TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION

Ex Officio Report to
Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities

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Executive Summary

VRD staff and providers continue to deliver services to customers, through both remote and in-person service delivery strategies. Timely service delivery and active customer engagement will be consistently achieved with either mode of access by the customer. In January, VRD launched a Hybrid Operations Plan for FY 2022. As it is implemented, VRD will continue to identify and expand effective remote service delivery strategies.

The following report includes VRD leadership changes, legislative updates as well as program updates and initiatives.

Leadership Changes

After 26 years of service to the State, Mike Hooks, Director of the Office of Disability Employment Strategies (ODES) retired at the end of December 2021. Effective January 1, 2022, Lizet Hinojosa, Business Enterprises of Texas (BET) Director, and Juan Garcia, Purchasing from People with Disabilities (PPD) Manager, will assume dual roles as the ODES Director and Deputy Director, respectively. They will each retain primary responsibility for their programs, but will add responsibility for leading ODES, building the BET and PPD programs, and creating stronger connections between both programs and VR. They are both very accomplished and experienced leaders, and they will continue to do outstanding work as they lead ODES.

Legislative Updates

The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) Vocational Rehabilitation Division (VRD) has been tasked with leading or coordinating some of the efforts related to the several items passed by the 87th Texas Legislature during the regular session. Updates will be provided at future meetings as those items are implemented. Below are updates on actions taken to date:

Rider 48: - This rider requires TWC to use funds appropriated for apprenticeship programs and Vocational Rehabilitation to conduct an inventory of all current apprenticeship and internship opportunities for people with disabilities. The inventory shall include the number of opportunities, the length of the programs, age ranges, whether the employer is public or private, geographical distribution, program funding and publicity, and the number of individuals that obtained full-time employment as a result of the program. The inventory shall be made available to the Rehabilitation Council of Texas and the Legislature by October 1, 2022.

Update: The workgroup comprised of TWC staff from VRD, the Workforce Development Division Office of Apprenticeship, the Adult Education & Literacy Program, and the Information Innovation & Insight Division has met and is currently researching information and data elements available to draft the report.

SB 50 by Sen. Zaffirini - Relating to a competitive and integrated employment initiative for certain Medicaid recipients.

This bill directs the Executive Commissioner of the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) to develop a process that conforms with the state's Employment First Policy to ensure that Medicaid waiver participants in Home and Community-based Services (HCS), the Texas home living (TxHmL) waiver program, the deaf-blind with multiple disabilities (DBMD) waiver program, the community living assistance and support services (CLASS) waiver program, and the STAR+PLUS home and community-based services (HCBS) waiver program who want competitive and integrated employment can achieve that goal.

The HHSC Executive Commissioner must establish rules to develop a uniform process to assess the goals of and competitive integrated employment opportunities and related employment services available to these individuals and to identify strategies to increase the number of individuals who are receiving employment services from TWC or through the waiver program in which the individual is enrolled. HHSC also must submit a report by December 31st of each even-numbered year to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and the Legislature that outlines the number of individuals who are receiving employment services under these provisions; whether the employment services are provided by TWC, through the waiver program in which the individual is enrolled, or both.

Update: Coordination between HHSC and TWC-VRD is underway on a Memorandum of Agreement that will establish a data exchange process between the agencies. HHSC is expected to provide a draft MOU for TWC review in January 2022.

SB 1917 by Sen. Lucio - Relating to a public outreach campaign for aging adults with visual impairments.

This bill requires the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), in collaboration with the Texas State Library and Archives Commission (TSLAC) and other appropriate state agencies, to conduct public awareness and education outreach campaigns designed to provide information relating to

programs and resources available to aging adults who are blind or visually impaired. The bill specifies that the campaigns be tailored to targeted populations, including aging adults with or at risk of blindness or visual impairment and their families and caregivers; health care providers; community and faith-based organizations; and the general public. The bill further specifies that the campaigns must be disseminated through methods appropriate for each targeted population by attending health fairs and working with organizations or groups that serve aging adults, including community clinics, libraries, support groups for aging adults, veterans organizations, for-profit providers of vision services, and the state and local chapters of the National Federation of the Blind.

To support these campaigns, the bill requires HHSC to establish a toll-free telephone number for providing counseling and referrals to appropriate services for aging adults who are blind or visually impaired. HHSC also must post on the agency's website information and training resources for aging adults, community stakeholders, and health care and other service providers that generally serve aging adults, including: links to websites that contain resources for persons who are blind or visually impaired; existing videos that provide awareness of blindness and visual impairments among aging adults and the importance of early intervention; best practices for referring aging adults at risk of blindness or visual impairment for appropriate services; and training about available resources for staff of aging and disability resource centers.

The bill requires HHSC to designate an HHSC contact to assist aging adults who are diagnosed with a visual impairment and their families in locating and obtaining appropriate services and to encourage awareness of reading services for persons who are blind or visually impaired that are offered by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Update: TWC-VRD staff have continued to participate in workgroup discussions with HHSC on implementation of this legislation. During the December 2021 workgroup meeting, HHSC presented a detailed action plan and timeline for implementation. The action plan includes items that have a timeline through February 2023.

Policy & Procedure Updates

Supported Employment

On February 1, 2022, the Supported Employment (SE) service delivery model will be revised to streamline the process and reduce the paperwork burden. The updates to SE policy and processes stem from a project that is

nearing completion. An important aspect of this project was incorporating providers and staff who actively use the service and to offer opportunities for their feedback throughout the policy revision process. Over a series of work sessions, a work group of SE providers and VR staff provided input on the SE benchmark system, policy, forms, rates, and training for staff and providers. Amendments to the SE policy were approved by TWC's 3-member Commission in a public meeting on December 7, 2022, and new SE policy and forms to publish on February 1, 2022. Highlights of the new SE model include: a new assessment called the Career Planning Assessment that is available to any customer who would benefit from an assessment of work skills, interests, and preferences; employment conditions that are negotiable or non-negotiable based on the customer's informed choice; compensation for SE providers for attending each SE Plan meeting and Job Stability Review meeting; a more flexible benchmark system that supports the customer's needs; ability to capture documentation needed for successful closure; payment of disability-related premiums throughout the SE process; list of SE resources for staff and providers; and a reduction of 41 pages of SE forms.

New or significant initiatives relating to disability programs

Aira – Visual Interpreting Service

TWC VRD is now offering Aira to VR customers, staff and anyone who visits a VR office to assist them navigate when visiting a VR office. Aira is a live human-to-human service that delivers on-demand skilled and reliable visual interpreting to support individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Using the camera and an app on the smartphone, Aira's trained agents assist by visually interpreting surroundings for the user.

Skills Training to Employment Project (STEP)

TWC VRD has developed the Skills Training to Employment Project (STEP) that builds upon pilots conducted with WinCo and Walgreens as well as the program's experience with work-based learning. The project provides training focused on job readiness and acquisition of work skills needed to gain employment with the host employer. It creates a replicable structure that is focused on meeting the needs of the employer for skilled, reliable employees and the needs of the VR customer for opportunities to learn work skills and demonstrate their ability to perform to the employer's expectations.

The project provides skills training and employment opportunities to cohorts of 4-6 adult VR customers who are interested in obtaining employment in positions available at the designated worksite of the host employer. The duration of the project is up to 12 weeks, but it may be shorter or longer based upon the time necessary for VR customers to achieve the knowledge and skills required for the positions available with the host employer. The duration will be determined by VR, ESP and the host employer as the project is developed. The estimated cost for a customer to receive this training is $14,800 and includes services provided by the ESP and Wage Services.

The project features a partnership between VR, a host employer, and an ESP that provides VR Vocational Adjustment Training (VAT) and Work Experience Services.

- VR works with the employer to develop the onsite training program, identifies, and engages an ESP, and refers customer candidates for participation. VR arranges for paid work experience services and wage services, which commence when the hands-on work experience training begins. VR also provides case management and support services to the customers, as needed, throughout their training.
- The host employer works with VR and the ESP to create and implement the training program, with the goal of hiring as many, qualified customers as possible after they have successfully demonstrated employability and work skills needed by the employer.
- The ESP works onsite at the employer's location to provide VAT training customized to the employer's business needs. The ESP also provides Work Experience Skills Training to the customers to assist them with applying and mastering the required employability and work skills.

The structure of the project is as follows, but may be customized as needed to meet the needs of the host employer:

- One week of VAT training for cohort of VR customers. Ideally this training is conducted at the worksite of the host employer, but it may also be offered at an alternate location, as agreed upon by the employer, VR and the ESP.
- Customers begin paid work experience training at the workplace for up to twelve weeks, as decided by the host employer, VR, and ESP, and based on the knowledge, employability skills and work skills needed for the available positions.
- At the initiation of the training, the three partners agree upon the knowledge and skills that must be demonstrated by each customer to meet the employers' needs.

- Throughout the training period, representatives of the three partners, along with each VR customer, evaluate the customer's progress in demonstrating the required knowledge and skills.
- If the partners or the customer determine that the worksite is not a good fit for a customer, VR will work with the customer to develop a new plan to achieve his or her employment goal and will transfer the customer to another VR service.
- If the partners agree that the customer is progressing and meeting expected knowledge and skill requirements, the customer will continue in the training program until fully meeting the hiring requirements of that employer. The host employer may hire the customer at any time during the training, as it is determined that the customer meets the knowledge and skill requirements and is ready for employment.

VRD will implement STEP in each of the six regions across the state in FY2022, with a goal to further expand use of the program in subsequent years within each region. VR staff are currently working to identify employers who are interested in implementing this project.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Training Work Group

The deaf and hard of hearing training workgroup continues its efforts on building capacity for VR staff to effectively serve customers who are deaf or hard of hearing.

The internal team comprised of VR staff has held 3 meetings since the last report to begin building the content for each training module. The team will continue to meet monthly. Information provided by stakeholders has been provided to the team for possible resources to assist with developing the content. The timeline to have the training developed is August 31, 2022 with a rollout to staff soon thereafter.

Outreach, Awareness, and Engagement

Start My VR – Since the introduction of Start My VR in June 2021, the online self-referral portal for prospective VR and OIB customers, VRD received 3,199 tickets as of the end of December 2021. Of those 3,199 tickets, 3,143 were for VR and 56 for OIB. There were 1,621 or 51% of those tickets that resulted in new initial contacts in the case management system. A flyer that promotes the use of this tool is available in English and Spanish on the TWC website.

Long-range strategic plans for people with disabilities

TWC VR programs are included in the Texas Workforce System Strategic Plan for FY 2016-FY 2023, facilitated by the Texas Workforce Investment Council. A link to this plan is located at:https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/twic/Texas_Workforce_System_Strategic_Plan_(FY2016-FY2023).pdf

TWC's 2019-2023 agency strategic plan is posted on the agency's website at: https://twc.texas.gov/files/twc/strategic-plan-fiscal-years-2019-to-2023-twc.pdf

Disability Program Updates

Vocational Rehabilitation Services

A. SFY 2022 Q1 State VRD Management Measures

Name of Measure	EOY Target	Cumulative Performance	Percent Target
Key Performance Measure: Number of Participants Served [1]	58,500	47,158	80.6%
Management Measure: Number of Exiting Participants Who Achieved Employment Outcomes	11,370	2,066	18.2%
Management Measure: Percent of Exiting Participants Who Achieved Employment Outcomes	55.8%	42.69%	76.5%

[1] A participant is defined as an individual receiving VR services in accordance with a signed and approved Individual Plan for Employment. This number includes active carry-over cases from previous fiscal years and new participants in SFY 2022.

B. Independent Living Services for Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB)

At the end of SFY 2022 Q1, the OIB program served 1,341 customers.

C. Business Enterprises of Texas

As of the end of the first quarter, the Business Enterprises of Texas (BET) administered the operation of 114 food service and vending businesses on state and federal properties located throughout Texas. BET businesses are operated by Texans who are legally blind. At the end of this quarter,

managers operating businesses within BET employed 1,408 Texans including 123 with disabilities.

Follow Up Items

We Hire Ability: TWC Commissioners approved an open nomination period for We Hire Ability, allowing employers and partners wishing to nominate an employer for the decal the ability to do so year-round. Question from GCPD member asked: how often will employers be awarded with this if it is year-round?

Response: Decals will be issued year-round. Employers will be recognized with a decal as soon as their nominations are received, reviewed and approved as meeting the criteria.