for several state agencies which will create a "one-stop" system for employment; target date is 5 years. A new online application put into development now would need to be sunset when the combined application goes live in 5 years. Terry felt it was not unreasonable to recommend an online process at this time. After discussion, the council approved the following recommendations:

- Implement an online application system. (Change category.)
- Prior to release of marketing materials, engage VR marketing staff to review for person-first language and authentic representation of persons with disabilities.

New or moved recommendations:

- 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 service providers and vendors.
- Further build capacity for job customization and Innovation and Expansion projects to include unserved and underserved populations.
- Evaluate and compare current self-employment services with other entrepreneurship-centered programs in Florida to better meet VR customers' employment goals. Consider ways to streamline and expedite the provision of self-employment services. (Need data.)
- Evaluate policies and practices concerning IPE development for customers who are pursuing post-secondary programs to include vocational objectives requiring extended planning such as license certification for graduate and post-graduate studies with provision for specialized employment services. (Needs work.)

Legislative and Public Affairs Committee-Tammy Davis, Chair

Quorum established

The committee approved the minutes from the Sept. 6th meeting.

- **Constant Contact:** The committee voted not to renew the Constant Contact subscription due to security issues and to move towards using a listserv created by DOE for FRC meeting announcements.
- **Annual Report:** Derrinita shared the draft Annual Report and said she is waiting on data and additional success stories. Tammy suggested adding, "In memoriam" to be included with Denny Clark's photo. Andy recommended doing a success story on Delaina and his counselor, Daisy Empacion. A photo library was discussed and Derrinita said for various reasons, it can be challenging. Using previous success stories were suggested as well. The council approved the draft report. Revisions will be made and the report will come before the council again in December for final approval. QR codes will be added in tandem with links throughout the report. A public comment was made stating that the council should pay close attention to the content in the annual report to make sure that what's being reflected, specifically about the AWARE case management system implementation, matches their understanding or experience. After discussion, the council approved removing the word "successfully" in the last paragraph on page 16, regarding AWARE implementation.

Evaluation and Planning Committee-Andy Houghton, Acting Chair

Quorum established

- Andy will continue as Acting Chair until a member volunteers.

Executive Committee-Andy Houghton, Chair

- After discussion, the council decided to hold only the one day meeting on February 6th in Tallahassee.

Partner Reports

- **Client Assistance Program (CAP), Allison Klein:** Oct. 1, 2022 – Sept. 30, 2023, CAP reported they had 313 cases; 216 were VR related; 138 referrals; 65 were communication issues; 57 were conflicts about the services to be provided. VR Areas 2 and 3 had the highest number of cases.
- **Able Trust, Joey D'Souza:** The Able Trust has promoted several different webinars and events around the state for Disability Employment Awareness month. A pilot project, Collective Impact, was just completed in the Tampa area, which looked at addressing systemic issues in employing

individuals with disabilities. High School High Tech has expanded with 2 more sites, now serving 49 sites around the state.

- **Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind, Paul Edwards:** Paul reported that the council has also been working on their State Plan. The council will be spending a day with legislators and partner organizations in Tallahassee in February, prior to their meeting. They are also working on policies that are presented to the council and the client satisfaction survey. Paul said they value the partnership with the FRC and Jose Morales's contribution to FRCB.

Presentation: Kara Tucker and Jose Morales awarded Pitney Bowes with the Employer of the Quarter award for their long time partnership and for actively hiring individuals with disabilities from the community.

Public Forum Summary:

- The first speaker discussed that there needs to be additional discussion with VR about perceived gaps and problems in the new AWARE system. The speaker felt that systemic issues were identified and were not corrected. The speaker discussed that they felt that VR is significantly out of compliance with developed timelines for AWARE processes for benchmarks and payments. The speaker discussed their belief that new forms, paperwork, and signatures are required that have caused delay. The speaker recommended the FRC review the implementation of AWARE and talk with service providers/vendors to learn what the challenges are.
- The second speaker indicated he would echo the first speakers comments and recommended looking for solutions. The speaker recommended a timeline of the issues since May moving forward, should be reviewed by the FRC. The speaker recommended the FRC have some communication/ dialogue with VR, the Department of Education and the Department of Revenue, as they felt that seems to be where the breakdown is occurring. The speaker discussed that they are part of the APSE system and that in a survey, they found that 92% of the providers that completed the survey have not been paid and are at risk of either laying individuals off or closing their business altogether. The speaker also felt that AWARE has created more paperwork. The speaker recommended that VR create an outside process in order to try to catch up with all of these outstanding payments for services already rendered. The speaker asked for clear communication from VR about how to handle outstanding invoices while also moving forward with new services. The speaker indicated they felt AWARE was causing delays for current customers to receive services but also for new customers to be approved through the VR process.
- The third speaker discussed that they have some history of working with people with disabilities and that he represents his son who is not in VR. The speaker discussed that he was a part of an informal group of parents who feel that the VR process is extremely cumbersome to the families and individuals. The speaker feels that for people who have more significant disabilities such as autism that they are extremely underserved by VR. The speaker discussed their belief that there are people who have been in the VR process for ten years, or longer and have no job coach and that job coaches do not want to provide assistance to them. The speaker recommended additional job coaching and for additional funding and services for people with significant disabilities.

- The fourth speaker discussed that he lived in Clay County, that one of his sons went through Project SEARCH and was able to find employment. The speaker indicated that regarding Ridgeview High School, of 227 graduates, maybe five students get to go on to Project SEARCH and/or other transition programs, and that leaves the rest to fend for themselves. The speaker recommended having a job fair right after high school. The speaker also recommended having a better staff/customer ratio of for customized and supported employment. The speaker learned about the ArtCIE program at Family Café and asked for some more details on the project.
- The fifth speaker commented that several parents were not able to attend today and he wanted to emphasize what they felt was the need for communication from VR staff when there is a counselor transition. The speaker recommended avoiding multiple counselors especially for youth and maintaining communication. The speaker praised Horace Brown for his communication and assistance to onboarding for referrals. The speaker asked if there was a way to model and continue what Horace was doing with introducing some services that were available in a wrap-around service approach through the providers.
- Council comments: Jose expressed that the issues discussed should be addressed on the December call. Andy brought up the idea of holding a public forum related to the challenges providers are facing through the implementation of AWARE, as it ultimately affects customers. He suggested inviting providers to attend virtually, statewide, so that the council can better understand and make concrete recommendations to the division and fulfill the council's role. Tammy agreed and suggested holding an emergency Executive Committee meeting to review the public comments and determine next steps.
- Division response (Brent McNeal): Brent discussed that VR is working as diligently as possible on the AWARE issue and that this is their top priority. Brent indicated that there has been substantial progress and that he and the VR team are meeting with vendors/providers every day to address individual concerns. Brent discussed that VR is moving in a positive direction.
- Andy thanked Brent for his comments and recommended an Executive Committee meeting to determine what the council could do to help the process; Brent supported the recommendation.
- Matti discussed that there are still many staff, like technicians and counselors that are not able to use the AWARE system yet. Mattis asked what the Council we can do to bring that to VR's attention so that way there can be more guidance to technicians and counselors.at.
- Andy suggested extending the length of the December 6th, full council meeting, which will be discussed at the Executive Committee meeting.

Adjourned