

DRS Bureau Report to State Rehabilitation Council

Reporting Period: 12/31/2023-03/01/24

Director

Director: Rahnee Patrick

Brief introduction or scope of Program

Director Rahnee Patrick is responsible for the direction of the Division and oversees all Bureaus.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

1. In pursuit of the goal to assure zero federal dollars are lapsed in the vocational rehabilitation program, Director Patrick visited providers and local offices to receive feedback on the contractual agreements and spending for transition services. Shepherded rules changes
2. In pursuit of the goal to have 14(c) certificate holders get funding to change their business model, Director Patrick presented to the Disability & Accessibility Caucus Briefing w/ILGA on 1/24/24. She attended a meeting on the Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment project. And she signed off on contracts that pay for job matching and retention services to the providers who can use the funds in lieu of contracts through subminimum wage usage.
3. Provided feedback to progress the formal application and review process for agencies who wish to become CRP's.
4. Worked with Healthcare and Family Services to improve its enrollment numbers in the Health Benefits for Workers with Disabilities (HBWD) program, an option authorized under the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act. HBWD allows working individuals with disabilities whose income and/or assets exceed the limits for other eligibility pathways to "buy-in" to Medicaid coverage. In addition, Director Patrick and the staff of the DRS Medicaid Waivers worked on bill language for House Bill 5227.

Open Issues

1. Director Patrick rolled out a strategic plan to address the goal of reaching 100K disabled students.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

1. Complete Strategic Goals.
2. Progress Competitive Integrated Employment in Illinois through oversight of Employment First, rate studies, rule changes.
3. Prepare for monitoring from the Rehabilitation Services Administration.
4. Assure no federal dollars are lapsed.

Chief of Staff

COS: Andy Losasso

Brief introduction or scope of Program

DRS Schools (ICRE-Roosevelt, Illinois School for the Visually Impaired (ISVI) and Illinois School for the Deaf (ISD); Personnel; Training Units.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- Hiring and Recruitment has improved through new efficiencies within DHS/DRS.
- New training series for Rehabilitation Services Supervisors focused on Leadership, Retention, and Customer Outcomes.
- As of 2/29, DRS has 105 total vacancies. Of which 19 are in Interview status, and 31 have job offers pending or have accepted with a start date more than two weeks away.
- ICRE- Roosevelt has passed their accreditation review with flying colors.
- May 24th ISVI Graduation 9am, ISD Graduation 10:30am
- May 29th ICRE-Roosevelt Graduation at 10am.

Open Issues

CMS migrated to a new Human Capital Management system and no new job vacancies could be submitted or processed from February 5 – 20th. Existing postings were able to be processed. It is unknown how this will affect our postings in the short term, but long term this software should add much needed efficiencies.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

- CSAVR and NCSAB attendance
- Illinois WIOA Summit attendance
- Marketing of new and hard-to-fill job vacancies.
- RSA Monitoring preparation.

Opportunities for Improvement

Connecting and interfacing with Apprenticeship opportunities. We see a lot of success with STEP students in Madison and St. Clair counties and are working with our WIOA partners to extend across the state and to adult VR customers. The SRC could assist with connections and networking with employers and industry groups.

Question for SRC:

Gauging interest for email marketing of job vacancies.

Bureau of Customer and Community Services (BCCS)

Bureau Chief: Erik Hansen

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The Bureau assists individuals with disabilities in preparing for, obtaining, and maintaining quality competitive employment. Services include evaluation, guidance and counseling, education, training, physical and mental restoration, assistive devices, job development, job placement, and post-employment services. The Bureau also provides a wide range of services to individuals with the most significant disabilities to enable them to remain in their homes and live as independently as possible. Services also include specialized services for people with HIV/AIDS or brain injuries.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- DRS CCFS staff successfully placed 2,627 customers in competitive, integrated employment in SFY2024 as of February 20, 2024. This is a 0.81% increase over same time last fiscal year. SFY2024 goal is 5,000 placements.
- DRS CCFS VR currently serves 31,528 customers: an increase of 9.5% over same time last fiscal year.
- DRS CCFS VR staff have increased the timeliness of moving a VR case from referral to plan status from 93.6 days in July to 86.63 days as of this report. DRS goal is 85 days or less.
- DRS currently has 42,590 Home Services Program customers: a 4.2% increase over same time last fiscal year.
- DRS CCFS VR staff outreached to 2,349 Williams/Colbert class members to offer VR services this FY, and 6,553 to date since the start of outreach activities in September of 2022. DHS Williams/Colbert Admin determined in January that given recent improvements to service planning that class members engage in, and development of IPS outreach contracts by DRS, these outreach calls were no longer needed.
- DRS Field Offices continue to be open on a limited basis, providing front desk/reception services. Appointments are still being managed remotely.
- DRS CCFS continues to engage with Illinois State Board of Education with the goal of strengthening partnerships and revising the MOU developed between the two agencies during COVID. DRS and ISBE have engaged the National Technical Assistance Center on Transition at UNC Charlotte to facilitate. The final draft of the document is awaiting ISBE signature approval.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

- DRS CCFS will continue our focus on increasing timeliness of case progression, increasing referrals to DRS programs, and providing excellent customer service.
- Reach our goal of 5,000 competitive integrated employment placements by end of SFY2024.
- DRS CCFS will work closely with UIUC and VCA to implement goals of the Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) grant; working to ensure individuals in subminimum employment settings can make informed decisions about whether or not to engage DRS in services to obtain competitive, integrated employment.

- DRS CCFS is working with our DRS partners, including Robyn Lewis, to streamline our referral process, and to reduce the number of referrals closed prematurely.
- DRS will work in partnership with ISBE in rolling out the new MOU, training local education agencies and DRS staff on its components. The newly created Illinois Center for Transition to Work 'School-to-Work Transition Guide' will also be used as a reference during these trainings.
- Prepare for upcoming RSA site survey in August.

Opportunities for Improvement

- Continue working with STEP and Transition providers to ensure student transition from STEP/Transition services to adult VR services is seamless for the customer and their family.
- Continue increasing timeliness of case progression.

Bureau of Transition and Community Rehabilitation Services (TCRS)

Manager: Kristin Wagner

Brief introduction or scope of Program

We manage and monitor provider contracts statewide for transition and adult Vocational Rehabilitation services. Additionally, we provide training, technical assistance, and outreach and engagement to both DRS Staff and external Providers.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- The Rate Setting Study for job placement contracts for adults continues to make progress. The contract finalizes 6/30.
- Several listening sessions were held, and a Provider workgroup has been meeting.
- FY25 budget meetings were held across all six regions. We are working to finalize the TCRS spending plan this month.
- FY25 contract exhibits were reviewed and updated.
- New for FY25, the contract exhibits were posted online. The intent is to reduce the number of back-and-forth emails and attachments. Instead, all communications could be contained in an email exchange.
- A new Provider page was created and added to the IDHS website. Information on how to become a provider as well as information required, timeframes, etc. is listed.
- Amendments and Modifications of the contracts continue to be received and reviewed. We base amendments and modifications off utilization against the contract and available funds.
- There were over 30 individuals or agencies that contacted TCRS to learn more about the contracting process so far this FY.

Open Issues

- We continue to work to make improvements to our internal processes that will assist with Customer and Provider satisfaction. This continues throughout the year.
- Continued work with the Rate Setting Study continues until the end of FY24.
- We are still looking for signatures on some initial contracts for FY24. TCRS reaches out to those Providers bi-monthly at least to obtain the required paperwork. It is very late in the FY to have outstanding paperwork.
- We are down two Advisor positions, so these contracts are being covered by others. We work to maintain timely responses and payments.

Priorities for 4th Quarter

- CRP manual review and revisions for FY25.
- Complete the FY25 spending plan for TCRS.
- Amendment deadline to request is prior to April 1st.
- Modification deadline is on or before June 30th.
- Begin the process to finalize FY24.
- Create the micro-session trainings that will begin in July and continue throughout FY25. These will cover a range of topics and will be held over a lunchtime so both external Providers and DRS staff can attend. Topics will include contract types, common billing issues, final reconciliations, Match, and others.

Bureau of Customer and Community Support for the Blind (BCCBS)

Bureau Chief: Kim Borowicz

Brief introduction or scope of Program

- The Illinois Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) field Program for low vision and blind individuals through BCCBS works with customers on their employment goals, as outlined in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). This includes educational goals, updating job skills to maintain employment, assistance with job searching, preparing for job interviews, counseling, communication skills, Orientation and Mobility, and Independent Living skills.
- The Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education Wood (ICRE Wood) located in Chicago provides a concentrated, short-term (3 month) residential or commuter program for adults who are blind, DeafBlind, or visually impaired. The program includes courses in Orientation and Mobility skills, Braille, keyboarding, assistive technology, and activities of daily living. Throughout the program customers work closely with ICRE-Wood's professional staff to develop their vocational goals emphasizing obtaining and maintaining employment.
- The Business Enterprise Program for the Blind provides business ownership opportunities for legally blind, visually impaired and DeafBlind entrepreneurs in vending,

retail, and food service. Business locations are located in federal, state, and public buildings statewide.

- Grant Programs: The Older Individual Blind Grant (ages 55 and over), Individual Blind Grant (ages 18 to 54), and DeafBlind Grant programs administered by BCCBS help people with disabilities throughout Illinois. Non-profits, including Centers for Independent Living throughout Illinois use these grants to administer services to customers. These services include providing assistive technology, orientation and mobility trainings, and independent living skills development.

Updates on Hiring in BCCBS

- BCCBS Field VR
 - The Assistant Bureau Chief, Ingrid Halvorsen, retired in December after many years of diligent service.
 - In January, 8 O&M positions were posted in Aurora, Belleville, Champaign, Chicago, Mt. Vernon, Rock Island, Rockford, and Rolling Meadows.
 - All Region 1 (Chicago and Cook County suburbs) counselor positions have been filled except Emerald City, which was reposted through 2/2/24. This includes Chicago Wood St, Avalon Park, Humboldt Park, Chicago Heights, and Rolling Meadows.
 - In Region 2 all counselor positions are filled. We recently filled the Waukegan and Rockford positions, and we also have a counselor in Aurora and Downers Grove.
 - In Region 3 we have a counselor in Champaign, Peoria, and Rock Island. Unfortunately, there weren't any candidates for the O&M position in Champaign, and that position will be reposted.
 - In Region 4 we reposted two counselor positions, one in Decatur, reposted through 1/23/24 and one in Jacksonville, reposted through 1/31/24. We currently have counselors in Jacksonville and Springfield.
 - In Region 5 all counselor positions are filled. We recently hired a counselor in Murphysboro and have a counselor in Belleville and Mt. Vernon.
 - Rehabilitation Case Coordinator positions were posted in January for Chicago Wood St, Rockford, Springfield, Avalon Park, and Waukegan.
- ICRE Wood Training Center
 - The Superintendent, Derrick Phillips, retired in December after many years of diligent service.
 - Current open positions at the training center are a morning Residential Care Worker and front desk receptionist. We are currently working on job descriptions to possibly post two additional O&M instructor and four additional Rehabilitation Instructor positions.
- Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB)
 - All positions in BEPB have been filled except the Administrative Assistant position, which will be posted soon.
 - On February 1st a new Budget & Contract Specialist started and on March 1st a new Business Consultant started, both in Springfield.
- Grants
 - A Grants Project Officer started on December 1st.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- Business Enterprise Program for the Blind (BEPB) staff and the Illinois Committee of Blind Vendors (ICBV) will hold an in-person quarterly meeting on March 14th in Springfield, IL. Ms. Borowicz continues to be the Acting BEPB Program Administrator and meets with members of the ICBV weekly. Beginning in January the ICBV and BEPB started a workgroup that meets weekly to revise the Illinois Administrative Code rules for the blind vending program.
- The new Grants Project Officer attended a national conference in New Mexico in February for all States that receive Older Individual Blind grant funding.
- The Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education Wood Street (ICRE) held its graduation in December 2023 and welcomed new customers in January 2024.

Open Issues

- The Bureau is working diligently on IT issues throughout the Bureau. In February ten desktop computers were setup in the classrooms, which have Fusion software loaded on them for customer use.
 - The Bureau is also working on improving the accessibility of our documents and forms so they work with screenreading software and can be converted into Braille. DRS hired a Disability Assistance Accessibility Program Manager who is helping tremendously in these efforts.
-

Bureau of Support Services (BoSS)

Bureau Chief: Rebecca Hawkings

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The Bureau of Support Services serves as the focal point for managing the global support required in the Division to ensure operational efficiency through its oversight of funding management and reporting, including maintenance of program income, and procurement and contract management.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- **Summary of FY24 Community Service Contractual Obligations**

Contract Type	Total Contract	YTD Spending	Utilization Rate
Customized Employment	\$718,600	\$226,900	31.58%
Fast Track Transition	\$1,699,770	\$906,800	53.35%
Intern Program	\$59,392	\$4,964	8.36%
Job Retention	\$127,318	\$41,202	32.36%
Milestone	\$13,481,680	\$6,547,192	48.56%
POS	\$800,606	\$334,287	41.75%
Project Search	\$561,808	\$259,576	46.20%
PTS-VR	\$500,000	\$251,675	50.34%
PTS-VR-CRP	\$304,010	\$33,110	10.89%
SEP	\$3,390,700	\$1,184,100	34.92%
STEP Performance	\$16,299,000	\$10,002,425	61.37%
STEP Specialized	\$282,218	\$121,652	43.11%
Transition Specialist (Youth SC)	\$3,131,524	\$1,642,652	52.46%
Williams-Colbert	\$278,732	\$79,856	28.65%
Youth Initiative (YOU)	\$208,375	\$54,340	26.08%
Total	\$41,843,733	\$21,690,731	51.84%

FY25 Planning

- **Governor Pritzker delivered his FY25 Introduced Budget on 2/21/24.**
 - **Highlights Include**
 - \$1.7B All Funds Request
 - \$116.0M additional funds for the Home Services Program to support caseload growth of 1,200 net new customers and changes in needs for current customers
 - \$4.0M to establish funding to support the federal Pathways to Partnership grant
 - \$1.0M in appropriation authority to support Money follows the Person
 - \$2.0M in federal appropriation adjustments for Supported Employment and Assistive Technology to enable the Division to manage the funding more appropriately. This does not represent new funding.
 - **A FY24 supplemental of \$71.0M has been requested to fully fund the Home Services Program and support caseload growth of 1,850 projected net new customers and an increase in health insurance premiums for eligible individual providers.**
 - **Budget Links:**
 - [FY 25 IDHS BUDGET BRIEFING PRESENTATION](#)
 - [FY25 BUDGET BRIEFING BOOK](#)
 - [FY25 HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES VIRTUAL BUDGET BRIEFING](#)
- **Contract Process**
 - DRS deployed its FY25 contract process and expanded information about contracts on the Department's website to standardize communication and enhance transparency [IDHS: Rehabilitation Services Grants - FY 2025 \(state.il.us\)](#).

Upcoming Activities:

- Bid opening for Transitional Services Rate Setting is 3/7/24.

Bureau of Engagement and Support Services (BESS)

Bureau Chief: Louis Hamer (acting)

Brief introduction or scope of Program

Workforce Development Unit (WDU); works with business, staff, and customers regarding employment services. The unit consists of a manager and six Business Employment Consultants (BEC) with two BEC vacancies and vacancy for the Manager position to date.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

Interviews were held this week for one of the BEC position. Interviews are scheduled for mid-March for the second BEC position. The WDU was involved in meetings with Robyn Lewis and James Knauf (UIUC) to discuss the SWTCIE grant awarded to DHS-DRS. This grant brought in

14 million dollars to provide services to customers who traditionally have not been served. Michelle Velez (BEC) presented to other BECs about Illinois IWIB efforts to provide apprenticeships in Illinois to include individuals with disabilities. Louis Hamer assumed the lead role for DHS-DRS with the National Employment Team (NET). Illinois got an apprenticeship request from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for interns, that request only had three days left for applicants to apply. A BEC referred a DRS customer and was informed the FAA would give that customer consideration.

DEAF/DEAF BLIND/HARD OF HEARING SERVICES

Christi Pean

Highlights/Progress

1. Attended Apprenticeship Learning Community meetings. area of focus will be how to integrate apprenticeship opportunities with VR. We hope to assemble a toolkit that can be used by VR agencies throughout the country. This project is nearing its end.
2. Attended the Illinois Academy of Audiology conference in February as an exhibitor. Information was provided about working with DRS.
3. Finalized plans for Camp Launch to be held at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville (SIUE). This will be held from July 8-11, 2024, on campus This will involve the evaluation team from the Illinois School for the Deaf, SIUE, and 360 Degree Academy. This Academy has designed an accessible pre-employment transition services curriculum. This curriculum seeks to fill in knowledge gaps that deaf students often have due to a lack of incidental learning opportunities.
4. Worked with the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) to provide STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) session at the Illinois State University Campus. This is scheduled for June 23-28.
5. Participated in monthly Envision Illinois meetings. Envision Illinois is a group that receives funding from the Illinois Coalition against Domestic Violence. This is focused on how we can make domestic services accessible to persons with a disability.
6. Attended the quarterly meeting hosted by the National Deaf Center (NDC). NDC is housed at the University of Texas in Austin. They receive funding from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation (OSERS). This grant is focused on improving postsecondary outcomes for deaf students who graduate from high school.

Ongoing Developments

1. A joint project is being undertaken with BFS to explore ways to access of virtual mental health services to persons with a disability. Access to mental health service providers who use sign language to communicate would greatly increase the ability of customers throughout the state.
2. Meetings with Calvette and Kristen are scheduled for the end of January to explore ways to serve students (without a hearing impairments) without the need to open a case. This is done through our Fast Track transition contracts.
3. Meetings with Calvette and David Kansiec in early March 2024 to explore Medicaid Waiver Possibilities for Covering Various Services for the Deaf.
4. George Washington University is having monthly meetings related to pre-employment transition services to individuals who are DeafBlind.

HISPANIC SERVICES

German Cutz

Highlights/Updates

1. Plan of work- 2024 has been approved and is scheduled for implementation to assistant bureau chiefs, Hispanic staffing and Hispanic board. Plan includes heavy outreach activities and marketing campaigns.
2. Reporting and data collection-. Community based organizations database has been created.
3. Trainings and presentations- have been finalized and is pending review from perspective assistant bureau chiefs' approval before scheduling.
4. Timekeeper has completed trainings administered by supervisor (German Cutz) on accessing webinar platforms.
5. Timekeeper/supervisor has strategized (strategy developed by German Cutz) to address outstanding timekeeping issues timely (before closeout)

Ongoing Developments

1. Recruitment- this unit is working with human resources on increased hiring for-bilingual staff in vocational rehabilitation counselor positions.
2. Supervisor is working with human research on development job description for an outreach coordinator position.
3. Collaborations- plannings with blind services have begun for inclusive outreach activities for Hispanics who are blind and/or visually impaired.
4. Calendar of events- this calendar highlights Hispanic events for 2025 entailing referral/outreach activities, educational and employment events. This calendar is predicated on approval and therefore will remain fluid for modifications as necessary.
5. Expanding training with timekeeper to include developing meeting minutes.
6. Working with timekeeper to verify filing system is up to date and filed accordingly and timely.

MENTAL HEALTH/IPS/WILLIAMS & COLBERT PILOT PROJECT

Highlights/Updates

Reporting/Data Collection-

1. Expenditures data have been collected from each pilot agency and has been analyzed, reviewed and reallocated based on underspending.

2. The spending plan for fiscal year 2025 has been modified to reflect A lesser amount allotted to each pilot agency and submitted.
3. Created CIPFSR data collection and information spread sheet.
4. Participated in vocational rehabilitation intense training program.
5. Participated in SRC sub-committee CTPT.
6. Attended IPS international meetings.
7. Reports to court monitor's meeting for the William Colbert program.
8. Hybrid model for IPS/fidelity interviews have been adopted to begin on February 26, 2024.
9. The unit is pleased to announce that the pilot contract will be renewed for year 2025.

Ongoing Developments

1. Trainings- criteria for selecting fidelity reviewers are being developed and established for future interviewers.
2. Contracts- modifications are underway for the new Williams/Colbert contract for June 30, 2024.
3. Revamping teams channel
4. Training- transitioning all responsibilities for IPS programs and services from Gene Ougley to Jennifer Grissom (via scheduled trainings) for the purpose of her acting as the lead DRS representative for mental health/IPS/fidelity services and William Colbert pilot program.
5. Presentations- for benefits planning are under development between this unit and the benefits planning unit are underway and scheduled to launch as of June 2024.
6. Planning and developments for exploring way to integrate DRS/IPS services into hospital settings.
7. Creation of IPS employment specialist contact list
8. Jennifer has begun collecting print requests from IPS providers and agencies for distribution of the "know your rights brochures".

TARGETED POPULATIONS UNIT

Calvette Brown

Highlights/Updates

1. All 201's Completed and Sent to Human Resources Files
2. All 1-1 Staff Meetings are Completed and Meetings Have Been Scheduled with External Sources to Move Their Projects Forward
3. Meetings For All Departments Have Scheduled (Agenda's Distributed)
4. Manager is Attending All IPS/Fidelity Trainings for the Purpose of Acting as A Backup to Staff in Their Absence.

ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS

Policy and Procedure Under Development-

1. Remote Work Policy for DRS customers desiring remote work.
2. Exception Policy for Funding Multi- Faceted Low Incidence Cases
3. William/Colbert Priority Policy Gives Hiring and Placement Priority to Williams and Colbert Members When Applying for Jobs Within Programs That Hire Persons with Disabilities.
4. Emergency Stockpile Policy Is to Ensure All DRS Establishments Maintain an Emergency Supply of Personal Protective Equipment for Use when Interacting with Persons with Disabilities at All Times.

Program Proposal Under Development-

1. Merging DRS Into Apprenticeships
2. Merging DRS Into Hospital Settings for Outreach and Referrals

Database Maintenance-

1. One Net Postings
2. Re Vamping Teams Platform

Presentations/Ideation Sessions on Collaborations-

1. Disability Policy, Codes and Regulations
2. Merging Apprenticeships
3. Launching Job Fairs and Conferences
4. Collaborative Projects Building

Bureau of Planning & Strategic Management

Bureau Chief: Sybil Nash

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The Bureau of Planning and Strategic Management (BPSM) is 1 of 6 bureaus with the Illinois Department of Human Services – Division of Rehabilitation Services (IDHS – DRS). BPSM has 4 units under its umbrella: Auditing, Data Analysis, Quality Assurance, and Assistive & Information Technology Support (AITS – formerly Rehabilitation Technology).

This particular bureau provides support and direction to central office staff within DRS, most notably employees working directly with our customers. BPSM seeks to enhance the provision services in its vocational rehabilitation (VR) and home services program (HSP) by evaluating the quantifiable and qualitative data generated by the programs. The findings of DRS' efforts are reported internally and/or externally. Additionally, BPSM reports it findings internally and externally. Through AITS, support is given to ensure both hardware and software are available for DRS employees.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

For the 3rd Quarter of FY24, BPSM uploaded the finalized version of the program-specific appendix for Title IV's Unified Plan on February 29, 2024.

Open Issues

Auditing has initiated its coordination of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act's (WIOA) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). As the field office rehabilitation service supervisors participate in the negotiation meetings governing the OneStops, the MOUs will be completed, signed by all parties, and returned by May 31, 2024.

Data Analysis is exploring the parameters of Qualtrics, the software that supports the presentation of dashboard and survey data.

Quality Assurance will be conducting a special survey of VR closed cases. Of particular note will be the root cause of unsuccessful closures, with a goal of the VR program reducing their numbers by 15%.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

BPSM will continue to prepare for the Rehabilitation Services Administration's (RSA) Monitoring Visit scheduled August 6-8, 2024. Additionally, Carol Pankow (VRTAC-QM) has offered technical assistance in the form of a pre-meeting that will be scheduled in May.

AITS will be focused on the computer refresh during the upcoming quarter. Orders will be placed shortly to rollout new hardware for DRS employees. Additionally, AITS is welcoming 1 new employee to its team. The Executive I will be starting March 18, 2024.

Opportunities for Improvement:

As vacant positions are filled; it has been noted that diversity is lacking in the bureau. Specifically, one of the units has hired 2 new employees. Aside from gender diversity, this particular unit lacks representation from people of color. An opportunity for improvement is to boost DRS' name more effectively out in the community to let potential applicants know of job opportunities. DRS continues to be the best kept secret in Illinois, and we need to change our status by dramatically increasing our visibility.

Blind Services Planning Council (BSPC)

Liaison: Sharon Howerton

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The Illinois Blind Services Planning Council (BSPC) reviews actions of the Illinois Department of Human Services (DHS) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Bureau of Customer and Community Blind Services (BCCBS). BCCBS facilitates communication and cooperation between agencies responsible for services to people who are blind and visually impaired. BSPC also identifies the needs and problems facing the blind community and makes

recommendations to the Bureau Chief of BCCBS, Director of DRS, Secretary of DHS, and the Governor of Illinois.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

Officer elections were held at our last meeting, December 8, 2023, with next meeting scheduled for April 12, 2024. Officer elections were held at the December meeting where the following individuals were elected: Daniel Hawkins-secretary; Ed Birmingham-vice chair; Sharon Howerton-chairperson. We were also informed that two major administrators retired at the end of December—Derrick Phillips who had been the superintendent of ICRE-Wood for 18 years and Ingrid Halvorsen who had been the assistant bureau chief though it is my understanding that she may be on a 75-day contract; I do not know if this is renewable after the 75 days.

Open Issues

We continue to monitor staffing issues within the Bureau of Blind Services including ongoing staffing shortages at the Illinois Center for Rehabilitation and Education-Wood (ICRE-Wood) and field services throughout the state.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

See statement re ongoing issues. I do not feel that this is something that BSPC is in a position to address, but it would seem that staff morale at all levels should be evaluated and addressed since ongoing staff shortages have required that staff at all levels work well beyond their responsibilities or area of service.

Opportunities for improvement

We lost two members after the 2023 calendar year. One person said she could not continue to serve due to her work responsibilities; the other was removed as did not complete the required training modules. We now have a total of seven members instead of the required 11 (I do not think we ever had 11 during my time on BSPC) with only one sighted person on the Council. One person applied probably two months ago and has heard nothing about her application.

Questions for the SRC

Would anyone be interested in applying? Applicants, however, cannot be employees of the state agency.

Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)

Liaison: Grace Tsao

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The SILC is charged with coordinating with the 22 Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and other agencies (including the SRC) to write the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL). We partner with others to help fulfil the goals, objectives, and activities of the SPIL, and monitor that the goals are being met.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

The Council continues to work with the CILs and other agencies to implement the activities of the plan. Success for each activity is measured by outcomes as reported by the CILs within their annual PPR, consumer satisfaction survey, and written reports to the SILC. When partnering with other organizations for training success is measured by exit surveys and evaluations.

We are continuing the writing process for the new SPIL which is to be submitted to ACL by June 30th, 2024. The annual Transition Conference was held the first week of November in Normal with 612 people participating. SILC continued collecting transportation complaints and held meetings with the new attorneys working to solve some of the problems. The annual Consumer Satisfaction Survey final report was submitted to SILC in December. This was shared with all CILs and SILC members. This report is used to help direct the objectives and activities of the SPIL. SILC submitted the annual PPR report to ACL in January.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

We will continue to work diligently on gathering transportation complaints. We will also continue the SPIL writing process so that the draft document can be posted for public comment. On February 27th SILC will host a webinar with Equip for Equality presenting concerning voting rights for people with disabilities. SILC will be partnering with staff from RAMP CIL to present at the annual Rural Transportation Conference being held here in Springfield on March 6th and 7th. We will present concerning transportation problems for people with disabilities.

Opportunities for Improvement

We continue to strive for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in all aspects of our Council and within the goals, objectives, and activities of both our current and upcoming SPIL.

The updated Transportation Complaint Form is now on our website where you can fill it out and submit it electronically. Just look on the blue banner on the right side and you will find the link under recent news. Please keep sending the reports.

Client Assistance Program (CAP)

Liaison: Sujatha Branch/ Christopher Garcia

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The Client Assistance Program (CAP) provides education, advice and advocacy to people with disabilities applying for or receiving services funded by the Rehabilitation Act, including vocational rehabilitation and independent living services. CAP also provides education, advice, and advocacy about Title I (employment rights) of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- **Trainings/Outreaches/Resource Development**
 - 1/17/24: Update about the Client Assistance Program's Work at Equip for Equality's Disability Rights Consortium Meeting
 - 1/26/24: DRS VR New Counselor Orientation (training about CAP and information about other services at Equip for Equality)
 - 2/6/24: Eisenhower Special Education Cooperative Resource Fair (outreach)
 - 2/7/24: Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities February Access Forum (presentation about employment rights under Title I of the ADA)
- **CAP fact sheets:** We are continuing to develop additional fact sheets and are working on translation of our fact sheets into Spanish and adding videos in ASL with captions.
- **Serving Individual Clients**
 - **Numbers**
 - Since July 1, 2022, CAP has opened 185 cases.
 - During this Reporting Period (1/1/24 – 3/1/24), CAP opened 10 cases.
- **Examples of Client Cases**
 - Closure letters being sent due to "no contact."
 - Customer is having difficulty getting in touch with counselor or feels that progress is not being made in DRS case.
 - Communication breakdowns where DRS customer and DRS counselor do not have a shared understanding of DRS customer needs.
 - Customers denied requested services due to disagreement about whether service is "necessary."
 - DRS customers being denied tuition funding under DRS's reimbursement policy because IPE was not drafted before start of classes.
 - Customers with questions and concerns about their employers

Open Issues

- **Streamline process of obtaining customer records:**
 - We have been working with DRS to streamline the process of gathering DRS customer records and information from counselors.
 - CAP is reviewing the revised Data Sharing Agreement that we received from DRS leadership on 1/19/24.

- Collaborating with DRS leadership to explore potential improvements to the appeal/hearing process:
 - CAP initiated discussions with DRS about ideas for improving aspects of the current VR appeal/hearing process, including ideas for helping customers better access accommodations for the appeal process and for ensuring that customers have adequate time and information to prepare for hearings.
 - DRS engaged in discussions about this topic with CAP and affirmed that DRS staff can assist customers with matters such as requesting accommodations for the appeal process or communicating with the Bureau of Hearings. DRS leadership also reached out to field staff to solicit feedback regarding barriers or concerns related to the appeal/hearing process.
 - CAP will continue to explore this subject with DRS and advocating for improvements to the appeal/hearing process.
- CAP Communication Protocols:
 - DRS leadership asked CAP to prepare proposed guidelines about when CAP attorneys can communicate directly with DRS leadership/staff versus when CAP should communicate with DRS's attorneys.
 - Status: CAP sent the proposal to DRS lawyers in July 2023. The proposal is being reviewed by DRS attorneys/leadership.
- Addressing CAP observations/trends
 - Limited resolution options for reimbursement appeals Barriers to obtaining services for individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities.
 - Questions about programs for individuals seeking employment with state and federal government (Successful Disability Opportunities Program, Schedule A, Disabled Workers Trainee Program)

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

Continue to build the CAP internal website, including developing resources (fact sheets and additional trainings).

- Continue to explore potential avenues for the efficient resolution of reimbursement appeals through informal channels without the costs and time of a hearing.
- Continue outreach efforts that specifically target underserved community – court involved youth.
- DRS and CAP have established a working group and will continue to collaborate to expand access for court-involved youth.
- Continue efforts to identify and address barriers to services faced by individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Outreach and trainings for independent service coordination agencies (ISCs) and DD providers
- Communicating with local DRS offices and DRS leadership to identify barriers to employment for individuals with I/DD and develop strategies to increase access to VR services for this population.
- Expand outreach efforts to WIPAs and other benefits counselors who work with SSI and SSDI beneficiaries to explore opportunities for collaboration.

Opportunities for Improvement

We are working to build up our website, materials and resources.

Questions for SRC

What priorities do you see for CAP, including areas for further collaboration?

Policy Update

Report Prepared by: Robyn Lewis, Policy Advisor

Brief introduction or scope of Program

The DRS Policy Advisor serves as the liaison to the federal government and required advisory bodies. The Policy Advisor reviews existing and proposed rules and legislation, ensuring new/revised rules are implemented in a timely manner. The Policy Advisor also serves as the SWTCIE IL Project Manager.

Highlights and Summary of Accomplishments

- Annual Report was filed with the Governor's office, Dec 1.
- Customized Employment report was filed with Governor's Office, Mar 1.
- WIOA State plan was finalized January 2024.
- The CRP rule was adopted.
- All SWTCIE agencies have participants who are VR customers.
- Four Competitive Integrated Employment placements have been made!
- Presented overview of the Self Employment rule to DRS leadership and all staff.
- Economic and Employment of Persons with Disabilities Task Force
- Quorum State Statute pr

SWTCIE IL

The Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) Transition from Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) Illinois Model Demonstration Project (U.S. Department of Education Disability Innovation Fund, 84.421D) is a nationwide initiative to address the need to expand opportunities for persons with disabilities to obtain high-quality CIE that leads to economic security and assist and encourage employers to fully include individuals with disabilities in their workforce. SWTCIE Illinois will increase opportunities for Illinoisans with disabilities to transition from subminimum wage employment to CIE and redirect to CIE those individuals contemplating subminimum wage employment for the first time.

- Agencies involved: UIUC (project implementor), The Workshop (Galena), Kreider Services (Dixon), AID (Aurora), CTF Illinois (Crestwood), Human Support Services (Waterloo), Centerstone (West Frankfort)

- January Virginia Commonwealth University on-site event included Agency Employment Specialists and supervisors, UIUC project manager and Community Research Specialists (liaisons) and VCU training team. The idea of the on-site visit was to show the SWTCIE IL team a successful customized employment program. VCU is renowned for being the nation’s leading experts in Customized and Supported Employment.
- Virginia Commonwealth University provides weekly virtual support to each agency along with at least quarterly on-site support.
- Benefits planning has become a focus for the project. The UIUC Community Research Specialists (liaisons) participated in benefits planning training with [Imagine Enterprises](#), are currently engaged in [VCU National Training and Data Center](#) Benefits Planning training, and will be the key personnel to work with families and further develop a larger statewide solution to benefits planning.
- Monthly community of practice with SWTCIE IL key personnel: January- Introductions and “Why a COP?”; February- overview of DRS referral process; March- Customer Selection
- Monthly team meetings with the SWTCIE IL implementation and evaluation team; Monthly DRS specific Team meetings; Monthly Meetings with RSA project Officer.

4th Quarter Activities FY24:

- Work with agencies on expanding/utilizing VR contracts.
- Develop a comprehensive Benefits Planning protocol.
- Provide TA to agencies for business model transformation, begin Community of Practice for Agency Executives
- SWTCIE IL will identify and engage Centers for Independent Living to provide advocacy for participants.

RULES

The rules committee are currently examining:

[PART 562 CUSTOMER FINANCIAL PARTICIPATION : Sections Listing \(ilga.gov\)](#)

[PART 590.100 Hearing Aids](#)

[PART 590.315-360 SELF EMPLOYMENT](#)

[590.490 AUXILARY SERVICES](#)

[590.90 HEARING AID EVAL](#)

[590.400 VEHICLE ADAPTATION](#)

[590.410 VAN MODIFICATION](#)

[590.415 Purchase of Modified Vehicle](#)

Self-Employment work group, comprised of internal DRS leaders and UIC team, presented a high-level presentation to DRS leadership and staff. Currently recruiting counselors and

supervisors interested in specializing in Self Employment. We will utilize [Vocational Rehabilitation Self-Employment Guide](#) developed by the RTC. The RTC:Rural is part of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities (RIIC) at the University of Montana. The RTC will provide free training to DRS staff on utilizing their materials. We meet every two weeks to work through rules revision. We are modeling ideas from Colorado and Wyoming. We are following four current cases as informal pilots to gain more insight into the process.

[PART 530 CRITERIA FOR THE EVALUATION OF PROGRAMS OF SERVICES IN COMMUNITY REHABILITATION AGENCIES : Sections Listing \(ilga.gov\)](#)

Fully Adopted in February 2024. Highlights of revision:

- Developed Appendix A for those seeking to be a new CRP with DRS to outline minimum standards.
- Allows CRPs to earn up to 100K per year (for an indefinite term) in DRS employment contracts without needing to acquire accreditation.
- Once agencies pass the 100k threshold, they will have three years to acquire accreditation.
- All CRPs will undergo an onsite review every three years.

[PART 562 CUSTOMER FINANCIAL PARTICIPATION: Sections Listing \(ilga.gov\)](#)

Currently Under budgetary review.

This rule change PROPOSAL expands exempt services to include the following:

1. Counseling and Guidance and Information and Referral,
2. Evaluation and assessment services and associated costs to include but not limited to room, board, and transportation,
3. Services or instruction provided directly by DHS-DRS staff or in a DHS-DRS managed facility,
4. Assessment, placement, customized, and supported employment through any approved community rehabilitation program (see 89 Ill. Adm. Code 530),
5. Pre-Employment transition services for students and youth with disabilities which facilitate transition from school to postsecondary life, such as achievement of an employment outcome in competitive integrated employment. provided through the Bureau of Blind Service's transition program (Transvision) or the Secondary Transitional Experience Program (STEP) (89 Ill. Adm. Code 590: Subpart L),
6. Technical assistance and other consultation services to conduct market analysis, develop business plans and otherwise prove resources, to eligible individuals who are pursuing self-employment or establishing a small business operation as an employment outcome,
7. Job related services including job search and placement assistance, job retention services, on-the-job training (OJT), follow-up services, and follow along services, to include job coaching and post-employment services, and
8. Auxiliary services (defined in 89 Ill. Adm. Code 521) to include interpreting services, reader services, rehabilitation teaching services, and Orientation and Mobility services,

9. Rehabilitation technology in accordance with definition provided in 89 Ill. Adm. Code 521, including vehicular modification, telecommunications, sensory, and other technological aides and devices,
10. Personal Assistance services pursuant to CFR 361.48(b)(14): Scope of Vocational Rehabilitation Services for Individuals with Disabilities, and
11. All costs directly related to the customers' attendance and participation at an Illinois Public Community College, and
12. All costs directly related to customers attendance and participation in programs specifically offered for disability related skills training such as orientation and mobility; rehabilitation teaching; training in the use of low vision aids; Braille; speech reading; sign language; and cognitive training/retraining.

LEGISLATIVE

[HB0793ham001 103RD GENERAL ASSEMBLY \(ilga.gov\)](#)

Dignity in Pay Act

- 5/31/23 Re-Referred to Rules Committee
- Held education and listening sessions with legislators in February and March
- Economic and Employment Opportunities for People with Disabilities (EEOPD) Task Force has created a work group to identify how they will facilitate DIP implementation.

[Illinois General Assembly - Full Text of HB5227 \(ilga.gov\)](#)

Increased Asset Limit Pilot (DRS initiated Legislation)

- 2/9/24 Referred to Rules committee.
- Amends the Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities Act. In a provision requiring the Department of Human Services to establish eligibility standards for services provided under the Home Services Program, provides that the standards must provide that a person may not have more than \$17,500 (rather than \$10,000) in assets to be eligible for services.
- Provides that the Department may not decrease the asset level below \$17,500 (rather than \$10,000).
- Requires the Department to implement a pilot program of no less than 60 months in 3 geographically diverse locations wherein it shall exempt from consideration when determining eligibility for the Home Services Program retirement accounts that the person cannot access without penalty before the age of 59 1/2, and medical savings accounts.
- Provides that services provided to any individual determined eligible under the pilot program shall be funded solely by the State.
- Amends the Medical Assistance Article of the Illinois Public Aid Code. In a provision regarding the income eligibility standard under the medical assistance program for persons with disabilities who are employed and for persons with a medically improved disability who are employed, requires the Department of Healthcare and Family Services to set the income eligibility standard at not lower than 450% (rather than 350%) of the federal poverty level.