TEXAS WORKFORCE COMMISSION

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

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Executive Summary

One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) Vocational Rehabilitation Division (VRD) staff and providers continue to deliver services to customers, through both remote and in-person service delivery strategies. In early December 2020, VRD finalized a data-based approach for increasing in-office staffing and in-person services in 2021 as virus transmission rates decreased and the risk to customers and staff subsides. Since January 2021, VRD has implemented this approach, increasing in-office staffing and in-person services, while also continuing to offer remote options.

To ensure the potential customers and communities are aware of VR services, VRD also continues to develop and implement outreach, awareness, and engagement strategies. For example, Start My VR, an online self-referral option, will launch this Spring. In addition, the Rapid Engagement Team, launched in July 2020, continues to offer connection to a local VR office through a single phone number and email address.

The following report includes a summary of program updates and initiatives. In addition, VRD continues to work on improvements to service delivery processes as well as outreach, awareness, and engagement activities, and updates will be provided in future reports.

Legislative Updates

Legislative Appropriations Request for FY 2022-2023

TWC appeared before the House Appropriations Committee on March 1 and the Senate Finance Committee on March 2 to present an update on the agency's work and appropriations request. All the Exceptional Items requested by TWC are included in the introduced versions of the HB and SB 1.

As previously reported, TWC's Exceptional Item requests include requests for capital budget authority that improve access to information and service delivery for individuals with disabilities:

- A Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) system replacement project that would replace the current Texas Review, Oversight, and Coaching System (TxROCS), ReHabWorks, and ReHabWorks Reports applications with a modern, efficient system that is incorporated into an integrated case management system that serves all agency

programs. The cost will be approximately $13.6 million in federal funds.

- TWC internet website redesign to make the agency's information more accessible and user friendly for any Texan requiring agency assistance. The cost will be approximately $930,000 in cost allocated funds across numerous programs.
- An enhanced customer communication effort that would enable agency program staff to communicate via text message with external customers, beginning with those seeking assistance with Vocational Rehabilitation services and Unemployment Insurance benefits. The cost will be approximately $350,000 in federal funds.

Policy & Procedure Updates

Vehicle Modification Policy

In 2020, a project was initiated to evaluate and recommend improvements to vehicle modification policies and business processes. The goal of the project was to increase availability and expedite delivery of services for customers who need a vehicle modified to succeed in their employment goal. As part of the process, the project team conducted interviews with customers, representatives from community organizations, vendors, and VRD staff. The project team also included individuals who use modified vehicles. The VRD director approved all recommendations from the team for improvements to business processes, communication strategies, and staffing of the vehicle modification process.

The team determined that policy revisions were also necessary to ensure the decision to modify a vehicle is based primarily on the customer's need for transportation that best enables the customer to engage, retain or advance in employment. The Commission approved the policy revision in February 2021 and a webinar was conducted to educate staff about the revised policy. The new policy became effective on March 1, 2021.

New or significant initiatives relating to disability programs

We Hire Ability Employer Recognition Program

In 2019, the Commission approved expansion of the agency's HireAbility Campaign to add an annual employer forum and an employer recognition program, called We Hire Ability. The launch of We Hire Ability was scheduled for early 2020 but was postponed for a year since at that time,

many employers were focused on responding to the business changes brought about by the pandemic.

Employers whose workforce includes individuals with disabilities in an integrated workplace, and in which they comprise at least 10 percent of the employer's Texas-based workforce, are eligible to receive a We Hire Ability employer recognition decal to display on their storefront and a digital decal to display on their website.

Employers may nominate themselves, or, with the employer's permission, they may be nominated by a local workforce development board, a local Mayor or County committee working with the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities, or a local VR office.

We Hire Ability will launch in April 2021. Nominations may be submitted via a short survey linked to TWC's website. Development of website content is ongoing and will include the promotion of We Hire Ability employer best practices. The We Hire Ability recognition will launch as a biennial cycle, with the first year's designation as 2021-2022.

National Employment Team (NET)

The Vocational Rehabilitation Division has two program specialists that serve as TX representatives on National Employment Team (NET). The NET was created by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) to ensure businesses have access to the VR talent pool across the country. The make-up of the NET includes points of contact from the national network of 78 public vocational rehabilitation programs that work together to provide a united approach to working with business customers. As the NET state points of contact, these program specialists coordinate business engagement activities with national and regional businesses which includes connecting them to a local VR Business Team member so VR can better understand the employer needs as they relate to developing a diverse workforce. Some of the business connections through the NET are: Cognosante, InspiriTec, Sadexo, Wells Fargo, Internal Revenue Service, Federal Aviation Administration, United Health Group and many more. In addition to being connected to businesses through the NET, VRD also assists TX employers with expansion of their diversity efforts in other states they operate in. VRD values the connections to other states and share ideas to ensure VR is available to work within each state and across states to assist the business community.

Online Student Transition Fairs

Throughout 2020-21, VRD hosted online events designed to assist individuals with disabilities in planning their futures. The Online Transition Fairs provided individuals with opportunities to learn about careers and opportunities for postsecondary education and training. In addition, individuals were able to interact with local employers and learn about potential work opportunities. The Online Transition Fairs include job fairs, career fairs, transition education events, and other events for students and adults with disabilities using the Easy Virtual Fair platform. The platform has also allowed VRD to host events designed to increase collaboration among community partners and improve workforce system integration efforts. This virtual event platform is accessible by both computer and mobile devices, using the Google Chrome web browser. Forty-one events have been conducted to date resulting in 3,568 participants, with additional events scheduled through May. Planning for additional events is underway.

Explore STEM!

Explore STEM! recognizes the labor market demand for employees skilled in science, technology, engineering and/or math (STEM). This program supports summer camps for students with disabilities that focus on STEM fields to encourage them to consider a STEM career. Nine institutions of higher education will be participating in Explore STEM! 2021. They are Sul Ross University, Central Texas College, Houston Community College, South Texas College, Texas A&M University, University of Houston Clear Lake, University of North Texas, University of Texas at El Paso, and University of Texas at San Antonio. STEM topics vary by camp. Activities that will be made available to attendees include aeronautical engineering, computer coding and video games, fundamentals of drone piloting, 3D printing, and many other exciting STEM careers paths.

Summer Earn and Learn

TWC issued a press release in March to announce the launch of the 2021 Summer Earn & Learn (SEAL) program. The press release announced SEAL availability and highlighted successes from an employer and student who participated in SEAL in prior years. Many Workforce Boards are already promoting SEAL in their areas with webinars, and information sessions for employers and students in preparation for this year's opportunities.

TWC executed contracts with the 28 local workforce development boards (Boards) in January 2021 to allow planning efforts for SEAL 2021 to begin earlier. In early March, VRD hosted a statewide SEAL planning forum

bringing together VRD and Board staff to share and discuss best practices and lessons learned. A second planning forum is scheduled to take place in April. VRD is promoting remote worksite training and remote worksite placements as these options exist and are available to students. VRD has also secured resources to ensure that students who need a device, or have other technology needs, have what they need to be able to participate in SEAL 2021.

Development of Training for VR Counselors Serving Customers who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

In 2020, TWC VRD convened a workgroup to develop training for VR counselors and other VR staff that serve customers who are deaf or hard of hearing. The training will build the capacity of VRD to effectively serve this important customer group. The workgroup includes numerous stakeholders and community partners, including the Texas Association of the Deaf, Texas School for the Deaf, HHS Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, the Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities, Statewide Outreach Center on Deafness, National Deaf Center, Gallaudet University Regional Center – South and others.

The core work group has continued to meet to develop the curriculum, which will focus on the core competencies a VR Counselor should have to serve Deaf and Hard of Hearing customers. The stakeholders have been in contact with the VR staff. The small core group has assigned teams to work on objectives which should be determined within the next couple of weeks. The lead for the stakeholders has advised the recent winter storm has caused significant delays in their work. The group should meet in late March or April to discuss the objectives, to continue to organize the participants and move forward with developing the training for the topics identified by the stakeholders.

Outreach, Awareness, and Engagement

National Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Appreciation Day, March 22 – In recognition of this national celebration, VRD recognized counselors with Certificates of Appreciation that were sent to each of the more than 650 VR counselors across the state, with Commissioners and executive management also recognizing the day. Counselors submitted comments about what inspires them to be a VR counselor, and those comments were shared with their peers. VRD is distributing social media messages to partners to encourage sharing on their social sites also.

Start My VR – This spring, VRD will introduce an online self-referral option for customers to begin the process of inquiring for VR services. This option is being configured using the agency's existing Service Now ticketing system. VR is working on outreach to introduce this tool to partners and external audiences, including the Boards who will be able to use the link on their websites.

Texas HireAbility - VRD has begun internal discussions of how the agency will engage with more stakeholders to promote the 5-year anniversary of Texas HireAbility. The Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities continues to be a strong partner in helping to promote this statewide campaign and we expect to include members of the committee on a work group on Texas HireAbility.

Other planned updates include a podcast series to support individuals who are blind and visually impaired as well as to promote Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center and the development of VR branded signage and materials. TWC VR continues to explore and implement alternative ways to outreach and engage current or potential customers.

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 2021 Q2 State VRD Management Measures

Name of Measure	EOY Target	Cumulative Performance	Percent Target
Key Performance Measure: Number of Participants Served [1]	71,962	54,479	75.7%
Management Measure: Number of Exiting Participants Who Achieved Employment Outcomes	11,372	4,117	36.2%
Management Measure: Percent of Exiting Participants Who Achieved Employment Outcomes	50%	43.9%	87.8%

[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 2021.

B. Independent Living Services for Older Individuals who are Blind

The OIB program now has fifteen workers that are dedicated 100% to the ILS-OIB program, along with multiple other staff, such as Rehabilitation Assistants and VR Teachers, that serve OIB customers as well as VR customers. OIB now has two state-level Program Specialists that provide training and support to managers and OIB Workers and who are also responsible for implementing statewide strategies to expand the reach of the program. In addition to serving OIB customers, OIB Workers continue to conduct outreach activities and provide informational presentations in their respective communities. At the end of the Second Quarter of State Fiscal Year 2021, the ILS-OIB program has served 1,335 customers.

C. Business Enterprises of Texas

As of the end of the second quarter, the Business Enterprises of Texas (BET) administers the operation of 111 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 1,504 Texans including 145 with disabilities.

Follow Up Items

Is there a way that commissioners can waive the requirement or change rule of applying for three jobs per week if they are active participants in VR?

It cannot be waived since work search is a federal requirement and exempting VR customers could conflict with federal requirements.