Program-Specific Requirements for Vocational Rehabilitation (Blind)

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services Portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan* must include the following descriptions and estimates, as required by section 101(a) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by WIOA:

* Sec. 102(b)(D)(iii) of WIOA

a. Input of State Rehabilitation Council (Blind)

All agencies, except for those that are independent consumer-controlled commissions, must describe the following:

1. input provided by the State Rehabilitation Council, including input and recommendations on the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, recommendations from the Council's report, the review and analysis of consumer satisfaction, and other Council reports that may have been developed as part of the Council's functions; (Blind)

Input of the State Rehabilitation Council The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind continues to be a valuable and active contributing partner to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the organization as a whole. Over the course of the past fiscal year, the Council members have participated in many activities on behalf of the Program, as well as continuing their existing responsibilities as identified in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The following information summarizes the recommendations and initiatives of the State Rehabilitation Council and incorporates the Bureau's response to each item.

SRC Recommendation: Have the Consumer Satisfaction Survey conducted by an entity experienced in performing consumer–based surveys and statistically analyzing outcome data.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau agreed with this recommendation. The SRC commissioned the Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) to conduct a consumer satisfaction survey of VR service recipients for fiscal year 2014. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the services that clients received from the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at BESB. Results of the survey found that nine out of ten clients (90%) reported that they would recommend BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Services to a friend. Similar to both 2012 and 2013 survey findings, Rehabilitation and Adaptive Equipment and Low Vision were the two most widely used BESB services. Personal Care Attendant remained the least used service. Four services experienced an increase in mean satisfaction rating, while four saw a decline in rating. Reader Services had the largest mean increase (8.67, up 1.67 in mean rating). Personal Care Attendant Services climbed to its highest rating in five years (9.0, up 1.0 in mean rating). Higher Education Services set its second–best rating in the history of the survey (8.7, up .9 in mean rating). This figure is only second to the all–time high of 8.86 set in 2003. Small Business Services also increased in ratings (7.14, up .39 in mean rating).
Among the services experiencing a decline in reported satisfaction, Low Vision Services saw the most sizable decrease (7.89, down .9 in mean rating). Transportation Services experienced a notable decline (7.25, down .46 in mean rating), as did Skills Training Services (8.67, down .42). Rehabilitation and Adaptive Equipment Services registered a modest decline (8.60, down .20 in mean rating). Overall satisfaction with BESB services decreased to 7.96, down .48 in mean rating. Ratings on the extent to which services met clients’ IPE also saw a decline of .42 in mean rating, coming in at 7.89. Satisfaction with the extent to which services met client expectations dropped to 7.46, down .33 in mean rating. Finally, satisfaction with the extent to which services met the needs of clients decreased to 8.16, down .19 in mean rating.

The completed report was posted on the Bureau’s section of the agency website (www.ct.gov/besb).

SRC Recommendation: Based on the results of the Consumer Satisfaction Survey, implement two measureable strategies for improving on the delivery of services for clients of the Program.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau agreed with this recommendation. Based upon the high level of utilization that was identified in the Consumer Satisfaction Survey for Rehabilitation and Adaptive Equipment Services, one strategy for continuous improvement focused on this area. In consultation with the State Rehabilitation Council, it was felt that the Bureau should develop a strategy of assisting clients with the latest smart phone technology by conducting group training sessions for clients on this topic. Two training sessions occurred, one in July on the use of Android devices and the other in August on the use of iPhone devices. Both sessions were held at the Bureau’s location in Windsor, with a distance learning option being offered so clients could participate remotely if they desired.

In the category of higher education, the SRC worked to identify challenges experienced by clients of the Bureau who were attending college. Disability Coordinators at the colleges were seen as critical resources for both clients and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to work closely with so that it would be clear to all concerned which entity held particular responsibilities and further to ensure that clients had timely access to the necessary services. To address this, the Bureau met with 15 staff from 13 institutions of higher education in Connecticut and 1 additional staff from a college in New York to provide an overview of the services available from the Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

SRC Recommendation: Include a Vocational Rehabilitation Client Success Story into each meeting of the Council.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau agreed with this recommendation and has incorporated this as a standing agenda item for every meeting of the Council. At each quarterly SRC meeting, a current or former recipient of services attends and informs the group about how services enabled them to achieve or maintain employment. In situations where the client is not self-employed or a homemaker, their employer is invited as well to present on their experiences in working with the Bureau to ensure a successful employment outcome. The SRC membership greatly values this aspect of the meetings, as it affords members the opportunity to hear directly from clients and employers that have benefitted from services.

SRC Recommendation: Support initiatives that develop leadership qualities in transition-age youth who are blind.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau supported this important recommendation. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program as well as the State Rehabilitation Council were cosponsors once again of the Youth Leadership Forum, with 4 clients participating and 2 former client participants returning as counselor mentors. Additionally, BESB was a cosponsor of the
Governor’s Coalition for Youth with Disabilities Scholarship event, recognizing the high school achievements of 3 students served by the Bureau. BESB further collaborated with Oak Hill to provide a week–long residential leadership development and mentoring camp for transition age youth at Harkness, with 8 clients participating.

SRC Recommendation: Implement the recommendations resulting from the Section 107 RSA Monitoring process to shorten the timeframe in Bureau policy for the development of Individualized Plans for Employment.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau agreed with this recommendation and actively engaged the SRC in reviewing the existing Bureau policy regarding the development of Individualized Plans for Employment after a determination of eligibility is reached. New draft policy language was proposed and subsequent to a public hearing, a new policy was adopted.

SRC Recommendation: Reinforce the priority for competitive, integrated employment by modifying existing Bureau policy to mandate that employment must be for wages that are at least the State minimum wage but also the customary wage that is paid to individuals who are not disabled, performing the same type of work for the employer.

Bureau Response: The Bureau agreed with this recommendation. This proposed policy change reflected the priorities of the Bureau as well as the State Rehabilitation Council to move away from placement options where the individual was working toward competitive wages that could potentially never be offered by the employer. With the proposed policy change, a shift to only permitting employment outcomes where the individual was earning the competitive and customary wage ensured that clients would be afforded the same level of earnings offered to their non–disabled coworkers. Subsequent to a public hearing process, this policy was changed.

SRC Recommendation: Replace SRC members whose terms are expiring with individuals who are actively interested and committed to participating on the SRC.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau agreed with this recommendation and sought candidates who were committed to serving and whose background and qualifications would satisfy particular categories for appointment to the SRC. Current and former recipients of services were also contacted by their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to make them aware of openings on the SRC. All interested candidates were referred to the membership committee of the SRC to initiate the process of contacting each candidate to discuss the role of the SRC and the role of the members. For candidates who then expressed an interest in joining the SRC, the membership committee forwarded their information to the Governor’s Office for consideration. During the fiscal year, new appointments were made in the categories of Community Advocacy Organization and Recipients of Services. Additionally, those existing members of the SRC who were eligible for a second term of appointment were presented to the Governor’s Office for reappointment consideration. The SRC and the Bureau express their appreciation and gratitude to the Governor and his staff for the attentive and timely actions taken to process these appointment and reappointment requests.

Public Comments: A public comment period was available from December 29, 2015 through February 1, 2016 that included a public hearing on January, 21, 2016. In total, there were 10 public comments submitted. All 10 of the commenters focused on the importance of Orientation and Mobility Instruction. Six commenters specifically noted the importance of Orientation and Mobility Instruction as a component that is necessary for employment. Six commenters indicated that the current ratio of 1 Orientation and Mobility Instructor to 1,016 clients is insufficient and 6 commenters requested that at least one more Orientation and Mobility Instructor position be added.
commenters mentioned the importance of Orientation and Mobility Instruction for independent living activities and 3 commenters noted the importance of Orientation and Mobility Instruction for children. Five commenters provided comments that referred to there being only 1 Orientation and Mobility Instructor for the entire Bureau. One commenter noted that while Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are important, that Orientation and Mobility Instruction should be a higher priority. One commenter noted that the Orientation and Mobility Instruction that was provided to her met her needs.

In order to promote collaborative and informative discussion, the State Rehabilitation Council and the DORS–BESB Advisory Board scheduled their meetings for February 2, 2016, allowing for the members of both bodies to participate in the other’s discussions and to obtain additional information from the Bureau simultaneously.

Bureau staff clarified that the ratio of 1 Orientation and Mobility Instructor position to 1,016 clients only referred to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, as that is the subject matter of the BESB portion of the draft Unified State Plan. The ratio is a formula that takes the total number of clients in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and divides that by the total number of staff in each category. There are 7 Orientation and Mobility Instructors for the Bureau, with 1 assigned to Vocational Rehabilitation, 3 assigned to Children’s Services, and 3 assigned to Adult (Independent Living) Services.

Bureau staff further clarified that within the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, the actual caseload of the 1 Orientation and Mobility Instructor averages approximately 190 referred clients, but only 15 to 30 requesting assistance at any one time. The Orientation and Mobility Instructor reported that this caseload size is manageable.

SRC Recommendation: The SRC recommended that the draft Vocational Rehabilitation section of the Unified State Plan be submitted as drafted, with no changes.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Response: The Bureau agrees with this recommendation.

2. the Designated State unit’s response to the Council’s input and recommendations; and (Blind)

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind agreed with all of the recommendations made by the State Rehabilitation Council as detailed in the above section.

3. the designated State unit’s explanations for rejecting any of the Council’s input or recommendations. (Blind)

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind did not reject any of the State Rehabilitation Council’s recommendations.

b. Request for Waiver of Statewideness (Blind)

When requesting a waiver of the statewideness requirement, the designated State unit must identify the types of services to be provided by the program on a non-statewide basis. The waiver request must also include written assurances that:
1. a local public agency will provide the non-Federal share of costs associated with the services to be provided in accordance with the waiver request; (Blind)

The Bureau provides the full range of services across the entire state and does not utilize a Waiver of Statewideness.

2. the designated State unit will approve each proposed service before it is put into effect; and (Blind)

Not applicable.

3. All State plan requirements will apply (Blind)

requirements of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan will apply to the services approved under the waiver.

Not applicable.

c. Cooperative Agreements with Agencies Not Carrying Out Activities Under the Statewide Workforce Development System. (Blind)

Describe interagency cooperation with and utilization of the services and facilities of agencies and programs that are not carrying out activities through the statewide workforce development system with respect to:

1. Federal, State, and local agencies and programs; (Blind)

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) is the designated state Vocational Rehabilitation unit for individuals who are blind within the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), which is the designated state agency. The Commissioner on behalf of, and for the benefit of, the Bureau executes cooperative agreements at the designated state agency level.

The Bureau is in a cooperative agreement with the Social Security Administration (SSA) that makes it possible to seek and receive reimbursement for certain costs associated with clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program that have achieved earnings at or above substantial gainful levels and have therefore transitioned off of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The process to seek reimbursement requires a combination of cooperative agreements at the state level. Client benefit status verification is obtained through an agreement with the Department of Social Services (DSS). A cooperative agreement with the Connecticut Department of Labor (DOL) makes it possible to review wage records of individuals who are participating in BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Program to determine if their earnings are above substantial gainful activity (SGA) levels and would therefore qualify the Bureau to request cost reimbursement from SSA. Cost reimbursement would be for the cost of BESB purchased services as well as fees for administrative and tracking costs associated with a client’s case. In federal fiscal year 2014 BESB received $122,689 from SSA under this program.
The Bureau also is in a cooperative agreement with the Native American Vocational Rehabilitation Program in Connecticut. This agreement has been developed to help with both program’s efforts to coordinate and provide services to individuals who are mutually served by the programs or who could benefit from these services if they were to apply and meet eligibility criteria. To maximize collaboration, a representative of the Native American Vocational Rehabilitation Program serves as an appointed member of the BESB State Rehabilitation Council, and a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor from BESB represents the Bureau on the Native American Vocational Rehabilitation Council.

The Bureau also has a cooperative agreement with the other Vocational Rehabilitation State Units within the New England Region that allows for the provision of services, such as mobility training for clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program who are attending training programs in those states.

For individuals who are deaf and blind, BESB works closely with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) for the coordination of services. Through a cooperative agreement, individuals who are deaf and blind can receive coordinated services from both public vocational rehabilitation programs. Through case conferencing, a determination is made as to which program will assume lead case management responsibilities, with the other program providing support services as needed. For clients who are receiving case management services through BRS, BESB offers vocational consultations, orientation and mobility services, and rehabilitation teaching assistance.

For clients who are blind and have developmental disabilities, the Bureau coordinates services with the State Department of Developmental Services (DDS) to bring about successful job placements with long–term supports. Each Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor works closely with DDS to establish a strong working relationship and a close collaboration of services with the DDS case manager.

BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors also coordinate services with the State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS) for individuals who are blind and have a mental health diagnosis and/or addiction.

The Bureau also is in a cooperative agreement with the state Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) that implements a state law requiring the department to report on a quarterly basis to DMV the names of individuals age 16 and older who have been declared legally blind in each preceding fiscal quarter. The DMV uses this information to notify such individuals that their driver’s license is no longer valid.

2. State programs carried out under section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998; (Blind)

Through the Assistive Technology Act, BESB works closely with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services to provide outreach and referrals of clients who are deaf and blind so that clients who meet the eligibility requirements of the Deafblind Technology Grant can apply for and received specialized adaptive equipment to increase their access to communication.

3. Programs carried out by the Under Secretary for Rural Development of the United States Department of Agriculture; (Blind)

Being a part of the Statewide Workforce Development System, the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind has access to the full range of programs carried out through the Department of Agriculture.
4. Noneducational agencies serving out-of-school youth; and (Blind)

The Bureau has entered into service agreements with Almada Lodge Times Farm Camp for the provision of transition programs for in–school and out–of– school youth. Programs include mentoring, leadership development, independent living skills trainings, and work experiences as camp counselors.

5. State use contracting programs. (Blind)

At the Department level, the agency participates with the Office of the State Comptroller for a Purchase Card program that permits for expedited purchasing of goods and services needed by clients to participate in the rehabilitation progress. The Department also has established a fee for service contract model with community rehabilitation providers across the state that enables BESB to purchase services at consistent pricing levels, making budget forecasting a more consistent and reliable process.

d. Coordination with Education Officials (Blind)

Describe:

1. DSU's plans (Blind)

The designated State unit's plans, policies, and procedures for coordination with education officials to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from school to the receipt of VR services, including pre-employment transition services, as well as procedures for the timely development and approval of individualized plans for employment for the students.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program at the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind is actively involved in a variety of transition school–to–work initiatives, with extensive collaboration and coordination at the administrative and service delivery levels of the organization.

At the direct service level, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors participate in Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings of clients who are in middle school or high school and assist in the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEP’s) for students. The services that are detailed in the IEP of each student are factored into the development of each client’s Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), which must be developed within ninety (90) days of the determination of eligibility for vocational rehabilitation services, or by the time the client exits high school, whichever comes sooner. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor involvement begins as early as age 14, with referrals to the Program initiated by the Education Consultants of the Bureau’s Children’s Services Program and Teachers of the Visually Impaired that work directly for school districts. The client is assigned to one of the two Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors that are exclusively dedicated to serving pre–employment transition services eligible clients. Assignments are based on geographic location of the client.

Within the higher education area, the agency has successfully negotiated with the State University System to establish a cooperative agreement that addresses the services available in the university setting for students with disabilities. This cooperative agreement includes the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services and describes the responsibilities of the universities as well as the responsibilities of public vocational rehabilitation to ensure that students with disabilities achieve equal access to classroom instruction, internships, and school–sponsored activities.
2. Information on the formal interagency agreement with the State educational agency with respect to: (Blind)

A. consultation and technical assistance to assist educational agencies in planning for the transition of students with disabilities from school to post-school activities, including VR services; (Blind)

Vocational Rehabilitation Program staff continue to participate and present information at in–service training programs organized by the Bureau for public school teachers and guidance counselors on issues affecting students who are blind or visually impaired. The Children’s Services Program of the Bureau further provides a comprehensive training series every year for school district staff to learn about low vision aids and adaptive technology, braille instruction, expanded core curriculum activities and resources that are available to facilitate the education and transition of students served by BESB.

B. transition planning by personnel of the designated State agency and educational agency that facilitates the development and implementation of their individualized education programs; (Blind)

In addition to serving on the statewide transition taskforce, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program’s Educational Projects Coordinator is also an active member of the Board of Directors of the Youth Leadership Project that oversees the Youth Leadership Forum. The forum is a yearly event that teaches students with disabilities leadership and self–advocacy skills.

BESB continues to conduct career exposure camps for high school students who are visually impaired or legally blind. These programs include opportunities to interact with former recipients of vocational rehabilitation services who are successfully employed in a variety of careers. Some of these programs are held on college campuses, where the students gain a firsthand perspective of residential campus life in addition to gaining insight into a variety of careers that former clients are now engaged in.

C. roles and responsibilities, including financial responsibilities, of each agency, including provisions for determining State lead agencies and qualified personnel responsible for transition services; (Blind)

Through a cooperative agreement with the State Department of Education, the roles and responsibilities of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the public educational system are clearly defined. This includes financial responsibilities as well as coordination of services and staff training. To facilitate this coordination, the Transition School to Work Coordinator from BESB serves on an interagency transition task force and there is an appointed representative from the State Department of Education serving on the State Rehabilitation Council to BESB.

D. procedures for outreach to and identification of students with disabilities who need transition services. (Blind)

Since BESB maintains a registry of all students who are legally blind or visually impaired within Connecticut, the process for identifying and referring clients from Children’s Services to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program is streamlined and efficient. The electronic case management system for the Bureau has a built in tracking system for identifying clients by age range to further facilitate the referral of clients who desire to participate in vocational rehabilitation services. The
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work with the students, educators, parents or legal guardians and the Program’s Education Projects Coordinator to identify careers of interest, develop career exploration opportunities, work and job shadowing experiences, mentoring activities and leadership development programs.

Through these comprehensive activities, BESB has and will continue to take an active approach to transition school–to–work activities to prepare students for the world of work.

e. Cooperative Agreements with Private Nonprofit Organizations (Blind)

(Formerly known as Attachment 4.8(b)(3)). Describe the manner in which the designated State agency establishes cooperative agreements with private non-profit VR service providers.

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) uses a wide range of contractual agreements with accompanying fee schedules that have been established by the Department of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), the designated state agency for BESB as well as the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS). This provides for a statewide comprehensive set of program options and services to choose from. More than 50 non–profit community based rehabilitation programs are available through these contractual agreements for clients to select from. The services that are offered through the community rehabilitation programs in the state include job development, job coaching, and work assessments, among a variety of other training and evaluative services to enable clients to prepare for and enter into employment.

Additional fee agreements have been established with private non–profit service providers in other states where it is identified that these programs offer specific vocational and independent living services for persons who are blind. These agreements include non–profit rehabilitation providers in Louisiana, Colorado, Maryland, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, which provide work training programs as well as adjustment to blindness training.

In a contractual agreement with the National Federation of the Blind, the NFB Newsline is available for clients to access news, career information and current events. This collaboration includes the National Federation for the Blind of Connecticut, which provides funding to cover a portion of the cost for this service.

When new community rehabilitation providers become known to the Bureau, staff outreach to the provider to learn of the services that are available, and often to follow up with onsite meetings to assess the relevance of the provider’s services to the clients served by BESB. Where the new provider has program offerings that could be beneficial, Bureau staff notify the centralized contracting unit for DORS about the program so that contractual arrangements can be further explored. Upon contractual approval, the Bureau is provided with the agreed–upon fee schedule and Bureau staff are notified of the availability of the new program and the available services. BESB staff members arrange to conduct training of staff at the provider’s facility on blindness related topics such as orientation and mobility and the use of adaptive technology to ensure that programs and services are safe and accessible.

f. Arrangements and Cooperative Agreements for the Provision of Supported Employment Services (Blind)
(Formerly known as Attachment 4.8(b)(4)). Describe the designated State agency's efforts to identify and make arrangements, including entering into cooperative agreements, with other State agencies and other appropriate entities in order to provide supported employment services and extended employment services, as applicable, to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including youth with the most significant disabilities.

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) has been actively involved in cooperative working relationships with other public and private agencies for many years with regard to supported employment and extended services. The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors identify individuals who have a significant disability along with legal blindness who can potentially benefit from long–term supports through supported employment. This process begins as early as middle school and high school for transition–age youth through the Counselor's involvement in the Planning and Placement Team meetings and discussions, but it can also often occur during the adult years of clients in situations where supported employment services may be appropriate and beneficial.

The Bureau utilizes contractual agreements and fee schedules established by the Designated State Agency, the Department of Rehabilitation Services in working with community providers to purchase supported employment services prior to the transition to the provider of extended services. Typically, job coaching is the most frequently purchased service, but work assessments to establish the level of support that may be needed on the job after placement occurs are also utilized.

This Bureau continues to have an active working arrangement with the State of Connecticut, Department of Developmental Services (DDS). This cooperative agreement assists in the coordination and identification of training providers that have specific expertise when a client with a developmental disability and legal blindness could benefit from supported employment services. This working relationship also involves the utilization of the Department of Developmental Services as a long–term third party provider of funding.

In addition to the collaborative relationship with DDS, BESB has developed a working relationship with the State of Connecticut, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Through this arrangement, individuals who have a mental health diagnosis, acquired brain injury, or an addiction diagnosis along with legal blindness can access supported employment opportunities, with DMHAS providing the third party funding.

Beyond the collaborative arrangements for third party funding with other state agencies, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program continues to identify and work with a growing number of private Community Rehabilitation Providers throughout the state. Working relationships have been established with providers such as Goodwill Industries of Hartford/Springfield, Mindscape Industries, the Kennedy Center, Marrakech, and C.W. Resources to provide extended services to ensure the long–term stability of job placements within supported employment settings.

Staff from the Bureau participates in meetings and training seminars organized by the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE). This organization links community providers, employers, state agency representatives and other resources together to exchange information on job placement strategies, funding sources and employer job leads. Bureau staff have presented at meetings of this organization on blindness related topics such as adaptive technology so that other providers in attendance would be aware of the options that exist for bringing about a successful job placement when accepting a referral from BESB for a client who is seeking a job placement with supported employment services.

g. Coordination with Employers (Blind)
Describe how the designated State unit will work with employers to identify competitive integrated employment and career exploration opportunities in order to facilitate the provision of:

1. **VR services; and (Blind)**

The primary goal of coordinated activities with employers is to bring about long-term partnerships that foster a mutually beneficial relationship for both the employer and the clients served by the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind. All staff with job placement responsibilities underwent training in job development, case management strategies and relationship development strategies through the consulting firm of Employment Management Professionals. Initially launched as a collaborative effort with the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, the Bureau underwent further training in June, 2014 with this company. Additionally, the vocational rehabilitation counseling staff received training in motivational interview techniques to strengthen client engagement in the rehabilitation and job search process.

Under the statewide coordinated efforts of the Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling Coordinator, the vocational rehabilitation counseling staff utilizes the techniques learned in these training programs to connect employers with job seeking clients. However, a key component of the Employment Management Professionals strategy is to work with employers to develop longer standing relationships that are built on a genuine interest in the work of each employer, their needs and their priorities. This could mean that an actual job opening for a particular client may not come along for some time, but the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor is nonetheless a resource the employer can turn to for information, referrals to other service providers, and also to learn about job site accommodations and provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Bureau staff strives to act as an employer’s placement agency, where the employer will contact the Counselor before placing job advertisements for open recruitment. If there are no clients with the skill set to meet the particular job requirements, Bureau staff can connect the employer with other agencies or share this information at Job Developer Leadership Network (JDLN) meetings.

BESB also coordinates placement services through the National Employment Team (NET). This is a business approach of all 80 publically funded vocational rehabilitation programs working together to nationally coordinate placement services to employers that have a major presence in multiple states. The NET is a valuable resource to develop relationships with the national companies, where access to Human Resources staff at the state level is less readily available. The NET coordinator puts the businesses local human resources representative in contact with Vocational Rehabilitation agency’s point of contact. In turn, the local Vocational Rehabilitation agency point of contact and the human resources staff of the company can meet to discuss specific services or recruitment needs at the local branch level. The needed services can vary from providing job candidates for local job openings, or providing in-service training to front line supervisors on disability topics, to offering job retention assistance for workers with disabilities who have requested work site accommodations.

Within the NET, there is an employer database, referred to as the Talent Acquisition Portal (TAP), where only job seekers who are receiving services from a public Vocational Rehabilitation agency can access the portal. Employers can search for qualified candidates through this portal as well. This helps the employer recruit pre-screened qualified candidates who have a disability.

Within the provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, the Bureau has been involved in new initiatives with the other partner programs to engage employers in the process of identifying how the system can best respond to their hiring, training and retention needs. A Business Engagement Partnership Forum was held in May for the purpose of hearing from employers, and to
begin to develop a strategy to address their business needs. Working groups were formed to continue this effort with the ongoing involvement of staff across the partner programs.

The Bureau is looking forward to a strong and collaborative approach with the other workforce partners who engage in employer outreach, with a focus on offering employers a seamless and coordinated team approach to job order placing and matching candidates from the partner programs to the needs of the employers.

2. transition services, including pre-employment transition services, for students and youth with disabilities. (Blind)

With the development of employer relationships, even when employers may not be immediately hiring, they can offer other valuable services such as informational interviews, job shadowing opportunities and work assessment site hosting. Company tours can further be arranged for clients of the Bureau to learn about a wide variety of careers. This is particularly important to the transition–age youth clients served by the Bureau, who may otherwise have very limited exposure to actual job sites during their junior high and high school years. Employer sites where current or former clients of the Bureau are employed have proven to be particularly beneficial in these situations. The opportunity for mentoring these young clients helps them to learn directly from another individual who is legally blind about careers in many of the occupations that provide solid earnings and long–term stability.

One such example is evident in an initiative launched by the Chair of the Bureau’s State Rehabilitation Council. As an employee of a leading employer in the aerospace industry, she successfully coordinated a mentoring event for transition–age students to spend a day at the company, touring the facility, shadowing employees and gaining inspiration by learning how the Council Chair successfully navigated and problem–solved questions regarding work site accommodations, transportation and career development.

h. Interagency Cooperation (Blind)

Describe how the designated State unit will collaborate with the State agency responsible for administering each of the following programs to develop opportunities for competitive integrated employment, to the greatest extent practicable:

1. the State Medicaid plan under title XIX of the Social Security Act; (Blind)

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) has been actively involved in cooperative working relationships with other public agencies for many years with regard to supported employment services, benefits counseling and access to public health care information for clients served by the Bureau.

Benefits Counselors from the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services are available to assist clients of this Bureau with understanding how employment earnings and public assistance benefits interact so that clients can make informed decisions regarding employment. The Benefits Counselors also explore with clients the many options that are available within the state and federal government programs including how to apply for Medicaid and Medicare, as well as health insurance under the Affordable Care Act.
One additional provision that Connecticut participates in is Money Follows the Person, a Medicaid demonstration grant that assists with the transition from institutionalized living to community living for individuals who are receiving Title XIX. A staff person from BESB has been designated to work with this program that is housed in the Department of Social Services.

2. the State agency responsible for providing services for individuals with developmental disabilities; and (Blind)

This Bureau has an active working arrangement with the State of Connecticut, Department of Developmental Services (DDS). This cooperative agreement assists in the coordination and identification of training providers that have specific expertise when a client with a developmental disability and legal blindness could benefit from supported employment services. This working relationship also involves the utilization of the Department of Developmental Services as a long–term third party provider of funding.

3. the State agency responsible for providing mental health services. (Blind)

In addition to the collaborative relationship with DDS, BESB has developed a working relationship with the State of Connecticut, Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (DMHAS). Through this arrangement, individuals who have a mental health diagnosis, acquired brain injury, or an addiction diagnosis along with legal blindness can access supported employment opportunities, with DMHAS providing the third party funding.

i. Comprehensive System of Personnel Development; Data System on Personnel and Personnel Development (Blind)

(Formerly known as Attachment 4.10)). Describe the designated State agency's procedures and activities to establish and maintain a comprehensive system of personnel development designed to ensure an adequate supply of qualified State rehabilitation professional and paraprofessional personnel for the designated State unit, including the following:

1. Data System on Personnel and Personnel Development (Blind)

A. Qualified Personnel Needs. (Blind)

Describe the development and maintenance of a system for collecting and analyzing on an annual basis data on qualified personnel needs with respect to:

i. the number of personnel who are employed by the State agency in the provision of VR services in relation to the number of individuals served, broken down by personnel category; (Blind)

The current composition of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program includes one State Director, one Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, one Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Coordinator, one Quality Control Reviewer, one Education Project Coordinator, eight full–time Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, two Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselors, one Orientation and Mobility Instructor, four Rehabilitation Teachers (two of these staff members are Rehabilitation
Technologists), one Administrative Assistant, one Secretary, and three Special Assistants to the Blind.

With this staffing level, the staff to client ratio breaks down as follows: Administrative Assistant 1/1016; Education Projects Coordinator 1/1016; State Director 1/1016; Secretary 1/1016; Orientation and Mobility Instructor 1/1016; Quality Control Reviewer 1/1016; Rehabilitation Teacher 1/508; Rehabilitation Technologist 1/508; Special Assistant to the Blind 1/339; VR Counselor/Assistant Counselor 1/102; VR Counselor Coordinator 1/1016; and VR Supervisor 1/1016.

In terms of years of service, the breakdown for staff is as follows: 1 – 4 years of service 3/25 or 12%; 5 – 9 years of service 5/25 or 20%; 10 – 14 years of service 7/25 or 28%; 15 – 19 years of service 6/25 or 24%; and 20 – 29 years of service 4/25 or 16%.

ii. the number of personnel currently needed by the State agency to provide VR services, broken down by personnel category; and (Blind)

The service delivery to the clients is divided into five regions throughout the state. At least one Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor is assigned to each of the five regions. The state is divided in half (East and West) for rehabilitation technology services, with one technologist covering each region. There is currently one Rehabilitation Teacher specializing in independent living skills training and adaptive technology training with screen readers, and one Rehabilitation Teacher specializing in computer training with screen readers and/or magnification software. Each of the Rehabilitation Teachers serves the entire state.

Also divided in half (East and West) are the two Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselor caseload assignments for clients whose preferred language is Spanish.

There is one Vocational Counselor Coordinator that covers the entire state and works with the ten VR Counselors. This position is designed to work with the VR Counselors on job development activities and case management.

There is one Orientation and Mobility Instructor covering the entire state. This Instructor explores transportation options with clients who are in need of solutions to participate in training or employment. Additionally, the Instructor also provides assessments and travel training with the use of long white canes.

The service delivery model also includes one Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor who works primarily with college students. This Counselor has established close working relationships with the offices of Disability Services at the institutions of Higher Education. Through this approach, consistent coordination of support services can be achieved. The assignment of a specific Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to the college students also ensures consistency and timeliness with the financial aid application process.

The Education Project Coordinator serves as the Program’s Transition School–to–Work coordinator, overseeing the statewide mentoring initiative, with efforts in this past year focusing on the development of mentor videos for the Bureau’s webpage. The Education Project Coordinator also is responsible for the development and implementation of programs that provide students with opportunities to work through summer employment and internships, as well as providing career exposure experiences through job shadowing, employer tours, and mentor activities.
For fiscal year 2016, plans are in place to dedicate two of the existing Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to work exclusively with caseloads of Pre-Employment Transition-Age students. The service delivery model will have one Counselor covering the Southwestern portion of the State based on the demographic of where many of the students are located. The other Counselor will cover the remaining portion of the State. Dedicating two Counselors to work exclusively with the Pre-Employment Transition-Age students will ensure a strong focus on preparing students for careers and higher education after exiting high school.

iii. projections of the number of personnel, broken down by personnel category, who will be needed by the State agency to provide VR services in 5 years based on projections of the number of individuals to be served, including individuals with significant disabilities, the number of personnel expected to retire or leave the field, and other relevant factors. (Blind)

Over the next 5 years, the Bureau anticipates there will be vacancies due to retirement and attrition in the categories of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and Special Assistant to the Blind. The demographic of this need is illustrated by the following description, listing the job title, current number of positions within that job title, the current number of vacancies in the job category and the projected need over the next five years.

Job Title—Total positions—Current vacancies—Projected vacancies over next 5 years:

Administrative Assistant: 1 — 0 — 0
Education Projects Coordinator: 1 — 0 — 0
State Director: 1 — 0 — 0
Office Assistant: 1 — 0 — 0
Orientation and Mobility Instructor: 1 — 0 — 0
Quality Control Reviewer: 1 — 0 — 0
Rehabilitation Teacher: 2 — 0 — 0
Rehabilitation Technologist: 2 — 0 — 0
Special Assistant to the Blind: 4 — 1 — 1
VR Counselor/Assistant Counselor: 10 — 0 — 4
VR Counselor Coordinator: 1 — 0 — 0
VR Supervisor: 1 — 0 — 0

During Fiscal Year 2014, the Program had one vacant position. The vacant position was a Special Assistant to the Blind that became vacant in 2010. The decision was made not to fill the vacant position at this time due to competing funding priorities. The Program acknowledges that it may
become more critical to fill this position in the future if the demographic of the field staff shifts beyond the current ratio of four field staff that are legally blind to three Special Assistants to the Blind.

It is projected that within the next five years, the need for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors due to attrition and retirement will be four. It is further anticipated that the Program may expand to add one additional Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to serve a regional caseload. The new position would be established to offset the realignment of two current staff to work exclusively with students with disabilities that meet the definition for eligibility to access Pre-Employment Transition Services reserved funding. As the Program implements the provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act associated with the emphasis on serving students with disabilities, the realignment of staffing to serve these individuals beyond what has traditionally occurred prior to the passage of the law becomes more critical. Dedicating specific staff to exclusively serve this client population will address this need.

With the relatively high starting salary for Master’s level Rehabilitation Counselors compared to the private rehabilitation sector within the state, it is anticipated that recruitment efforts would again result in a sufficient applicant pool of qualified individuals when a Counselor vacancy occurs or a new position is established. The Program recruits for individuals who meet the highest standard in the state (CRC eligibility) first. The competitive salary offered by this Bureau has resulted in the ability to hire individuals who possess this level of credentialing in most situations. If there are no qualified candidates from those recruitments, then recruitment will be made for a Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselor level.

B. Personnel Development (Blind)

Describe the development and maintenance of a system for collecting and analyzing on an annual basis data on personnel development with respect to:

i. a list of the institutions of higher education in the State that are preparing VR professionals, by type of program; (Blind)

Central Connecticut State University, Masters in Rehabilitation Counseling

ii. the number of students enrolled at each of those institutions, broken down by type of program; and (Blind)

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program monitors the number of students enrolled in Masters of Rehabilitation counseling programs at colleges throughout the region by contacting the educational institutions to ensure that there are sufficient numbers of candidates to address future anticipated recruitment needs. In the past year, Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts had 86 students enrolled, with 32 recently graduated. Central Connecticut State University in New Britain, Connecticut had 91 students enrolled with 25 recently graduated. The number of Masters of Rehabilitation Counseling degree candidates is sufficient to address the projected recruitment needs over the next fiscal year.

iii. the number of students who graduated during the prior year from each of those institutions with certification or licensure, or with the credentials for certification or licensure, broken down by the personnel category for which they have received, or have the credentials to receive, certification or licensure. (Blind)
Central Connecticut State University graduated 25 students with Masters degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling and Assumption College graduated 32 students with Masters degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling.

2. Plan for Recruitment, Preparation and Retention of Qualified Personnel (Blind)

Describe the development and implementation of a plan to address the current and projected needs for qualified personnel including, the coordination and facilitation of efforts between the designated State unit and institutions of higher education and professional associations to recruit, prepare, and retain personnel who are qualified, including personnel from minority backgrounds and personnel who are individuals with disabilities.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program remains in contact on an annual basis with all of the institutions of higher education in this region that offer Master’s degree programs in Rehabilitation Counseling to ensure that an adequate flow of graduates is anticipated for projected vacancies. When positions are available, recruitment efforts are conducted through job announcements that are placed on the Department of Administrative Services web site, news publications of minority–based organizations, and colleges in the area. The Program also distributes the job vacancy announcements to organizations of and for individuals who are blind within the state, as well as advertising nationally through Rehab Net, which is a list–serve that connects all 80 public vocational rehabilitation agencies. The list–serve for the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) is also utilized to distribute job announcements to ensure the widest possible distribution.

Within the past year, the Bureau has also reached out to Goodwin College to arrange to speak with students in their human services classes at the bachelor’s level in an effort to increase awareness of the field of Rehabilitation Counseling, with the goal of encouraging students to consider graduate work in this field. Beyond this outreach activity, the Bureau also worked with Springfield College, Central Connecticut State University and the University of Massachusetts to host graduate level interns at the Bureau for the new fiscal year. Two interns are scheduled to do their field placements within the Vocational Rehabilitation program and the third intern’s field placement will be in the Children’s Services program during fiscal year 2015.

3. Personnel Standards (Blind)

Describe the State agency's policies and procedures for the establishment and maintenance of personnel standards consistent with section 101(a)(7)(B) and 34 CFR 361.18(c) to ensure that designated State unit professional and paraprofessional personnel are adequately trained and prepared, including:

A. standards that are consistent with any national or State-approved or -recognized certification, licensing, registration, or other comparable requirements that apply to the profession or discipline in which such personnel are providing VR services; and (Blind)

All staff members working as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and the Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor at the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind meet the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development. These staff members meet these requirements by having a Master’s Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling or a closely related field, as specified by the criteria for certification as a rehabilitation counselor by the Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor
Certification (CRCC). In addition, the State Director for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program also meets the CRCC standard and holds the credential of Certified Rehabilitation Counselor.

There are two staff members that do not meet the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development requirements of a Master’s Degree in Rehabilitation or a closely related field. As specified in Bureau policy, the Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, who meets this standard, approves all eligibility decisions, Individualized Plans for Employment, and case closures for these two staff who are both in the job title of Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselor.

There is no requirement in the job specification of the Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselor series to advance into the Counselor level. However, staff hired into the job title of Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselor are encouraged to pursue continuing education to meet the qualifications of the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor level. This strategy has proven to be successful. One of the current staff did pursue this option, acquiring a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling through the Region I Continuing Education Grant, and subsequently applied for and was promoted into the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor level position. In the past year, he moved into a higher level position of Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling Coordinator.

The most recently hired Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselor is currently participating in the Master’s in Rehabilitation Counseling program at Central Connecticut State University. The anticipated date for completion of the program is 2016.

Working with the Department of Labor and the One–Stop Centers and their regional partners, Vocational Rehabilitation staff will be participating in training seminars on the needs of employers within the state, to better prepare staff in working with clients to meet the needs of the employer community. This will include training to learn of the credentials required for careers in demand, the universities and training programs that offer these degrees and credentials, and the adaptive technology considerations that must be taken into account to enable individuals who are blind to access these training curricula and the job tasks.

B. the establishment and maintenance of education and experience requirements, in accordance with section 101(a)(7)(B)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act, to ensure that the personnel have a 21st century understanding of the evolving labor force and the needs of individuals with disabilities. (Blind)

With the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), new opportunities for collaborative training with other partners of the workforce system are emerging within the state. The Bureau will be working in partnership with the State Department of Labor and the State Department of Education to identify training opportunities that Vocational Rehabilitation staff can participate in on labor market projections and career forecasting, employer engagement strategies, and skill requirements for high growth job opportunities in the state. Additionally, the Bureau will work with the One–Stop partners in each of the regions to identify training workshops available to staff from partner programs on topics such as accessing services from training providers, including apprenticeship opportunities and certificates from post–secondary occupational schools.

4. Staff Development. (Blind)

Describe the State agency’s policies, procedures, and activities to ensure that, consistent with section101(a)(7)(C) of the Rehabilitation Act, all personnel employed by the designated State unit receive appropriate and adequate training in terms of:
A. System of staff development (Blind)

a system of staff development for professionals and paraprofessionals within the designated State unit, particularly with respect to assessment, vocational counseling, job placement, and rehabilitation technology, including training implemented in coordination with entities carrying out State programs under section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998; and

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program makes available a full range of training programs offered through public and private entities. Program staff members are encouraged to identify training areas of particular interest for their individualized professional development in addition to the Bureau identifying programmatic training categories for staff to participate in.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work directly with their supervisor to identify areas for professional growth and development each year. Each employee of the Program receives at least one written evaluation per year, which is consistent with collective bargaining agreements. The Supervisor of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program meets with staff members regularly to assist with any areas of their job performance that could benefit from further development and to provide feedback on best practices that have proven to be effective in service delivery. Technical assistance on policies and procedures is also provided during individualized meetings and during staff meetings. If an employee is found to need additional assistance and training in order to meet the job requirements, then a plan for improvement is developed. This may include the use of weekly reviews, additional written performance evaluations, and increasing the opportunity for the employee to participate in formalized training programs to increase skills and competencies.

Assistive Technology continues to be among the highest training priorities for staff in Vocational Rehabilitation, particularly since adaptive equipment is so often a component of success on the job for clients served by the Program. One of the Rehabilitation Technologists attended a national conference on technology at California State University at Northridge (CSUN). The other Rehabilitation Technologist attended the National Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) conference. The Rehabilitation Technologists bring back all the information they learned and provide an in-service training to Program staff on the latest technology available to individuals who are blind.

The two Rehabilitation Teachers who provide adaptive technology training to clients took part in trainings on accessible applications and features for the iPhone and Android devices. Several Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors also participated in these training sessions. Additionally, eight staff attended the statewide conference “Achievement Through Technology” with the two Rehabilitation Technologists presenting a workshop session on adaptive technology for people who are blind.

Additionally, online training programs have been utilized on such topics as how to fund adaptive technology, making web pages accessible and JAWS for Windows with Math.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling staff, the Supervisor and the Director all participated in a refresher course that was first delivered in fiscal year 2006 on employment outreach strategies that engage employers in the job development process. Originally delivered as part of a two–state initiative with the Region I Technical Assistance Center and the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, this training taught new approaches to job development through effective long–term relationship building with employers and a technique for time management. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors also attended a training on motivational interviewing strategies to increase the Program’s focus on client engagement in services.

B. Acquisition and dissemination of significant knowledge (Blind)
procedures for the acquisition and dissemination of significant knowledge from research and other sources to designated State unit professionals and paraprofessionals.

Information on best practices in other state vocational rehabilitation programs as well as evidenced based research and practices is disseminated to staff of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to help them remain current with trends and strategies. Most noteworthy are the recent developments with transition age youth and the programs that have been developed across the country to increase access to leadership development, mentoring and summer employment.

5. Personnel to Address Individual Communication Needs (Blind)

Describe how the designated State unit has personnel or obtains the services of other individuals who are able to communicate in appropriate modes of communication with or in the native language of applicants or eligible individuals who have limited English speaking ability.

There are two Vocational Rehabilitation Assistant Counselors who are bilingual in English and Spanish, and who work with Spanish–speaking clients throughout the State. Part of their duties includes outreach to community–based organizations to distribute information about services offered by the organization. The Bureau also provides information to clients in large–print, Braille, electronic, and audio formats to ensure that materials are accessible. Bureau staff can also utilize contracted translation services to communicate with clients in other languages. Through the Deaf and Hard of Hearing unit at the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, interpreters for the deaf are available, including tactile interpreters for clients of the Bureau who are deaf and blind and whose preferred mode of communication is through sign language.

6. Coordination of Personnel Development Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Blind)

As appropriate, describe the procedures and activities to coordinate the designated State unit's comprehensive system of personnel development with personnel development under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Collaboration through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) occurs on a continual basis through joint training programs and initiatives. Staff members from Vocational Rehabilitation have participated in transition work groups including the Transition Taskforce that is facilitated by staff from the State Department of Education. There is also a Community of Practice group that focuses on best practices and emerging trends in transition services to youth with disabilities. This multi–agency initiative includes representatives from this Bureau as well as the State Department of Education, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Department of Developmental Services and the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services.

With the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, there is increased emphasis on providing career development services to youth with disabilities prior to high school completion. The Bureau is developing strategies to address these priorities for eligible and potentially eligible individuals. Training in the components of the new law and how it will be implemented within the Bureau has already begun and will continue into the new fiscal year.

j. Statewide Assessment (Blind)

(Formerly known as Attachment 4.11(a)).
1. Provide an assessment of the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the State, particularly the VR services needs of those: (Blind)

A. with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services; (Blind)

The State Rehabilitation Council to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program for individuals who are blind commissioned the Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) at Central Connecticut State University to conduct a comprehensive statewide needs assessment in fiscal year 2015 to assist the Bureau with establishing goals and priorities. The full report as issued by CPPSR appears immediately below. The Council has utilized the findings and recommendations within this document to assist with the development of goals, objectives, strategies and measures for the upcoming state plan.

CPPSR Full Report:

BUREAU OF EDUCATION AND SERVICES FOR THE BLIND (BESB) NEEDS ASSESSMENT

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I. Overview

In accord with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) is required to conduct a needs assessment of individuals with disabilities living within the
state. This needs assessment complies with the evaluative objectives outlined in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) Guide dated November 30, 2009. As noted in the Guide, this analysis is valid for three years. In conducting this analysis, Central Connecticut State University’s (CCSU) Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) gathered information from consumers, an advisory council, the Internet, and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) staff.

II. Methodology

In conducting the assessment, The Center for Public Policy and Social Research examined and/or conducted:

- An analysis of population statistics for Connecticut that describe disability and minority status;
- A description of VR participation rates of minority individuals in comparison to individuals in the overall population in Connecticut and to national VR statistics;
- An analysis of VR services to individuals with the most significant disabilities,
- An analysis of Bureau improvements since the previous VR assessment;
- The results of a teleconference focus group discussion held with the Bureau Consumer Advisory Committee (conducted January 2014);
- The results of the consumer satisfaction survey for individuals served during Fiscal Year (FY) 2013;
- Comparative longitudinal data analysis based off of the consumer satisfaction survey from FY 2003–2013;
- The results of one in–depth interview with a Bureau Consumer Advisory Committee member;
- The results of three in–depth interviews with BESB Vocational Rehabilitation counselors (conducted April 2014).

III. Clientele Summary

A. Overview

At the end of fiscal year (FY) 2011, BESB’s registry comprised of 10,942 visually impaired individuals (footnote 1). The Bureau’s registry for FY 2012 accounted for 10,735 visually impaired individuals, revealing that their clientele decreased by 1.8% (footnote 2). Data for FY 2013 further show a registry increase of approximately 2.7% to 11,034. No reliable state blind population statistics are available at this time. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain whether this recent registry increase indicates growth within the visually impaired community or success on BESB’s behalf at identifying more of its potential clientele.

B. Minorities

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2012 data, predictions based on 2010 Census findings, Connecticut’s minority population is slightly less representative than that of the national population. Approximately two–fifths of all Americans (38.9%) self–identified their ethnicity as part of a minority group. Of those individuals who associated with one ethnicity, 16.9% were Hispanic or Latino, 13.1%
were African American, 5.1% were Asian, 1.2% were Native American, and 0.2% were Pacific Islander (footnote 3). Slightly off of national statistics, approximately one–third (32.3%) of Connecticut survey respondents identified themselves as a minority (footnote 4). In order of frequency, state minorities are accounted for as follows: 14.2% Hispanic/Latino, 11.2% African American, 4.2% Asian, .5% Native American, and .1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (footnote 5).

Comparing BESB, state, and national statistics, we find that the Bureau’s Vocational Rehabilitation program appears to be successful at engaging Connecticut’s visually impaired minority community. Overall, Bureau clientele enrolled in the VR program who self–identify their ethnicity reasonably reflect both the state and national minority population at approximately 34%. Sub–groups are similarly represented. For fiscal year 2012, BESB reported the following of program enrollment: 19% African American, 12% Hispanic/Latino, 2% Asian, and less than 1% Native American/Pacific Islander (footnote 6). As noted in the overview of the Clientele Summary, participation in BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation program has decreased by approximately 1.5% between 2011 and 2013 (footnote 7). Notably, minority enrollment in the program remained steady during this time. This indicates that while the overall registry enrollment has dropped, outreach to minorities with visual disabilities has remained consistent. Currently, there is no reliable data that measures the incidence of blindness in minority communities within Connecticut. For this reason, the Needs Assessment approximates information based on general minority population statistics.

Since the last VR assessment was issued, BESB has taken numerous steps to improve its outreach to the minority community. BESB employs two bilingual counselors and pays for interpreters on an "as needed" basis. BESB also continues outreach to specific minority groups through local meetings and events. Such outreach efforts include attending the Puerto Rican Forum and working with other agencies that offer ESL (English as a Second Language) classes (footnote 8). Given the information, CPPSR concludes that BESB has made successful efforts in reaching out to underserved populations. Towards the end of this report, suggestions to further assist in outreach efforts have been provided.

C. Youth

Reporting practices vary, so it is difficult to compare BESB’s success at reaching minority and child populations with other states. For example, many agency websites do not divulge statistics for race, ethnicity, or age. Despite the lack of comparative data, it is possible to assess how BESB is doing within its own state. We conclude that BESB is actively engaging blind youth in the State of Connecticut. In fiscal year 2011, the Bureau’s registry accounted for 10,942 blind individuals. Out of that number, 1,074 were children. The 2012 report reveals that 1,123 out of 10,735 individuals on BESB’s registry were children. This reflects a 3% increase in their enrollment. While the registry grew 2.7% in FY 2013 (totaling 11,034), the number of children decreased to 1,100 (footnote 9). This represents a drop of less than 1%. The amount of children served since the last Assessment saw a statistically insignificant increase of .09%. This adds a net of three children since the end of fiscal year 2010. While it is difficult to determine the reason behind the fluctuation of children registered with BESB simply by looking at numbers, a possible explanation is that some children entered adulthood.

IV. Vocational Rehabilitation Outcomes

This section compares Connecticut’s Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind outcome data with those from other peer agencies. These data were derived from the U.S. Department of Education’s Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) 911 Ad Hoc Query feature. Information is from the most recent RSA reporting (FY 2012). Looking at a variety of metrics, BESB’s measured outcomes are very competitive with peer agencies.
Compared to peer agencies with similar grant amounts received for FY 2012, BESB ranked the highest for closing cases based upon favorable employment outcomes (88.8%, footnote 10). Of the 6 peer state agencies included in this particular comparison, Oregon ranked second at 78.13%, Iowa and South Carolina tied for third (77.88%), Arkansas fifth (73.99%), and New Mexico sixth (53.03%). Another metric that can be used to evaluate BESB’s VR program is to compare the Bureau’s outcome data to peer agencies with similar amounts of individuals served. BESB served 125 new clients in FY 2012. Other agencies serving numbers of clients closest to this figure include Minnesota (159), Oregon (128), Idaho (106), and Iowa (104). BESB reported the highest positive employment outcome percentage in this cohort by over ten percentage points (10.67%, footnote 11). Among peer agencies, as measured by both grant funds received and the number of clients served, Connecticut’s Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind leads in positive employment outcomes.

While BESB is highly competitive in most measures presented in the RSA data, one area stands out as being a place to improve the services offered. This comes in observing the average hours per week in which clients are employed. Looking at reported outcomes for agencies that exclusively serve blind populations, the average is 26.48 hours per week worked (footnote 12). BESB sits right at this mean. Using the median, a more precise measure of central tendency given the outlier of Maine (10.33), we find that BESB falls just below the middle point of the data (28.17). The unfortunate fact is that Connecticut has the 39th highest unemployment rate in the country (footnote 13). This undoubtedly contributes to the Bureau’s difficulty in locating and obtaining full–time opportunities for their clients. However, when BESB does place VR clients in positions, these individuals make highly competitive salaries. Among all 24 states that isolate the reporting of blind agency data outcomes, BESB is second in the nation with an hourly wage of $16.24. This figure is $3.54 above the average for this agency cohort. Washington leads this grouping with an average hourly wage of $17.03.

The Bureau stands out when examining the average time to case closure with no employment. BESB leaves cases open for an average of 95.30 months, a true outlier. Isolating reported outcomes for agencies exclusively serving the blind population, a cohort of 24 states, the statistical average for this metric 46.72 months. Qualitative data offer some insights as to why BESB’s figure is comparatively high. Some clients who enter the VR program are unprepared for employment. For example, some of these individuals are adjusting to life as a newly blinded person. These individuals may not aggressively seek employment for an extended period of time. These cases are typically left open. Further, VR counselors report an unconditional desire to never give up on a client. These insights are statistically corroborated by BESB’s low percentage of cases closed without employment. Looking at the 24 states that isolate data for agencies exclusively serving the blind population, the Bureau has the lowest percentage of cases closed without unemployment (11.2%). Notably, this figure is just shy of 20 percentage points below the average for this cohort (31.18%).

Financial efficiency is extremely important in today’s economic climate. We find the Bureau to be extremely efficient with its funds. BESB spent an average of $5,603 on each client with a positive employment outcome. This measure of efficiency is sixth in the nation among the 24 state cohort referenced above. Looking at this same peer grouping, BESB spends the highest amount of dollars on cases closed with no employment (average of $14,249.07). This figure is substantially above the mean ($7,437.268).

Bureau employment outcomes reported to the RSA correspond to customer satisfaction survey results. Central Connecticut State University’s Center for Public Policy and Social Research has collected longitudinal data on client attitudes towards services rendered by BESB. The results typically yield a margin of error of +/-5 at the 95% confidence interval. In fiscal year 2013, more than nine out of ten survey respondents (91%) reported that they would recommend BESB to a friend (footnote 14). Since the last time this assessment was conducted, the Bureau reached its all–time
high on this valuable measure. The results for fiscal year 2012 revealed that 94% of clients surveyed would recommend BESB to a friend.

Overall, Bureau clients that participated in the survey reported high levels of satisfaction across all services. On average, BESB clients reported higher levels of satisfaction with services compared to 2012. Five services enjoyed an increase in mean satisfaction rating. Only three services experienced a decline, all of which were modest downturns. These findings continue the general positive trend set in 2012. In 2013, Low Vision and Skills Training services, for example, both experienced notable increases in satisfaction from the previous year’s survey. The mean satisfaction score for Low Vision Services improved from 7.72 in 2011 to 8.79 in 2013 (footnote 15). Skills Training Services’ mean score increase from 7.96 in 2011 to 9.09 in 2013. This represented the highest satisfaction mark out of all of BESB’s services in 2013.

V. Focus Group Summary

As part of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, the Center for Public Policy and Social Research conducted a focus group with members of the Bureau Consumer Advisory Committee (BCAC). This focus group was conducted within the context of a BCAC teleconference business meeting held in January of 2014. The purpose of this focus group was to understand how BCAC members felt about BESB services, needs that should be addressed in the near future, and how BESB could increase outreach efforts to the unserved and underserved. Given that BESB’s Director was involved in the teleconference, Advisory Committee members seeking greater confidentiality were encouraged to call the Principal Investigator at a later point in time. One individual took advantage of this offer. It is worth noting that these qualitative findings cannot be generalized beyond the BCAC membership. Still, they provide valuable insight into how a group of select consumers and agency affiliates view BESB’s operations.

The chief concern that emerged from the focus group revolved around the topic of access to technology. Multiple BCAC members talked about the importance of getting technology to older adults. They felt that the concentration of technology training has been geared towards people who are going into the workforce or are currently employed. An increasing number of older adults are interested in using computers at home. However, these individuals are missing both the adaptive technology and the skill set needed to use that equipment. The Committee stressed that technology is a critical tool for independence. Clients have the ability to receive needed goods and services that are otherwise difficult to obtain. Provided example included online grocery shopping and access to online vendors such as Amazon. One client suggested that there is a large population of older people living alone. Access to online services is particularly important for this age group.

A second concern was the issue of unreturned phone calls. One focus group participant mentioned that certain staff members return phone calls right away, while others do not return their calls. As a result, clients end up calling supervisors. This strategy puts an additional strain on the Bureau’s management team. The Director of BESB mentioned that messages left on direct lines cannot be tracked. He can only identify calls that come in via the main switchboard. This means that the Bureau currently has no mechanism to confirm if calls were received and/or returned. CPPSR offers some suggestions to address this issue in section seven of this report.

A third concern is improving outreach to underserved populations. One individual referenced the demographic influence that Connecticut’s two casinos have had on the Southwest region of the State. Language barriers may hinder outreach efforts. For example, there is a growing Haitian population in Connecticut that speaks French Creole. Furthermore, one BCAC member highlighted the importance of recognizing cultural barriers. Some cultures tend to deal with disabilities within the
family, a concern that was reaffirmed by CCSU in an interview with one of the VR counselors. VR Counselors should be knowledgeable about—and sensitive to—how certain cultures view disability.

Finally, focus group participants expressed a need for a job placement specialist. The group was informed that a Counselor Coordinator was hired in October of 2013. This hire will be responsible for helping people get jobs and needed services. Mr. Richmond, the incumbent, should be instructed to engage federal partners when they have job openings. He should also help clients who have given up on finding employment. Further suggestions about how to best use the Counselor Coordinator are offered at the conclusion of this report.

It is worthy of mention that BCAC members were very complimentary of BESB’s services. While not specifically related to VR, one individual praised the Bureau for helping with general daily skills. This client has learned basic organizational skills, cooking skills, and alternate ways to deal with day-to-day tasks. CRIS Radio, a collaborative partner of the Bureau, is thankful that counselors are informing clients about their service. It is estimated that 90% of new applications come from BESB referrals.

VI. VR Staff Interview Summary

In April of 2014, CPPSR conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with three counselors working in BESB’s Vocational Rehabilitation division. The VR employees who participated in the interview process made several recommendations. CPPSR is presenting these recommendations in a broad context to help BESB identify actionable solutions:

Finding 1: VR counselors are responsible for a diverse range of time-sensitive tasks. Some of these tasks are clerical responsibilities that take away from quality casework time. Bill paying tasks were cited as being particularly time consuming.

Solution: We suggest that the Counselor Coordinator adapt an “open door policy” to assist counselors with identifying priorities. We also suggest developing a college internship program to help with BESB’s day-to-day operations. This would allow additional time for counselors to focus on getting their clients jobs.

Finding 2: Counselors expressed interest in being more integrated into the agency’s policy-making process.

Solution: Our findings suggest that management values the expertise of its VR counselors. We suggest that management verbally reaffirm this position to its staff. We also suggest that, when possible, that the leadership continue to engage the counselors in the policy brainstorming and implementation processes.

Finding 3: Counselors are concerned that clients call management as a means of overriding their decisions. A unified front should be presented in these scenarios.

Solution: Utilize middle management, specifically the Counselor Coordinator, to deal with these situations. When a client calls management, that call should be redirected to the Coordinator. This person should then meet with the counselor to come up with a mutually agreeable solution. This approach would help establish a greater sense of teamwork among the staff.

Finding 4: One counselor expressed that he/she did not feel technologically mobile, especially during the client intake process. This person reported not having access while “on the go.”
Solution: A separate finding suggests that technology requests from VR counselors are taken seriously and usually approved. Management should verbally reaffirm this position. We suggest that the Director convene a meeting focused on technology. Counselors should be encouraged to discuss what technology they see as being necessary. If technological gaps are ultimately identified, management should work to fill them.

Finding 5: One counselor expressed frustration over not being able to accept electronic signatures from clients. This counselor reported driving a long distance just to secure a signature.

Solution: A separate finding suggests that BESB can accept electronic signatures from clients. This position should be reaffirmed to VR staff members.

Finding 6: Counselors find the new case management system frustrating. A common report states that the system’s built–in authorization process is cumbersome and time consuming.

Solution: Offer this feedback to appropriate decision–makers in the Department of Rehabilitation Services. Encourage the DORS leadership to make the system more user–friendly.

VII. Further Recommendations

Based on the data collected for this Assessment, CPPSR has a few recommendations for improving the VR program. First, we have some broad suggestions on how to improve agency outreach. CPPSR sees social media as a valuable way for the Bureau to extend its name recognition and knowledge of services offered. As state law permits, CPPSR suggests setting up and maintaining a Facebook account. There is no charge to establish an account. The Bureau could then post regular announcements regarding special events and outreach efforts. By “friending” other agencies or business–oriented networks, the Bureau may come to learn of new outreach opportunities. We also recommend, as state law permits, that BESB create a series of YouTube videos. These videos could highlight BESB’s mission, available services, and client success stories. These videos could be posted on the BESB website and Facebook page. Links to the videos could also be distributed via e–mail. If someone calls BESB wanting to learn more about the Bureau’s mission, video links could serve as valuable promotional material. Clients could also participate in making videos and share their personal stories about the Bureau. We realize that some of the decisions regarding the use of social networking platforms rest with the Commissioner of the Department of Rehabilitation Services. It is our suggestion that the Commissioner consider the Bureau as a test case for social media outreach. We find that both VR staff and the Bureau’s management team are interested in utilizing digital technology.

Activating LinkedIn accounts for VR counselors was a positive first step. Continued advancements should be investigated, especially in light of the Bureau’s enthusiasm towards integrating this new technology. Along the lines of digital technology, we recommend that the BESB website be improved. The website is unorganized and visually unappealing. This could discourage potential consumers, as well as potential employers, from pursuing a relationship with the Bureau. Having a strong digital presence is important in today’s technological age. Should the BESB pursue this suggestion, it is critical that the Bureau conforms to the standards adopted by the State of Connecticut Website Accessibility Committee (WCAG A, footnote 16). We suggest that documents and reports should be organized with clear headings. We also recommend having headings on the home page targeted to specific populations. For example, “Information for Consumers” or “Information for Employers” would offer website visitors some direction. If the Bureau is in a position to pursue social media outreach, including that information on the website would be extremely valuable.
CPPSR finds great merit in the newly instituted college mentorship program. This is a positive development that may ultimately assist students in important career trajectory decisions. Interviews with VR staff members highlighted some potential improvements to the program. Instead of starting the mentorship program during a client's freshman year, establish the mentor/mentee relationship one year earlier. The junior or senior year of high school would be ideal. The mentor could then assist with critical decisions such as what college/university to attend and navigating the first day of school. Capturing the transition period from high school to college would maximize the value of this new program. This same mentor may then assist the student with career questions as they prepare to transition to post–college life.

Also in the realm of higher education, we suggest that the Bureau consider establishing an internship program with local colleges and universities. Students majoring in social work, sociology, and political science may have interest in gaining real–world experience at the Bureau. Many departments housed in Connecticut's state university system have internship coordinators. This individual is a valuable point–person for connecting the Bureau with students. Students could work for either a semester or, more ideally, an entire academic year. We see an internship program as a valuable pipeline for addressing some long–standing concerns that BESB has been facing. One prominent example is the issue of phone calls going unreturned. CPPSR is not aware of any technology that could serve as an immediate fix to this dilemma. Consequently, we suggest that the Bureau turn to the power of people. College interns could assist with the day–to–day operations of BESB. This could include things such as helping with billing paperwork, tracking phone calls, and directing clients to the appropriate staff member. We realize that part of the difficulty with addressing these needs comes in training new workers. If BESB could secure interns for an academic year, this training would be worth the time investment. Many internship programs base themselves on a “for credit only” arrangement. To present a more competitive internship program, we suggest that the Bureau consider offering a semester stipend in addition to the possibility of earning college credit. Such a program would also allow for BESB to identify new talent worthy of full–time positions.

CPPSR views the recent re–emergence of the Counselor Coordinator position as a positive development. During the BCAC teleconference, BESB’s Director mentioned that the incumbent will be responsible for helping clients get jobs and needed services. We perceive that this employee can serve as a critical liaison between upper management and the VR staff. As an example, a client recently called upper management to challenge a decision that a VR counselor made regarding technology training. These types of calls should be redirected to the Counselor Coordinator. In close consultation with the VR counselor handling the case, a decision can be made on how to address the dispute. This team–oriented approach will enhance the sense of camaraderie and teamwork within the Vocational Rehabilitation division.

VIII. Conclusion

Connecticut’s Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind has done an excellent job of providing services and employment opportunities for the blind population of the State. When clients get jobs, those placements are quality employment opportunities. The average wage for BESB clients in the Vocational Rehabilitation program is extremely competitive. While this may partially be attributed to the high cost of living in Connecticut, it may also be that BESB takes steps to ensure that its clients maintain a quality standard of living. Additionally, in fiscal year 2012, 47 out of 111 cases closed with employment resulted in the client receiving health insurance. Moving forward, with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, this metric may become less significant. Still, we see this as a positive measure of the Bureau's commitment to placing clients in viable, long–lasting employment opportunities. Counselors have a true passion for helping their clients.
The client satisfaction data also reveal positive trends. The survey results from 2012 and 2013 indicate that the Bureau is very popular among its clientele. As previously mentioned, the Bureau posted excellent satisfaction ratings in many key service areas. Notably, satisfaction ratings have improved over the last two years, even as funding has decreased. Not only has the Bureau been able to serve more individuals with less grant funding, but it was highly ranked in several of our comparisons with other states that did not have similar grant decreases.

IX. Appendix & Footnotes

Table Number: Table Title

Table 1: BESB Clientele, FY 2009–2013

Table 2: BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Participants, FY 2013

Table 3: BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Participants, FY 2012

Table 4: State of Connecticut Minority Statistics, 2012

Table 5: National Minority Statistics, 2012

Table 6: Comparison of Vocational Rehabilitation Employment Outcomes between BESB and States with Similar Grant Amounts, FY 2012

Table 7: Comparison of Vocational Rehabilitation Employment Outcomes between BESB and States Serving Similar Amounts of Individuals, FY 2012

Table 1: BESB Clientele, FY 2009–2013 (footnote 17)

CLIENTELE – NUMBER

Total for 2009 – 12,166 Children – 1,071
Total for 2010 – 12,426 Children – 1,097
Total for 2011 – 10,942 Children – 1,074
Total for 2012 – 10,735 Children – 1,123
Total for 2013 – 11,034 Children – 1,100

Table 2: BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Participants, FY 2013 (footnote 18)

PARTICIPANTS – NUMBER – PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL

Total VR – 954

Minorities – 326 – 34%
African–American – 182 – 19%
Hispanic/Latino – 115 – 12%
Asian – 19 – 2%
Native–American/Pacific Islander – 9 – <1%

Table 3: BESB VR Participants FY 2012 (footnote 19)
POPULATION – NUMBER – PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL
Total VR – 958
Minorities – 321 – 33.5%
African–American – 184 – 19.2%
Hispanic/Latino – 118 – 12.3%
Asian – 19 – 2%
Native–American/Pacific Islander – 5 – <1%

Table 4: State of Connecticut Minority Statistics FY 2012 (footnote 20)
POPULATION – NUMBER – PERCENTAGE
Total Population – 3,591,765 – ~ 1% of national
Minority Population – 1,160,140 – 32.3%
African–American – 402,278 – 11.2%
Hispanic/Latino – 510,031 – 14.2%
Asian – 150,854 – 4.2%
Native American – 17,959 – 0.5%
Pacific Islander – 3,592 – 0.1%
Other – 75,427 – 2.1%

Table 5: National Minority Statistics (2012)
POPULATION – NUMBER – PERCENTAGE
Total – 313,873,685
Minorities – 122,096,863 – 38.9%
African American – 41,117,453 – 13.1%
Hispanic/Latino – 53,044,653 – 16.9%
Asian – 16,007,558 – 5.1%
Native American – 3,766,484 – 1.2%
Pacific Islander – 627,747 – 0.2%

Table 6: Comparison of Vocational Rehabilitation Employment Outcomes between BESB and States with Similar Grant Amounts FY 2012 (footnote 21)

CT – OR – IA – SC – AR – NM

Employment Rate:
CT 88.8% – OR 78.13% – IA 77.88% – SC 77.88% – AR 73.99% – NM 50.9%

Number Closed with Employment:
CT 111 – OR 100 – IA 81 – SC 257 – AR 313 – NM 35

Percent Closed with Employment at 35 Hours Per Week or More:
CT 39.2% – OR 18.75% – IA 41.35% – SC 31.21% – AR 38.53% – NM 12.1%

Average Hourly Rate:

Average Time to Close Months with Employment:
CT 28.5 – OR 38.6 – IA 28.0 – SC 17.3 – AR 22.1 – NM 63.9

Other 7,532,968 – 2.4%

Table 7: Comparison of Vocational Rehabilitation Employment Outcomes between BESB and States Serving Similar Amounts of Individuals FY 2012 (footnote 22)

CT – OR – IA – ID – MN

Employment Rate:
CT 88.8% – OR 78.13% – IA 77.88% – ID 75.47% – MN 50.94%

Number Served:
CT 125 – OR 128 – IA 104 – ID 106 – MN 159
Number Closed with Employment:

CT 111 – OR 100 – IA 81 – ID 80 – MN 81

Percent Closed with Employment at 35 Hours Per Week or More:

CT 39.2% – OR 18.75% – IA 41.35% – ID 45.0% – MN 43.21%

Average Hourly Rate:


Average Time to Close Months with Employment:

CT 28.5 – OR 38.6 – IA 28.0 – ID 27.1 – MN 45.6

Footnotes

1. BESB, "Annual Report on Services to Individuals who are Blind or Visually Impaired,”


   QuickFacts” http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html

   http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09000.html

   http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09000.html

6. BESB, "Annual Update on Services to Individuals from Minority Backgrounds" Under
   “Underserved Populations CT–B–FFY 2013,”

7. BESB, BESB, "State Plan for Rehabilitation Services for FY 2012," under
   "Draft"http://search.ct.gov/search?q=submitted%20fy%202011&btnG=Search&client=besb&output=x
   ml_no_dtd&proxystylesheet=besb&ulang=en&entfrm=0&entsp=a__besb_policy&oe=UTF-8&ie=UTF-8
   8&fu=1&sort=date%3Ad%3AS%Ad1&exclude_apps=1&site=dors_collection&ip=108.248.14.233?
   BESB, “State Plan for the State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program for FY 2014,” Under
   “4.11(b) Annual Estimates CT–B–FFY 2014,”

8. One such example is BESB’s alliance with Aspire.
9. BESB, "Dept. Rehabilitation Services, under “4 11(b) Annual Estimates CT–B FFY 2013”

10. Data derived from: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), Management Information System (MIS), Vocational Rehabilitation Agency Data, 2012,

11. Oregon had the second–best positive employment outcome figure at 78.13%.

12. This analysis excludes RSA data from states that combine disabilities.

13. As reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics for March of 2014:
http://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm


http://www.access.state.ct.us/policies/accesspolicy40.html


http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/09000.html. This is a prediction based upon the 2010 US Census. All numbers that ended in .5 or above were rounded up to the next whole number.
B. who are minorities; (Blind)

Individuals from underserved populations are tracked in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to ensure that they are engaged in services and fully understand the scope of available services that can be provided. Before any individual from a minority background is inactivated from the Program with an unsuccessful outcome, a supervisory review process is required. The Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor confirms that the individual was provided with information in his or her preferred language and accessible format. Additionally, the Supervisor reviews the case record of services to confirm documentation is present, substantiating that the individual was afforded the opportunity to make informed decisions in regards to participation in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program has two Counselors who are bicultural and fluent in Spanish. Throughout the past fiscal year, these two staff members each served half of the state, with each of these Counselors serving the Spanish–speaking clients within their assigned territory. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program also employs a Counselor who is African–American and who serves a caseload in traditionally underserved communities. These staff members engaged in extensive outreach activities, working with employers, community rehabilitation providers and community based organizations to share information on Bureau services and to secure work assessments, internships and job placements. Among the employers were Capital Cleaners, Neighborhood Studios, Neighborhood Housing, Kimmy’s Homemaker and Companion Services, Caring Connection, Dress for Less Inc., Center for Latino Progress, Stub Hub, New Britain Recreation Center, Adult Education Center in Hartford, and Sean Patrick’s Plants. Community rehabilitation providers that assisted with training and job placement services included Futures, CW Resources, Marrakech and the Chrysalis Center.

A key component of successful strategies in job placement is to work with community based organizations that can assist with housing, mental health supports, medical services and benefits as well as family support services. Outreach efforts have included working with Neighborhood Housing, New Opportunities, Dads Matter Too, Acts 4 Ministries, Mi CASA, Family Services of Woodfield, Boys and Girls Village, Merton House Soup Kitchen, and the Bridgeport Senior Center.

C. who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program; (Blind)

According to current data on the U.S. Census Bureau website, 31.6% of the overall populations of Connecticut identify race or ethnicity from a minority background. This data further breaks down to 11.5% of the overall population as African–American, 15% as Hispanic or Latino, 0.5% as American Indian/Alaska Native, 4.5% as Asian, and 0.1% as Pacific Islander. Analysis of the demographics of clients in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program found that 39.9% indicated race or ethnicity from a minority background, exceeding the overall demographic of 31.6% for Connecticut. This can be further broken down as 21.7% identifying their race or ethnicity as African–American; 15.5% identifying their race or ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino; 2.7% identifying their race or ethnicity as Asian, and less than 1% identifying their race or ethnicity as American Indian/Alaska Native or
Pacific Islander. As this data illustrates, outreach efforts to underserved populations by the Bureau have been effective in reaching and serving individuals from traditionally underserved populations.

D. who have been served through other components of the statewide workforce development system; and (Blind)

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and Rehabilitation Technologists coordinate services with the One Stop operators to assist VR clients in successfully accessing services such as job seeking skills classes, resume development and access to employer job openings.

E. who are youth with disabilities and students with disabilities, including, as appropriate, their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services. (Blind)

BESB is actively engaging blind youth in the State of Connecticut. In fiscal year 2011, the Bureau’s registry accounted for 10,942 blind individuals. Out of that number, 1,074 were children. The 2012 report reveals that 1,123 out of 10,735 individuals on BESB’s registry were children. This reflects a 3% increase in their enrollment. While the registry grew 2.7% in FY 2013 (totaling 11,034), the number of children decreased to 1,100 (footnote 9). This represents a drop of less than 1%. The amount of children served since the last Assessment saw a statistically insignificant increase of .09%.

For fiscal year 2016, plans are in place to dedicate two of the existing Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to work exclusively with caseloads of Pre–Employment Transition–Age students. The service delivery model will have one Counselor covering the Southwestern portion of the State based on the demographic of where many of the students are located. The other Counselor will cover the remaining portion of the State. Dedicating two Counselors to work exclusively with the Pre–Employment Transition–Age students will ensure a strong focus on preparing students for careers and higher education after exiting high school.

2. Identify the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State; and (Blind)

Other than providing training to staff of community rehabilitation programs on blindness related technology and adaptations for accessing training and employment, no needs to establish, develop or improve upon these programs have been identified.

3. Include an assessment of the needs of individuals with disabilities for transition career services and pre-employment transition services, and the extent to which such services are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (Blind)

BESB conducts career exposure camps, mentoring programs, college days and skills acquisition events, and works with school district staff to incorporate these activities into the IEP or service plan of the students. The VR program also explores job exposure and job options that school districts offer to students with disabilities.
k. Annual Estimates (Blind)

(Formerly known as Attachment 4.11(b)). Describe:

1. The number of individuals in the State who are eligible for services; (Blind)

The Department of Rehabilitation Services, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind is a comprehensive service delivery organization, providing a wide range of rehabilitative services to children and adults who are legally blind or visually impaired within Connecticut. Presently the Bureau has identified 11,854 individuals who meet these criteria and are listed on the Bureau’s Blind Registry. Of that number, 10,766 of these individuals are adults and 1,088 are children. Through outreach efforts, the Bureau has worked to ensure that all individuals who are legally blind have access to and knowledge of the services provided by this organization.

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program provides a wide range of services to eligible individuals. Guidance and counseling, mobility training, rehabilitation technology, adaptive equipment, rehabilitation teaching, job coaching, on-the-job training, low vision services, as well as a variety of skills assessments, are among the services provided.

2. The number of eligible individuals who will receive services under: (Blind)

A. The VR Program; (Blind)

Of the total number of individuals on the Bureau’s registry, 992 clients are presently registered with the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, with 797 of these individuals found eligible for services. The majority of the remaining 195 individuals are in referral status or applicant status moving towards eligibility determinations.

B. The Supported Employment Program; and (Blind)

Of the total number of eligible individuals, 27 clients have been determined eligible for supported employment services.

C. each priority category, if under an order of selection; (Blind)

Not applicable.

3. The number of individuals who are eligible for VR services, but are not receiving such services due to an order of selection; and (Blind)

Not applicable.

4. The cost of services for the number of individuals estimated to be eligible for services. If under an order of selection, identify the cost of services for each priority category. (Blind)
In fiscal year 2014, there were a total of 1,016 participants in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program expended $1.39 million in purchased client services during the fiscal year. Additionally, $598,000 was expended for the improvement and maintenance of Business Enterprise locations. Total Program costs, including all purchased services, staffing, and administrative operations were approximately $5.56 million for the year. For Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, budget projections indicate that approximately $5.51 million will be expended on combined Program costs, including an estimated $1.69 million in purchased services to serve approximately 1,100 clients, and $3.82 million in administrative and operational costs. This estimate includes inflationary adjustments, inclusion of indirect cost charges of 12.5 percent to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, as well as projected costs to serve transition age students who are visually impaired as well as who are legally blind.

With the availability of $4.12 million in Title I carry over funds from FY 2014 in addition to the federal Title I allotment of $3.1 million (representing 15 percent of the total Title I allotment received by Connecticut) and state matching funds of approximately $900,000, the Program did not need to enter into an Order of Section in FY 2015 and is not projecting the need for an Order of Selection in FY 2016.

I. State Goals and Priorities (Blind)

The designated State unit must:

1. Identify if the goals and priorities were jointly developed (Blind)

Identify if the goals and priorities were jointly developed and agreed to by the State VR agency and the State Rehabilitation Council, if the State has a Council, and jointly agreed to any revisions.

The following goals, objectives, strategies and measures of performance were developed in collaboration with the State Rehabilitation Council. These goals reflect the vision of Governor Dannel P. Malloy and the accompanying priorities and strategies of the statewide workforce system and the regional partners to contribute towards the achievement of the Governor’s vision. Additionally, this document details the strategies that will be utilized by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to contribute towards the achievement of these shared goals through the provision of services to individuals with significant visual impairments and to employers across the state.

Governor Dannel P. Malloy’s Vision: Connecticut will create and sustain the global economy’s best–educated, most–skilled, most–productive workforce.

Overarching Goals:

Promote Business Growth: Connecticut businesses in key sectors (economic drivers) must have the skilled, talented employees needed to compete effectively, prosper and create jobs for CT workers.

Strengthen Current Workforce: Workers must have the skills and credentials needed to prosper and advance in careers that support their families.

Develop Future Talent: Connecticut youth must be prepared and ready for career and post–secondary success as productive contributors to a competitive state economy.

System Transformation: Connecticut’s multi–faceted workforce system must align and integrate goals, strategies, policies, investments, services, infrastructure and accountability.
Objective 1. Analyze economic conditions, including existing and emerging in-demand industry sectors and occupations.

Strategy: Identify employment needs of employers – knowledge, skills, abilities in key industries and occupations.

Measure: Documentation of coordination with CTDOL, Office of Research to obtain data and information.

Strategy: Analysis of current workforce unemployment data, labor market trends, workforce’s educational and skill levels (including individuals with barriers/disabilities).

Measure: Documentation of coordination with CTDOL, Office of Research to obtain data and information.

Strategy: Analysis (strengths, weaknesses, capacity) of CT’s workforce development activities (including education and training), to address identified education/skill needs and employment needs of employers.

Measure: Coordination with CTDOL, Office of Research to obtain data and information.

Objective 2. Implement strategies for workforce partners to prepare educated/skilled workforce.

Strategy: Establish performance accountability measures and align strategies across the workforce programs to support economic growth and self-sufficiency, and how Connecticut will assess workforce system effectiveness.

Measure: Performance measures established with each partner program’s anticipated contribution to the measures noted.

Objective 3. Operationalize the Service Delivery System

Strategy: Review statewide policies, programs, and recommended actions to support comprehensive streamlined workforce system.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation provides policies to workforce partners for review.

Strategy: Develop/continuously improve workforce system: identify coordination/alignment barriers (avoid duplication); develop career pathways strategies; develop outreach/access strategies for individuals and employers; develop/expand industry/sector partnership strategies; identify regions/designate local areas; develop One-Stop system continuous improvement strategy; develop staff training strategies.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation staff participate in regional and statewide workforce meetings that focus on implementation of coordinated One-Stop service delivery system.

Strategy: Develop and update comprehensive State performance accountability measures.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation provides data on performance in identified accountability categories.
Strategy: Identify/disseminate info on best practices for: effective operation of One–Stop centers; development of effective local boards; effective training programs responsive to real–time labor market analysis.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation provides to the state and regional workforce system evidence based practice on successful job placement and retention strategies for individuals with significant disabilities.

Strategy: Develop and review statewide policies to coordinate services through One–Stop system: criteria and procedures for WIBs to assess effectiveness and continuous improvement; guidance to allocate One–Stop center infrastructure funds; policies on roles/contributions of One–Stop partners.

Measure: Documentation of Vocational Rehabilitation staff participation in the review and development of coordination of services to people with significant disabilities with One–Stop center staff and partners.

Strategy: Develop strategies for technological improvements to One–Stop system to: enhance digital literacy skills; accelerate acquisition of skills and credentials; strengthen staff professional development; ensure accessibility of technology.

Measure: Documentation of Vocational Rehabilitation adaptive technology consultations and recommendations for equipment to make the One–Stop centers accessible to individuals with significant disabilities.

Strategy: Develop strategies to align technology and data systems across One–Stop partner programs.

Measure: Documentation of Vocational Rehabilitation staff participation in statewide meeting regarding the development of a common–front end data collection system.

Strategy: Develop allocation formulas to distribute funds to local areas for adult and youth programs.

Measure: Documentation of Vocational Rehabilitation staff participation in cost allocation formula reviews that follow prescribed federal requirements.

Strategy: Prepare annual performance reports.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation report on performance measures distributed.

Strategy: Develop statewide workforce and labor market information system.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation staff provide data on job placements for clients served by the program.

Strategy: Develop other policies to promote statewide objectives and enhance system performance.

Measure: Documentation of BESB participation in the development of state policies and objectives.

Strategy: Alignment of funded activities.
Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation clients gain access to core services offered by the One–Stop centers with information provided in accessible formats by the centers.

Strategy: Alignment with activities not covered by Plan, to assure coordination, avoid duplication.

Measure: Independent Living services are offered and provided to eligible individuals with disabilities who are being served by the One–Stop centers.

Strategy: Coordination of activities, comprehensive services, including support services.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation staff members participate in regional and statewide planning and implementation meetings to coordinate the provision of vocational rehabilitation services to eligible clients served by the One–Stop delivery system.

Strategy: Engagement with community colleges, career/technical schools, to leverage resources.

Measure: Vocational Rehabilitation staff become participating members in regional teams that develop certificate and training programs at community colleges and career/technical schools to ensure curriculum accessibility for individuals with significant disabilities.

2. Identify the goals and priorities in carrying out the VR and Supported Employment programs. (Blind)

In addition to the participation of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in contributing to the aforementioned, comprehensive statewide goals for the Workforce system, the following, goals, objectives, strategies and measures specific to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program have been developed with the full participation and guidance of the State Rehabilitation Council. These goals, objectives and accompanying strategies reflect on the priority to provide comprehensive, timely and quality services to clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, including those clients who are receiving supported employment services. Based on a review of the findings and recommendations in the Statewide Assessment and the Consumer Satisfaction Survey, as well as a review of the most recent Section 107 report and the performance achieved on established program measures in existence at the time of this plan’s development, these priorities have taken into account this information to shape the efforts of the Council in establishing focus areas for the coming year.

Goal A: Increase employment opportunities for eligible individuals of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

Objective: BESB will collaborate with BRS and at least one major employer with a statewide presence to implement a Disability Resource Team to assist the employer with job recruitment and retention services.

Strategy: BESB Job Developer will coordinate with BRS Job Development Team to identify and work with employer(s) to implement a Resource Team.

Measure: Team is developed and implements resource meetings with employer(s).

Objective: BESB Counselors join job development teams implemented through the regional workforce boards to gain access to employers within the regions who are seeking job candidates.
Strategy: Counselors contact the Job Developers of the regional One Stop Center to become part of their employer outreach teams.

Measure: Each counselor serves as part of a regional job development team.

Objective: Vocational Rehabilitation clients obtain proficiency to utilize web–based job search websites.

Strategy: Rehabilitation teachers and/or fee for service vendors teach no less than ten job seeking clients how to navigate and utilize at least one job search website on the internet.

Measure: Documentation of utilization by each client.

Objective: Each BESB Counselor with job development responsibilities shall engage clients on their caseloads in job fair attendance.

Strategy: Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors will share information on job fairs within their regions with job seeking clients on their individual caseloads and facilitate the attendance of clients at job fairs.

Measure: Documentation of no less than 5 clients per Counselor caseload attending a job fair.

Goal B: Provide coordinated services to students with disabilities to prepare for careers and post–secondary education after exit from high school.

Objective: The Vocational Rehabilitation Program shall designate two full–time Counselors to exclusively serve clients that are in the Pre–Employment Transition Services (PETS) category.

Strategy: Junior high and high school clients will be assigned to one of the counselor caseloads to receive specific, qualifying PETS services with dedicated PETS funding.

Measure: Documentation of caseload assignments.

Objective: PETS eligible students and their parents/guardians shall receive a resource guide that explains all of the BESB services that can be provided to prepare for careers and post–secondary education.

Strategy: The Vocational Rehabilitation Program shall develop a transition resource guide to post on the Bureau’s webpage of the DORS website and to distribute to PETS eligible clients and their parents/guardians in their preferred format.

Measure: Case record documentation that the resource guide has been mailed or delivered to each PETS eligible client and their parents/guardians.

Objective: PETS eligible clients are provided timely notice of opportunities from the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and/or the Transition Coordinator to participate in work exposure programs, paid employment, internships, college preparatory programs, technology training programs, life skills programs and related career development camps, seminars and initiatives, both in state and out of state.
Strategy: Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and the Transition Coordinator working with the PETS clients provide timely information on available services and programs so that clients and their guardians can make informed decisions on attendance at programs, activities and related transition experiences of interest.

Measure: Case record documentation of the services being authorized.

Objective: The Vocational Rehabilitation Program develops and implements outreach and public education programs for potentially PETS eligible clients and their parents/guardians.

Strategy: Vocational Rehabilitation Transition Coordinator designs and delivers outreach and public education programs to populations where PETS eligible clients are likely to be found, such as, but not limited to school districts.

Measure: Documentation of the programs being provided.

Objective: The Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the State Rehabilitation Council co-sponsor leadership development activities and camps for groups of PETS eligible clients. Strategy: The State Rehabilitation Council and the Vocational Rehabilitation Program provide co-sponsorship funding for the Youth Leadership Forum, and similar programs if available.

Measure: Documentation of the funds committed.

Goal C: Utilize Innovation and Expansion authority to engage in continuous improvement initiatives, to increase access to services and activities that can benefit groups of individuals with visual impairment or legal blindness, to increase access to career information, adaptive technology, self-advocacy, and public awareness of the employment potential of individuals served by BESB.

Objective: The Vocational Rehabilitation Program shall provide funding for electronic access to career and news information.

Strategy: Funding provided to have NFB Newsline available to Vocational Rehabilitation clients.

Measure: Documentation of purchase order for NFB Newsline.

Objective: Provide access to the latest adaptive technology devices for clients to try out for assessment purposes. Strategy: Purchase new adaptive technology devices for the BESB Technology Lab and the Technology Lab at the Southeastern Connecticut Community Center of the Blind.

Measure: Documentation of purchase order for technology devices.

Objective: The State Rehabilitation Council utilizes an entity experienced in administering consumer satisfaction surveys to conduct the fiscal year 2016 Consumer Satisfaction Survey and the results are used to develop continuous improvement initiatives.

Strategy: The State Rehabilitation Council selects a vendor, reviews the results of the survey, and works with Program staff to implement strategies that address the results and trends identified in the survey.
Measure: Documentation of purchase of survey, Consumer Satisfaction Report received and reviewed with Program staff.

Objective: State Rehabilitation Council representatives participate in state, regional and national conferences and programs that provide opportunities to increase public awareness of the employment capabilities of BESB clients, increase the Council members knowledge and understanding of the public Vocational Rehabilitation Program, and create opportunities for learning best practices that can develop into new goals and strategies for the BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Program to explore and implement, if applicable.

Strategy: State Rehabilitation Council Chair is provided with information about upcoming conferences, seminars and activities from the Bureau Director and designates a Council member or members to participate and share information with the full membership.

Measure: State Rehabilitation Council members attend CSAVR, NCSAB and other national, regional or statewide conferences or seminars that address the components stated in the objective.

3. Ensure that the goals and priorities are based on an analysis of the following areas: (Blind)

A. The most recent comprehensive statewide assessment, including any updates; (Blind)

The comprehensive needs assessment and the consumer satisfaction survey results were utilized in considering and developing these goals.

B. the State’s performance under the performance accountability measures of section 116 of WIOA; and (Blind)

The bureau has factored in our role in achieving statewide WIOA performance measures in establishing the goals for the VR program.

C. other available information on the operation and effectiveness of the VR program, including any reports received from the State Rehabilitation Council and finding and recommendations from monitoring activities conducted under section 107. (Blind)

The State Rehabilitation Council has reviewed the comprehensive needs assessment, the consumer satisfaction survey results and trends in outcomes and services provided in addressing the goals that were developed.

m. Order of Selection (Blind)

Describe:

1. Whether the designated State unit will implement and order of selection. If so, describe: (Blind)
A. The order to be followed in selecting eligible individuals to be provided VR services. (Blind)

The Bureau is not operating under an order of selection and provides services to all eligible individuals.

B. The justification for the order. (Blind)

Not applicable.

C. The service and outcome goals. (Blind)

Not applicable.

D. The time within which these goals may be achieved for individuals in each priority category within the order. (Blind)

Not applicable.

E. How individuals with the most significant disabilities are selected for services before all other individuals with disabilities; and (Blind)

Not applicable.

2. If the designated State unit has elected to serve eligible individuals, regardless of any established order of selection, who require specific services or equipment to maintain employment. (Blind)

Not applicable.

n. Goals and Plans for Distribution of title VI Funds. (Blind)

1. Specify the State's goals and priorities for funds received under section 603 of the Rehabilitation Act for the provision of supported employment services. (Blind)

It is the primary goal and priority of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to consider supported employment as an option in all circumstances where the provision of these services will increase the likelihood of placement success for people with significant, multiple barriers to employment.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program for individuals who are blind received $45,000 in Title VI, Part B funds for fiscal year 2014. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, there were 3 clients who achieved employment outcomes in supported employment settings. The funding source for long–term support for 2 of these situations was the Department of Developmental Services, with the client's family being the provider of long–term support in the third situation since the client works at a family–run business. Community rehabilitation providers were utilized for onsite training in all three situations.
Fourteen (14) new clients were found eligible for supported employment services during the fiscal year, bringing the total number of clients that have been found eligible for supported employment services to 30. Of the 30 clients that were eligible for supported employment services during the fiscal year, 3 clients achieved employment outcomes, 1 individual was in plan status, 1 individual was placed in employment status, 1 individual was moved to services interrupted status due to medical issues and 24 individuals were in a service status. Of this total number of eligible individuals, Title VI, Part B funds have been utilized for 8 individuals during the fiscal year.

Community rehabilitation providers continue to be utilized most frequently as the providers of extended services for the employment programs coordinated. In the current and upcoming year, this approach will continue to be utilized. This is based on the history of job placement outcomes from preceding fiscal years that has continually demonstrated the proven ability of community rehabilitation providers to employ job coaches and vocational instructors necessary for the provision of long–term employment supports, combined with their willingness to periodically assume the cost of providing extended services when other public funding options are not available. This arrangement is especially important, given the limited availability of third party funding from other public agency providers.

In addition to the option of utilizing community rehabilitation providers for the provision of extended services, the successful utilization of natural supports through a client’s family and the use of a volunteer organization in placement situations in prior years have shown promise as a practice to replicate to expand options for the provision of support services. It is a high priority goal to identify all possible providers of long–term funding to cover the cost of providing the supports over an extended period of time. In addition to seeking out community rehabilitation providers who can financially assume the role of becoming the provider of extended services, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program will continue to explore the option of utilizing volunteer groups, employers, and families where feasible to offer natural supports as an option. The Program will also continue to contract with community rehabilitation providers who can access public and private funds in order to secure supported employment placements.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will continue to distribute funds to providers and employers who can offer the long–term assurances that supports will be in place to enable people with the most significant disabilities to participate in integrated employment with competitive wages and benefits. Vocational Rehabilitation Program staff will continue to participate in Planning and Placement Team meetings early in the transition process to identify the need for supported employment services, and to identify providers, both private and public, that may offer services while a student is preparing to transition from public or private education into employment. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors will also utilize supplemental evaluations through community rehabilitation providers to identify the need for supported employment services prior to the development of Individualized Plans for Employment in situations where it is uncertain if long–term supports will be necessary to ensure a successful placement outcome.

2. Describe the activities to be conducted, with funds reserved pursuant to section 603(d), for youth with the most significant disabilities, including: (Blind)

A. the provision of extended services for a period not to exceed 4 years; and (Blind)

In order to facilitate the identification of supported employment options for transitioning high school students, the two Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors assigned to work with this specific client
population participate in Planning and Placement Team meetings (PPTs) and work in cooperation with the Children's Services Program at BESB. The number of students who are legally blind or visually impaired who are age fourteen and older continue to be tracked by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program to ensure that services are offered and made available. There are approximately 140 students of transition age who are presently being served in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. With the implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), there are new provisions pertaining to serving youth with disabilities, and in particular, for youth with significant disabilities who require supported employment services, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program can fund the cost of extended services for up to 4 years in situations where no other funding options are available. Provisions within WIOA require that 50 percent of Title VI B funds are reserved to exclusively serve youth with significant disabilities to assist with meeting this priority.

B. how the State will leverage other public and private funds to increase resources for extended services and expanded supported employment opportunities for youth with the most significant disabilities. (Blind)

The Bureau works collaboratively with the Department of Developmental Services, the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, employers and community providers to identify and secure alternative sources of long-term funding and support, where available.

o. State's Strategies (Blind)

Describe the required strategies and how the agency will use these strategies to achieve its goals and priorities, support innovation and expansion activities, and overcome any barriers to accessing the VR and the Supported Employment programs (See sections 101(a)(15)(D) and (18)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act and section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA)):

1. The methods to be used to expand and improve services to individuals with disabilities. (Blind)

The following strategies support the goals and objectives that have been identified with the participation of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), and reflect the commitment of the Bureau to increase employment opportunities for people who are legally blind or visually impaired through the provision of Vocational Rehabilitation and Supported Employment Services.

Methods To Be Used to Expand and Improve Services:

Utilizing the results and recommendations from the Comprehensive Needs Assessment, as well as the Section 107 Review conducted by Rehabilitation Services Administration, the Program has identified areas that need further expansion and revision to better serve clients. Shortening the timeframe for the development of the Individualized Plan for Employment was recommended in the Section 107 Review. This recommendation was implemented in Bureau policy subsequent to a public hearing process and prior to the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. The Act prescribes a time frame of 90 days for plan development to occur. The Program is utilizing this new requirement to ensure the timely movement of case services subsequent to determinations of eligibility.

To augment the capacity of maintaining adequate levels of contact with clients, the Program embraced the recommendation of the Center for Public Policy and Social Research to contact
graduate level programs that offer Master’s Degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling and closely related fields to seek internship and practicum students who could assist the Program in contacting clients, following up on service requests and maintaining higher levels of contact than what is possible with the existing staffing levels. This approach has been very successful, with students from Springfield College and Central Connecticut State University coming to the Bureau for their graduate field work in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program further addressed case management activities through the reestablishment of the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor Coordinator position, which had been vacant for several years. A major focus of this position is to assist the Counselors with case management strategies. Utilizing the newly developed case management computerized dashboard, the Coordinator, Supervisor and the Counselors are able to track the timely movement of client services and timeframes for case status changes. The dashboard is capable of analyzing trends by caseload to further assist in identifying where additional activity is required.

The other major focus of the Coordinator position is to serve as the statewide job placement point of contact with employers. The Coordinator organizes the Bureau’s participation in job fairs held by partner agencies of the workforce system, coordinates meetings between employers and Counselors in situations where an employer has locations that cross Counselor territories, and also serves as the point of contact with the national job matching system operated by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR).

The results of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment also found that while the Bureau’s website contained a considerable amount of important and useful information, it was organized in a way that made it difficult to search for information by topic. An extensive review of the website was subsequently conducted and substantial revisions were implemented. The Bureau’s website is now organized by type of service, with subcategories under each major service heading. Policy manuals are grouped by program type as well so visitors to the website can locate and search the applicable policies more conveniently than in the past.

The Comprehensive Needs Assessment also recommended that BESB develop a presence in social media, possibly uploading information on services to You Tube. This recommendation has been explored and has been conservatively implemented. To date, there have been 5 BESB mentor videos uploaded to You Tube for public viewing, but plans for greater expansion in the use of social media have become part of the larger discussion at the agency level. It is anticipated that the agency and the Bureau will expand further into social media in future years.

Results of the Consumer Satisfaction Survey indicated that levels of satisfaction with low vision services were on the decline. Over the past several years, the number of doctors on the approved provider list has decreased, due to retirements and also due to doctor dissatisfaction with the paperwork burden required to obtain payments from the agency for fee schedule rates that are less than what the doctors can receive by seeing private pay patients. More Low Vision doctors would add increased options for clients and hopefully also reduce wait times for clients to get a low vision appointment, since many of the current doctors on the low vision provider list limit the number of BESB referred clients they will see each month. Toward that end, the Bureau Director sought and obtained an opportunity to speak at the statewide Optometric conference on the topic of seeking additional low vision providers. Subsequent to that event, three doctors have expressed an interest in becoming approved low vision providers. Efforts are underway to have their applications processed so they can be utilized.
2. How a broad range of assistive technology services and devices will be provided to individuals with disabilities at each stage of the rehabilitation process and on a statewide basis. (Blind)

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program employs two full time Rehabilitation Technologists who are available to provide individualized assessments on adaptive technology options and solutions so that clients can make informed decisions as to the best option for their particular vocational training and employment situations. The Technologists are able to provide these assessments at the employer site, training facility or home of the client by utilizing a portable array of technology devices that are maintained by the Bureau.

Additionally, the Bureau maintains a fully equipped adaptive technology laboratory in Windsor that is available for both assessments and training sessions. In collaboration with the Southeastern Connecticut Community Center of the Blind, an additional technology laboratory is located at their facility in New London.

The Bureau further employs two full time Rehabilitation Teachers, who provide training in the use of adaptive devices that have been provided for client use in training and employment. Their services are available in addition to the use of both in state and out of state vendors that offer fee for service training in the use of technology devices.

Through the Assistive Technology Act, BESB works closely with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services to provide outreach and referrals of clients who are deaf and blind so that clients who meet the eligibility requirements of the Deafblind Technology Grant can apply for and received specialized adaptive equipment to increase their access to communication.

3. The outreach procedures that will be used to identify and serve individuals with disabilities who are minorities, including those with the most significant disabilities, as well as those who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program. (Blind)

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program has two Counselors who are bicultural and fluent in Spanish. Throughout the past fiscal year, these two staff members each served half of the state, with each of these Counselors serving the Spanish-speaking clients within their assigned territory. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program also employs a Counselor who is African-American and who serves a caseload in traditionally underserved communities. These staff members engage in extensive outreach activities, working with employers, community rehabilitation providers and community based organizations to share information on Bureau services and to secure work assessments, internships and job placements. Among the employers utilized in the past year were Capital Cleaners, Neighborhood Studios, Neighborhood Housing, Kimmy’s Homemaker and Companion Services, Caring Connection, Dress for Less Inc., Center for Latino Progress, Stub Hub, New Britain Recreation Center, Adult Education Center in Hartford, and Sean Patrick’s Plants. Community rehabilitation providers that assisted with training and job placement services included Futures, CW Resources, Marrakech and the Chrysalis Center.

A key component of successful strategies in job placement is to work with community based organizations that can assist with housing, mental health supports, medical services and benefits as well as family support services. Outreach efforts have included working with Neighborhood Housing, New Opportunities, Dads Matter Too, Acts 4 Ministries, Mi CASA, Family Services of Woodfield, Boys and Girls Village, Merton House Soup Kitchen, and the Bridgeport Senior Center.
4. The methods to be used to improve and expand VR services for students with disabilities, including the coordination of services designed to facilitate the transition of such students from school to postsecondary life (including the receipt of VR services, postsecondary education, employment, and pre-employment transition services).

(Blind)

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors participate in Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meetings of clients who are in junior high or high school and assist in the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEP’s) for students. The services that are detailed in the IEP of each student are factored into the development of each client’s Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), which must be developed within ninety (90) days of the determination of eligibility for vocational rehabilitation services, or by the time the client exits high school, whichever comes sooner. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor involvement begins as early as age 14, with referrals to the Program initiated by the Education Consultants of the Bureau’s Children’s Services Program and Teachers of the Visually Impaired that work directly for school districts. The client is assigned to one of the two Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors that are exclusively dedicated to serving pre–employment transition services eligible clients. Assignments are based on geographic location of the client.

Since BESB maintains a registry of all students who are legally blind or visually impaired within Connecticut, the process for identifying and referring clients from Children’s Services to the Vocational Rehabilitation Program is streamlined and efficient. The electronic case management system for the Bureau has a built in tracking system for identifying clients by age range to further facilitate the referral of clients who desire to participate in vocational rehabilitation services. The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work with the students, educators, parents or legal guardians and the Program’s Education Projects Coordinator to identify careers of interest, develop career exploration opportunities, work and job shadowing experiences, mentoring activities and leadership development programs.

In addition to serving on the statewide transition taskforce, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program’s Educational Projects Coordinator is also an active member of the Board of Directors of the Youth Leadership Project that oversees the Youth Leadership Forum. The forum is a yearly event that teaches students with disabilities leadership and self–advocacy skills.

BESB continues to conduct career exposure camps for high school students who are visually impaired or legally blind. These programs include opportunities to interact with former recipients of vocational rehabilitation services who are successfully employed in a variety of careers. Some of these programs are held on college campuses, where the students gain a firsthand perspective of residential campus life in addition to gaining insight into a variety of careers that former clients are now engaged in.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program staff members continue to participate and present information at in–service training programs organized by the Bureau for public school teachers and guidance counselors on issues affecting students who are blind or visually impaired. The Children’s Services Program of the Bureau further provides a comprehensive training series every year for school district staff to learn about low vision aids and adaptive technology, braille instruction, expanded core curriculum activities and resources that are available to facilitate the education and transition of students served by BESB.
The Vocational Rehabilitation Program has also established a goal of participating in Planning and Placement Team meetings early in the transition process to identify the need for supported employment services, and to identify providers, both private and public, that may offer services while a student is preparing to transition from public or private education into employment.

5. If applicable, plans for establishing, developing, or improving community rehabilitation programs within the State. (Blind)

Other than providing training to staff of community rehabilitation programs on blindness related technology and adaptations for accessing training and employment, no needs to establish, develop or improve upon these programs have been identified.

6. Strategies to improve the performance of the State with respect to the performance accountability measures under section 116 of WIOA. (Blind)

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act established new measures of performance for the partner programs to collectively work towards achieving. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program is participating in discussions on the implementation of these new performance measures with the other partners at both the state and the regional level. At this point in the development process, it is premature to discuss how to improve performance on measures that have not been established and implemented at the partner agency level. This Bureau shall have an active and integral role in contributing towards the achievement of the regional and statewide performance measures by working collaboratively with the other workforce partners to coordinate services and to leverage the resources and employer contacts that will be mutually available to the partner programs.

7. Strategies for assisting other components of the statewide workforce development system in assisting individuals with disabilities. (Blind)

The Vocational Rehabilitation staff’s expertise on blindness related topics, including how adaptive technology can be utilized to make core services of the One Stop Centers and training programs accessible, will also benefit the partner programs. This level of technical assistance to the partners will resolve many barriers, both anticipated and unanticipated by the partner program staff, in regards to training materials and tasks that require adaptive technology to access.

8. How the agency’s strategies will be used to: (Blind)

A. achieve goals and priorities by the State, consistent with the comprehensive needs assessment; (Blind)

Employer outreach and engagement are key components of the workforce system to achieve success in the performance measures and toward that end, the benefits of becoming part of a unified approach toward employer outreach will serve the Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the partner programs particularly well. Being a part of regional job development teams will ensure that Counselors of the Bureau are at the forefront of discussions with employers who are seeking to fill job vacancies as well as those employers who are considering expansion in this state.

An additional potential benefit that is anticipated will be a coordinated approach toward the use of social media to expand the reach of all partner programs in communicating the availability of the
myriad of services that are offered through the partner programs. Expanding the use of social media to educate the public about services was a recommendation contained in the Comprehensive Needs Assessment and through a coordinated effort across partner programs, this recommendation is likely to experience a greater level of growth than it may have experienced as a separate and distinct goal for this Bureau.

B. support innovation and expansion activities; and (Blind)

Access to career information and job openings is a key component of the Innovation and Expansion activities that have been established as priorities for the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The opportunity to become part of a larger, organized and comprehensive approach to access job search engines is particularly beneficial. BESB staff can contribute to this initiative by offering technical assistance on accessibility requirements so that equal access among program participants can be achieved.

Programs serving youth, including youth from unserved and underserved populations is another priority that has been identified in the Innovation and Expansion initiatives for this Bureau. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program staff can provide information to the partner programs on the types of leadership development camps and initiatives that it had designed and utilizes, so the partner programs that serve youth can assess if similar models would be beneficial to their clients.

Additionally, youth training, employment and leadership programs offered by partner agencies may be readily accessible to clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, opening new opportunities that were previously unknown or unavailable to clients of this Bureau.

Expansion of the availability of adaptive technology in training programs, core services and apprenticeship programs is another category where there is considerable opportunity for growth. Bureau staff will bring their knowledge of blindness related technology accommodations into discussions with the partners so that solutions can be identified and implemented in the planning stages of new initiatives, ensuring equal access to services.

C. overcome identified barriers relating to equitable access to and participation of individuals with disabilities in the State VR Services Program and the State Supported Employment Services Program. (Blind)

Perhaps the most significant barrier is within the category of training materials that are utilized across a broad spectrum of vendors and service providers utilized by the partner programs and the One Stop Centers. Materials are often created in formats that do not readily lend toward conversion into accessible text to speech formats for those clients who are not able to access print. This is particularly seen in training materials that are distributed electronically, where PDF files are a common format of the documents being distributed. Being at the front end of discussions with partner programs on how to make training materials accessible from the onset will bring about a seamless training opportunity for clients of this Bureau. In this scenario, training materials in accessible formats would be prepared in advance and distributed to seminar and training program participants who are blind at the same time that other participants receive their materials. Rehabilitation Technologists are available to participate in the review of the training materials and to offer recommendations on how to make the information accessible.

p. Evaluation and Reports of Progress: VR and Supported Employment Goals (Blind)
Describe:

1. An evaluation of the extent to which the VR program goals described in the approved VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan for the most recently completed program year were achieved. The evaluation must: (Blind)

A. Identify the strategies that contributed to the achievement of the goals. (Blind)

The following summary details the goals and objectives established with the participation of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) and the outcomes for each of these goals.

GOAL A (the desired outcome)

CLIENT SERVICES GOAL: Individuals who are blind acquire the necessary skills and training to obtain and retain employment in a challenging economy.

Objectives (The reasons the goal is of high importance):

1. Due to the continuation of a challenging economic climate, individuals who are blind continue to experience fewer opportunities to access and maintain employment, requiring a greater diversity of skills and flexibility in adapting to employer needs.

2. Employment provides individuals who are blind the opportunity to be contributing, self–sufficient members of society.

3. Career advancement is an important aspect of career development, resulting in greater likelihood of achieving self–sufficiency.

4. For individuals who are losing vision or whose job duties change, assistance to maintain employment is often necessary.

5. For individuals who are blind and who experience multiple barriers to employment, on–the–job training and long–term job supports enable achievement and maintenance of employment.

Strategies (The methods for achieving the objectives):

1. Vocational Rehabilitation clients will be trained in the use of new internet–based job search engine technologies to identify and apply for job openings.

2. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will facilitate a job seekers skills training on resume writing and interviewing techniques.

3. Vocational Rehabilitation staff that have job placement as a primary responsibility will each conduct ongoing employer outreach activities.

4. Vocational Rehabilitation clients will receive training in the use of new smart–phone and tablet technologies that have built in accommodation features.
5. Vocational Rehabilitation staff will conduct training sessions for disability coordinators at Connecticut colleges to become familiar with the supports and services that are available through Vocational Rehabilitation for students who are blind.

6. Vocational Rehabilitation staff will develop a support and mentoring group for college students who are blind.

Measures (the activities that will be achieved):

1. Vocational Rehabilitation staff will conduct or coordinate two informational sessions on the use of the major job search sites and provide individualized training to ten clients, consistent with the individual’s vocational goal.

Summary of Activities: Two information sessions were held. One session was held in Bridgeport with 8 attendees and the second session was held in Windsor with 7 attendees. The sessions reviewed the accessible job search sites that are featured on the agency website in the document titled “JOB SEARCH WEBSITES THAT ARE ACCESSIBLE WITH SCREEN READERS.”

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

2. Two job seekers training programs will be offered and delivered to Vocational Rehabilitation clients on resume writing and interviewing techniques and strategies.

Summary of Activities: One job seekers training program was conducted in Hartford in July with 6 participants and the second was held in New London with as many as 11 participants attending at one time during ongoing sessions conducted between February and July.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

3. Each Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor with job placement responsibilities shall engage in an average of 2 hours per week in job development and job placement outreach to employers, including the use of internet based employer networking sites.

Summary of Activities: More than 1,000 hours of employer outreach activity occurred in the fiscal year, provided by 9 Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling staff. On average, 2.39 hours per week per Counselor were provided.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

4. Vocational Rehabilitation staff will conduct or coordinate the delivery of two training sessions in the use of smart–phone and tablet technologies for clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

Summary of Activities: Two training sessions occurred, one in July on the use of Android devices and the other in August on the use of iPhone devices. Both sessions were held at the Bureau’s location in Windsor, with a distance learning option being offered so clients could participate remotely if they desired. While the iPhone training was attended by 6 clients, the Android training only had 2 client participants, although 5 staff members who are legally blind attended as well.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.
5. Vocational Rehabilitation staff will conduct in–service training sessions on the services available through this agency for disability coordinators at no less than 5 institutions of higher education in Connecticut, focusing specifically on colleges where Vocational Rehabilitation clients are currently enrolled.

Summary of Activities: This particular objective was developed in response to prior Consumer Satisfaction Survey results and sought to better educate disability coordinators at institutions of higher education on the services that BESB can provide and also to explain the expectations that the Bureau has of the colleges in regards to providing reasonable accommodations. In total, 15 staff from 13 institutions of higher education in Connecticut and 1 additional staff from a college in New York were provided with training. It is noted that the Consumer Satisfaction survey results obtained at the close of fiscal year 2014 showed a marked increase in the level of satisfaction with higher education services, going from a mean satisfaction rating of 5.0 out of 10 in 2012, to 7.8 out of 10 in 2013, and then to 8.7 out of 10 in 2014.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

6. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will develop and implement a mentoring program for college students with a focus on connecting freshman students with seniors or recently graduated students who can provide insight and guidance on how to overcome the challenges and obstacles often encountered at college.

Summary of Activities: This objective produced both a formal and an informal approach toward mentoring. A mentoring panel was developed to discuss experiences with incoming freshman students, occurring in January. Offered as an in–person and telephonic event, there were 4 students who participated out of 11 new freshman students. Challenges in getting participation in this formal event led to the development of a more informal approach of connecting incoming college students with college seniors and recently graduated students. Plans were also put in place to offer a mentoring panel for high school students at the 2015 college on–campus program as well.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

GOAL B (the desired outcome)

INNOVATION AND EXPANSION: Expand and promote vocational services to groups of individuals who are legally blind who want to obtain, retain or advance in employment.

Objectives (The reasons the goal is of high importance):

1. There is a broad range of Vocational Rehabilitation services that benefit whole groups of individuals who are legally blind, who want to obtain, retain, or advance in employment.

Strategies (The methods for achieving the objectives):

1. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will cosponsor NFB Newsline for clients of the agency to access educational, career and occupational outlook information.

2. Community–based adaptive technology centers will receive updated adaptive technology for people who are blind to engage in vocational preparation and job seeking activities.
3. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will support and fund State Rehabilitation Council activities that promote awareness of services and supports available to people who are blind.

4. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will cosponsor and implement leadership development opportunities for transition school-to-work students who are legally blind.

5. The State Rehabilitation Council will implement a client satisfaction survey to identify areas where improvements are necessary to better meet the rehabilitation goals of clients served by the Program.

Measures (the activities that will be achieved):

1. The agency enters into a contract with the National Federation of the Blind for NFB Newsline.

   Summary of Activities: In collaboration with the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, NFB Newsline has been available for clients to access on an ongoing basis throughout the year. CRIS Radio continues to broadcast Newsline programming. BESB services have been featured on CRIS Radio, and a new program on employment has been launched by CRIS Radio, with BESB staff providing input into the development of topic areas for the program. In total, during the fiscal year, more than 412,000 minutes of use of the Newsline service occurred.

   Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

2. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program provides technical assistance and purchases updated equipment, as needed, for at least one community-based technology center.

   Summary of Activities: The Bureau continues to provide support and technical assistance to the technology laboratory at the Southeastern Connecticut Community Center of the Blind, and provided a new monitor for their facility during the year. At the present time, there are no other community based technology laboratories that are directly supported by BESB. The Bureau maintains a fully equipped technology laboratory at the office location in Windsor that is utilized for assessments and training of clients.

   Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

3. On behalf of the SRC, the client satisfaction survey is conducted by an entity experienced in administering such surveys, and the SRC utilizes the results of this survey to develop two measurable strategies for continuous improvement.

   Summary of Activities: The SRC commissioned the Center for Public Policy and Social Research (CPPSR) at Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) to conduct a consumer satisfaction survey of VR service recipients for fiscal year 2014. The purpose of the survey was to evaluate the services that consumers received from the Vocational Rehabilitation Program at BESB. In 2014, nine out of ten clients (90%) reported that they would recommend BESB Vocational Rehabilitation Services to a friend. Similar to both 2012 and 2013 survey findings, Rehabilitation and Adaptive Equipment and Low Vision were the two most widely used BESB services. Personal Care Attendant remained the least used service. Four services experienced an increase in mean satisfaction rating, while four saw a decline in rating. Reader Services had the largest mean increase (8.67, up 1.67 in mean rating). Personal Care Attendant Services climbed to its highest rating in five years (9.0, up 1.0 in mean rating). Higher Education Services set its second–best rating in the history of the survey (8.7, up .9 in mean rating). This figure is only second to the all–time high of 8.86 set in 2003. Small Business Services also increased in ratings (7.14, up .39 in mean rating). Among the services experiencing a
decline in reported satisfaction, Low Vision Services saw the most sizable decrease (7.89, down .9 in mean rating). Transportation Services experienced a notable decline (7.25, down .46 in mean rating), as did Skills Training Services (8.67, down .42). Rehabilitation and Adaptive Equipment Services registered a modest decline (8.60, down .20 in mean rating). Overall satisfaction with BESB services decreased to 7.96, down .48 in mean rating. Ratings on the extent to which services met clients’ IPE also saw a decline of .42 in mean rating, coming in at 7.89. Satisfaction with the extent to which services met client expectations dropped to 7.46, down .33 in mean rating. Finally, satisfaction with the extent to which services met the needs of clients decreased to 8.16, down .19 in mean rating.

Average ratings of counselors were mixed in 2014 with four dimensions of counselors improved, one remained unchanged, and four declined in mean ratings. The counselors ability to provide information in a format that clients could use increased the most in satisfaction, coming in at 9.36, up 1.27 in mean rating. Counselors’ ability to help clients understand the process for complaint resolution also saw substantial improvement, setting an all–time high for this survey at 8.85, up 1.14 in mean rating. The professionalism of counselors achieved a mean rating of 9.06, up .27 in mean rating. Counselors’ ability to identify career goals climbed to the second–best average in the history of the survey at 8.05, up .27 in mean rating. Reports of counselors’ ability to help clients understand their vocational rehabilitation rights remained unchanged from last year (8.47, zero change in mean rating). The remaining four dimensions of counselors experienced declines in mean satisfaction ratings. Counselors’ ability to develop an IPE could not sustain the record–high ranking set in 2013 (7.84, down .39 in mean rating). Ratings of the knowledge of BESB counselors experienced an identical decline in mean ratings, (8.28, down .39 in mean rating). Counselors’ ability to recognize the special needs of their clients dropped to 7.84, down .38 in mean rating. Finally, client satisfaction of referrals dropped for the second consecutive year (8.20, down .20 in mean rating).

In fiscal year 2014, a Comprehensive Needs Assessment was also conducted by CPPSR. A complete overview of their findings and recommendations were included in the fiscal year 2015 state plan submission. In summary, based on the data collected for the assessment, CPPSR recommended that BESB develop a greater use of the internet to get the message out to a broader audience, ideally by expanding into social media and perhaps even posting videos onto YouTube that could highlight success stories. CPPSR also recommended that the Bureau’s website be updated and made easier to use for identifying services by categories of interest. CPPSR found merit in the newly–instituted college mentorship program and encouraged further development in this area. They also recommended that the Bureau should establish an internship program with local colleges and universities so that students majoring in human services and rehabilitation could gain real–world experience at the Bureau, and help to create a pipeline for addressing some long–standing concerns that BESB has been facing with staffing levels necessary to maintain higher levels of contact and engagement with clients.

Utilizing the results of the Consumer Satisfaction Survey and the Comprehensive Needs Assessment, the State Rehabilitation Council and the Vocational Rehabilitation Program established several objectives for the 2015 state plan. These objectives included establishment of mentoring videos for posting on the internet, reorganizing the Bureau’s web site to make it more user friendly, and implementing an internship program with local colleges and universities to bring student interns into BESB. Strategies were also identified for increasing the level of client access to career information by adding to each Individualized Plan for Employment information on the career identified in the plan. Additionally, there was a strategy identified to place greater emphasis on offering and utilizing supported employment services to facilitate access into careers for clients with the most significant disabilities.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.
4. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program cosponsors two leadership development programs for clients.

Summary of Activities: The Vocational Rehabilitation Program and the State Rehabilitation Council were cosponsors of the Youth Leadership Forum, a weeklong leadership development residential program, with 4 clients participating and 2 former client participants returning as counselor mentors. Additionally, BESB was a cosponsor of the Governor’s Coalition for Youth with Disabilities Scholarship event, recognizing the high school achievements of 3 students served by the Bureau. BESB further collaborated with Oak Hill to provide a weeklong residential leadership development and mentoring camp for transition age youth at Harkness, with 8 clients participating.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

5. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program sponsors the participation of SRC members at conferences and events that promote advocacy, service delivery and information exchange of best practices in the field of rehabilitation.

Summary of Activities: The SRC chairperson attended the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) national conferences in April. The chairperson attended conference seminars as well as participated in the visit to Washington, DC to meet with Connecticut’s Congressional delegation to educate them on how the VR Program assists people who are blind to achieve employment and self-sufficiency.

Evaluation of Progress: This measure was achieved.

B. Describe the factors that impeded the achievement of the goals and priorities.

While it is noted that all of the goals and objectives were achieved, the relatively low numbers of clients participating in training sessions that were held on topics ranging from adaptive technology to job seeking skills was below expectation. Challenges such as availability of transportation, and varied skill levels of clients contributed to these difficulties in attracting larger numbers of clients to participate in group training activities. Arranging for similarly skilled clients to attend trainings at a particular location for one or more sessions proved to be logistically difficult, and sometimes frustrating for the clients and the trainers. Even when offering virtual training options, the number of participants was still small. While these group training goals were certainly worthwhile, the time and resources required to plan for and implement these sessions has made the Program question if it would be more productive to utilize the training opportunities offered by fee for service providers, in addition to providing individualized and customized training through Bureau staff.

2. An evaluation of the extent to which the Supported Employment program goals described in the Supported Employment Supplement for the most recent program year were achieved. The evaluation must:

A. Identify the strategies that contributed to the achievement of the goals. (Blind)
It is the primary goal to identify all possible providers of long–term funding for extended services. In addition to seeking out community rehabilitation providers who can financially assume the role of becoming the provider of extended services, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program established the goal to encourage employers to offer natural supports. The Program also sought to contract with community rehabilitation providers who could access public and private funds for people with multiple disabilities in order to secure supported employment placements. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2014, there were 3 clients who achieved employment outcomes in supported employment settings. The funding source for long–term support for 2 of these situations was the Department of Developmental Services, with the client’s family being the provider of long–term support in the third situation since the client works at a family–run business. Community rehabilitation providers were utilized for onsite training in all three situations. The Bureau has achieved these objectives by successfully accessing other funding sources including natural supports through a family operated business.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program also established a goal of modifying Bureau policy to clearly reinforce that a successful employment outcome in a supported employment setting requires that the individual is compensated at or above the minimum wage, but not less than the customary wage and level of benefits paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals who are not disabled. This proposed policy change reflected the priorities of the Bureau and the State Rehabilitation Council to move away from placement options where the individual was working toward competitive wages that could potentially never be offered by the employer. With the proposed policy change, a shift to only permitting employment outcomes where the individual was earning the competitive and customary wage ensured that clients would be afforded the same level of earnings offered to their non–disabled coworkers. Subsequent to a public hearing process, this policy was changed and went into effect for October 1, 2015.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program has also established a goal of participating in Planning and Placement Team meetings early in the transition process to identify the need for supported employment services, and to identify providers, both private and public, that may offer services while a student is preparing to transition from public or private education into employment. This is an area that continues to require more effort. Of the 14 new clients who were found eligible for supported employment services during the fiscal year, none of them were of transition–age. With the new reorganization in the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, assigning two counselors to work exclusively with transition–age students, it is anticipated that discussions regarding the option for employment with supports will become a much larger focal point in Planning and Placement Team meetings, with anticipated improvements in this category of service delivery occurring as a result.

B. Describe the factors that impeded the achievement of the goals and priorities. (Blind)

The challenging economy continues to impact on the scope and variety of job placement options available to clients, making customized employment particularly difficult to secure. The need for long–term funding support is an additional step that is necessary for supported employment placements at the onset. These two variables in combination make the timing challenging in filling job vacancies with a client who requires long–term supports. Dedicating two counselors to work specifically with the transition–age client population will facilitate discussions on supported employment options much earlier in the Planning and Placement Team process, starting as early as junior high school. This should allow for increased time to explore and secure long–term funding commitments and also to develop job opportunities for clients.

3. The VR program's performance on the performance accountability indicators under section 116 of WIOA. (Blind)
The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act established new measures of performance for the partner programs to collectively work towards achievement. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program is participating in discussions on the implementation of these new performance measures with the other partners at both the state and the regional level. However, as these are new measures of performance, outcomes cannot be reported on retrospectively. Under the Workforce Investment Act, Vocational Rehabilitation Programs reported on their performance in achieving established Standards and Indicators. What follows is a summary of this Bureau’s performance on these measures for FY 2014.

The first indicator addresses the overall number of individuals achieving employment outcomes in FY 2013 and FY 2014 in total, in comparison to the number of individuals achieving an employment outcome in total for fiscal years 2012 and 2013. The Program increased the total number of individuals achieving employment outcomes from 224 to 227 for these time periods, thereby passing the first indicator. The second indicator addresses the number of individuals who exit the Program in employment versus the number of individuals who exit the Program not in employment subsequent to the development of an employment plan. Eighty–two percent of Program participants exited the Program in employment in FY 2014, thereby achieving the required passing level of 68.9 percent. The third indicator addresses the number of individuals that exit the Program in competitive employment job categories as a percentage of all employment outcomes. Of the 227 individuals that achieved employment outcomes during the two–year time period, 205, or 90.3 percent achieved competitive wages, passing the required indicator level of 35.40 percent. Performance indicator 4 asks for the percentage of individuals achieving an employment outcome who are classified as having a significant disability as defined by the Rehabilitation Act. The Program passed this indicator, achieving 100 percent. The fifth indicator examines the hourly earnings of the individuals who achieved employment, requiring that the average hourly earnings of these individuals reach at least 59 percent of the Connecticut average hourly wage. For this state, the average hourly wage was $30.26 in 2014, so to pass the indicator, the Program would need to achieve $17.85 per hour on average for the clients who achieved employment. The Program passed this indicator, with the average hourly earnings reaching $18.58, or 61 percent of the Connecticut average hourly rate. The final indicator is the only one the Program was not able to pass in 2014. It examines the percentage of clients that report self–sustaining earnings at Program completion compared to those who indicated self–sustaining earnings at application. Since this Program provides a significant level of assistance to individuals who are employed at application and who are seeking assistance to retain their current employment or find new employment, it is common for applicants of services to have competitive wages at the time of application. To pass this indicator, 30.4 percent of individuals who exited the Program in employment needed to have transitioned from other sources of support at application to self–sustaining earnings at closure. The Program was not able to reach this required percentage, with 17.1 percent of individuals moving from other sources of support at application to self–sustaining wages at closure.

4. How the funds reserved for innovation and expansion (I&E) activities were utilized. (Blind)

During the fiscal year, Innovation and Expansion funding was utilized to cover the cost of the NFB Newsline service. Innovation and Expansion funds were also utilized to cover the cost of the State Rehabilitation Council’s co–sponsorship of the Youth Leadership Forum. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program also was a separate co–sponsor of this leadership development camp for transition–age students. Innovation and Expansion funding was also utilized to secure the Center for Public Policy and Social Research to conduct and analyze the 2014 consumer satisfaction survey and to report their findings to the State Rehabilitation Council for use in developing Program goals and priorities. Additionally, Innovation and Expansion funds were utilized to purchase adaptive technology for the technology training facility located at the Southeastern Connecticut Community
Center of the Blind. Innovation and Expansion funding also made it possible for the Program to be a co–sponsor of the Governor’s Coalition for Youth with Disabilities, an initiative that awards college scholarships to graduating high school students with disabilities who are college bound. Lastly, funding was utilized to facilitate the participation of the State Rehabilitation Council, through its Chair to participate in national activities at the conferences of the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation.

q. Quality, Scope, and Extent of Supported Employment Services. (Blind)

Include the following:

1. The quality, scope, and extent of supported employment services to be provided to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including youth with the most significant disabilities. (Blind)

The Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind is committed to providing competitive employment opportunities in integrated settings to all clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. The Program utilizes Title VI, Part B Funds, federal Vocational Rehabilitation Program funds and State matching funds to cover the costs of client placement into supported employment, and ensure that participants are provided with the necessary long–term support to succeed in the competitive labor market.

Supported Employment refers to competitive integrated employment, including customized employment, that is individualized and customized consistent with the strengths, abilities, interests, and informed choice of a client with a most significant disability, and that includes ongoing support services. Supported employment services may be considered for individuals for whom competitive integrated employment has not historically occurred, or for whom competitive integrated employment has been interrupted or intermittent, and where there is a need for extended services after the transition from support provided by the Bureau, in order for the client to perform this work. Supported employment may also be provided in the form of transitional employment services for individuals with the most significant disabilities due to mental illness, in addition to legal blindness or lessened visual acuity.

Supported Employment Services are ongoing support services, including customized employment, and other appropriate services:

(A) Organized and made available, singly or in combination, in such a way as to assist an eligible individual to achieve competitive integrated employment;

(B) Based on a determination of the needs of an eligible individual, as specified in an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE); and

(C) Provided by the Bureau for a period of not more than 24 months, unless under special circumstances the eligible individual and the rehabilitation counselor jointly agree to extend the time to achieve the employment outcome identified in the IPE; and

(D) Following transition to extended services, as post–employment services that are unavailable from an extended services provider, and that are necessary to maintain or regain the job placement or advance in employment.
Prior to determining that an applicant is unable to benefit from vocational rehabilitation services, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program must conduct an exploration of the individual’s abilities, capabilities, and capacity to perform in competitive integrated work situations. This is accomplished through the use of trial work experiences, which must be provided in competitive employment settings to the maximum extent possible, consistent with the informed choice and rehabilitation needs of the individual. Trial work experiences include supported employment, on–the–job training, and other experiences using realistic integrated work settings. Trial work experiences must be of sufficient variety and over a sufficient period of time for the Bureau to determine that there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the individual cannot benefit from the provision of vocational rehabilitation services in terms of a competitive integrated employment outcome. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program will provide appropriate supports, including assistive technology devices and services and personal assistance services to accommodate the rehabilitation needs of the individual during the trial work experiences.

For individuals who have been found eligible for services, an IPE shall be developed as soon as possible, but not later than a deadline of 90 days after the date of the determination of eligibility, unless the Bureau and the eligible individual agree to an extension of that deadline to a specific date by which the IPE shall be completed. If the Bureau is operating under an order of selection, this timeframe will apply to each eligible individual to whom the Bureau is able to provide services.

The Bureau will conduct an assessment for determining vocational rehabilitation needs, if appropriate, for each eligible individual or, if the Bureau is operating under an order of selection, for each eligible individual to whom the Bureau is able to provide services. The purpose of the assessment is to determine the employment outcome, and the nature and scope of vocational rehabilitation services, including the need for supported employment services, to be included in the IPE. The IPE will be designed to achieve the specific employment outcome that is selected by the individual consistent with the individual’s unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice, and results in competitive, integrated employment. The IPE will be amended, as necessary, by the individual or, as appropriate, the individual’s representative, in collaboration with a qualified vocational rehabilitation counselor employed by the Bureau if there are substantive changes in the employment outcome, the vocational rehabilitation services to be provided, or the providers of the vocational rehabilitation services. For a student with a disability, the IPE will consider the student’s Individualized Education Program or 504 services.

For a supported employment outcome to be considered, the employment must be within an integrated work setting in the community that is at a location where the employee interacts with other persons who are not individuals with disabilities (not including supervisory personnel or individuals who are providing services to such employee) to the same extent that individuals who are not individuals with disabilities and who are in comparable positions interact with other persons, and that, as appropriate, presents opportunities for advancement that are similar to those for other employees who are not individuals with disabilities and who have similar positions.

The outcome must also be for paid employment where the client will be compensated at a wage that is not less than the rate specified in Section 6(a)(1) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (29 U.S.C. 206(a)(1)) or the rate specified in the applicable State of Connecticut minimum wage law. The wage should not be less than the customary rate paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by other employees who are not individuals with disabilities, and who are similarly situated in similar occupations by the same employer and who have similar training, experience, and skills. The client will also have access to the same level of employer–offered benefits that are available to similarly situated employees within the company.
For a client for whom an employment outcome in a supported employment setting has been
determined to be appropriate, the IPE or subsequent amendment developed to include supported
employment must identify:

(A) The supported employment services to be provided by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program;

(B) The extended services needed by the eligible individual, which may include natural supports;

(C) The source of extended services, or to the extent that the source of the extended services
cannot be identified at the time of the development of the IPE, a description of the basis for
concluding that there is a reasonable expectation that such a source will become available;

(D) Periodic monitoring to ensure that the individual is making satisfactory progress toward meeting
the weekly work requirement established in the IPE by the time of transition to extended services;

(E) The coordination of services provided under an IPE with services provided under other
individualized plans established under other federal or state programs;

(F) The extent that job skills training is provided, and identification that the training will be provided at
the job site; and

(G) Placement in an integrated setting for the maximum number of hours possible based on the
unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests and informed choice
of the individual.

2. The timing of transition to extended services. (Blind)

Extended Services in supported employment refer to ongoing support services and other appropriate
services that are:

(A) Organized or made available, singly or in combination, in such a way as to assist an eligible
individual in maintaining supported employment;

(B) Based on the needs of an eligible individual as specified in an IPE;

(C) Provided by a state agency, a private nonprofit organization, employer, or any other appropriate
resource, after an individual has made the transition from support provided by the Bureau, and;

(D) Provided to youth with the most significant disabilities by the Bureau for a period of time as
established by policies adopted by the Bureau, not to exceed 4 years.

Ongoing Support Services in supported employment are identified based on a determination by the
Vocational Rehabilitation Program of the individual’s needs as specified in an IPE, and are furnished
by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program from the time of job placement until transition to extended
services, unless post–employment services are provided following transition, and thereafter by one
or more extended service providers throughout the individual’s term of employment in a particular
job placement or multiple placements if those placements are being provided under a program of
transitional employment. These services include an assessment of employment stability and
provision of specific services or the coordination of services at or away from the worksite that are
needed to maintain stability based on:
(A) at a minimum, twice–monthly monitoring at the worksite of each individual in supported employment; or

(B) if under special circumstances, especially at the request of the individual, the IPE provides for off–site monitoring, twice monthly meetings with the individual, consisting of:

1. Any particularized assessment supplementary to the comprehensive assessment of rehabilitation needs;

2. The provision of skilled job trainers who accompany the individual for intensive job skill training at the work site;

3. Job development and training;

4. Social skills training;

5. Regular observation or supervision of the individual;

6. Follow–up services including regular contact with the employers, the individuals, the parents, family members, guardians, advocates or authorized representatives of the individuals, and other suitable professional and informed advisors, in order to reinforce and stabilize the job placement;

7. Facilitation of natural supports at the worksite;

8. Any other service identified in the scope of vocational rehabilitation services in Bureau policy.

Certifications (Blind)

Name of designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate
Department of Rehabilitation Services, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind, Vocational Rehabilitation Program

Name of designated State agency
Department of Rehabilitation Services

Full Name of Authorized Representative: Brian S. Sigman

Title of Authorized Representative: Director of Education and Rehabilitation, BESB

States must provide written and signed certifications that:

1. The designated State agency or designated State unit (as appropriate) listed above is authorized to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan under title 1 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Rehabilitation Act), as amended by WIOA*, and its supplement under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act.** Yes

2. As a condition for the receipt of Federal funds under title I of the Rehabilitation Act for the provision of VR services, the designated State agency listed above agrees to operate and administer the State VR Services Program in accordance with the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, the Rehabilitation Act, and all applicable regulations, policies, and
procedures established by the Secretary of Education. Funds made available under section 111 of the Rehabilitation Act are used solely for the provision of VR services and the administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan;  Yes

3. As a condition for the receipt of Federal funds under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act for supported employment services, the designated State agency agrees to operate and administer the State Supported Employment Services Program in accordance with the supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan* , the Rehabilitation Act, and all applicable regulations , policies, and procedures established by the Secretary of Education. Funds made available under title VI are used solely for the provision of supported employment services and the administration of the supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan;** Yes

4. The designated State agency and/or the designated State unit has the authority under State law to perform the functions of the State regarding the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement; Yes

5. The State legally may carry out each provision of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement. Yes

6. All provisions of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement are consistent with State law. Yes

7. The Authorized Representative listed above has the authority under State law to receive, hold, and disburse Federal funds made available under the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement; Yes

8. The Authorized Representative listed above has the authority to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and the supplement for Supported Employment services; Yes

9. The agency that submits the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement has adopted or otherwise formally approved the plan and its supplement. Yes

Footnotes (Blind)

Certification 1 Footnotes

* Public Law 113-128.

** Unless otherwise stated, "Rehabilitation Act" means the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by WIOA, signed into law on July 22, 2014.

Certification 2 Footnotes

* All references in this plan to "designated State agency" or to "the State agency" relate to the agency identified in this paragraph.

** No funds under title 1 of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 101(a) of the Rehabilitation Act.
Act.

*** Applicable regulations, in part, include the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR parts 76, 77, 79, 81, and 82; 2 CFR part 200 as adopted by 2 CFR part 3485; and the State VR Services Program regulations.

Certification 3 Footnotes

* No funds under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act.

** Applicable regulations, in part, include the citations in *** under Certification 2 footnotes

Additional Comments on the Certifications from the State (Blind)

Certification Regarding Lobbying — Vocational Rehabilitation (Blind)

Certification for Contracts, Grants, Loans, and Cooperative Agreements

The undersigned certifies, to the best of his or her knowledge and belief, that:

(Blind)

(1) No Federal appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid, by or on behalf of the undersigned, to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of an agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress in connection with the awarding of any Federal contract, the making of any Federal grant, the making of any Federal loan, the entering into of any cooperative agreement, and the extension, continuation, renewal, amendment, or modification of any Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement.

(Blind)

(2) If any funds other than Federal appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress in connection with this Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement, the undersigned shall complete and submit Standard Form-LLL, "Disclosure of Lobbying Activities," in accordance with its instructions.

(Blind)

(3) The undersigned shall require that the language of this certification be included in the award documents for all subawards at all tiers (including subcontracts, subgrants, and contracts under grants, loans, and cooperative agreements) and that all subrecipients shall certify and disclose accordingly. This certification is a material representation of fact upon which reliance was placed when this transaction was made or entered into. Submission of this certification is a prerequisite for making or entering into this transaction imposed by section 1352, title 31, U.S. Code. Any person
who fails to file the required certification shall be subject to a civil penalty of not less than $10,000 and not more than $100,000 for each such failure.

**Statement for Loan Guarantees and Loan Insurance (Blind)**

The undersigned states, to the best of his or her knowledge and belief, that:
If any funds have been paid or will be paid to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress in connection with this commitment providing for the United States to insure or guarantee a loan, the undersigned shall complete and submit Standard Form-LLL, "Disclosure of Lobbying Activities," in accordance with its instructions. Submission of this statement is a prerequisite for making or entering into this transaction imposed by section 1352, title 31, U.S. Code. Any person who fails to file the required statement shall be subject to a civil penalty of not less than $10,000 and not more than $100,000 for each such failure.

Applicant’s Organization: Department of Rehabilitation Services, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind

Full Name of Authorized Representative: Brian S. Sigman

Title of Authorized Representative: Director of Education and Rehabilitation, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind

[SF LLL Form – Disclosure of Lobbying Activities (only if applicable) (http://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/apply/appforms/appforms.html). If applicable, please print, sign, and email to MAT_OCTAE@ed.gov]

**Certification Regarding Lobbying — Supported Employment (Blind)**

Certification for Contracts, Grants, Loans, and Cooperative Agreements The undersigned certifies, to the best of his or her knowledge and belief, that:

(Blind)

(1) No Federal appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid, by or on behalf of the undersigned, to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of an agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress in connection with the awarding of any Federal contract, the making of any Federal grant, the making of any Federal loan, the entering into of any cooperative agreement, and the extension, continuation, renewal, amendment, or modification of any Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement.

(Blind)

(2) If any funds other than Federal appropriated funds have been paid or will be paid to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress in connection with this Federal contract, grant, loan, or cooperative agreement, the undersigned shall
complete and submit Standard Form-LLL, "Disclosure of Lobbying Activities," in accordance with its instructions.

(Blind)

(3) The undersigned shall require that the language of this certification be included in the award documents for all subawards at all tiers (including subcontracts, subgrants, and contracts under grants, loans, and cooperative agreements) and that all subrecipients shall certify and disclose accordingly. This certification is a material representation of fact upon which reliance was placed when this transaction was made or entered into. Submission of this certification is a prerequisite for making or entering into this transaction imposed by section 1352, title 31, U.S. Code. Any person who fails to file the required certification shall be subject to a civil penalty of not less than $10,000 and not more than $100,000 for each such failure.

Statement for Loan Guarantees and Loan Insurance (Blind)

The undersigned states, to the best of his or her knowledge and belief, that:

If any funds have been paid or will be paid to any person for influencing or attempting to influence an officer or employee of any agency, a Member of Congress, an officer or employee of Congress, or an employee of a Member of Congress in connection with this commitment providing for the United States to insure or guarantee a loan, the undersigned shall complete and submit Standard Form-LLL, "Disclosure of Lobbying Activities," in accordance with its instructions. Submission of this statement is a prerequisite for making or entering into this transaction imposed by section 1352, title 31, U.S. Code. Any person who fails to file the required statement shall be subject to a civil penalty of not less than $10,000 and not more than $100,000 for each such failure.

Applicant’s Organization

Department of Rehabilitation Services, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind

Full Name of Authorized Representative:    Brian S. Sigman

Title of Authorized Representative:   Director of Education and Rehabilitation, Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind

SF LLL Form – Disclosure of Lobbying Activities (only if applicable)
(http://www2.ed.gov/fund/grant/apply/appforms/appforms.html).

Assurances (Blind)

The designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate and identified in the State certifications included with this VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, through signature of the authorized individual, assures the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), that it will comply with all of the requirements of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, as set forth in sections 101(a) and 606 of the Rehabilitation Act. The individual authorized to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement makes the following assurances: The State Plan must provide assurances that:

1. Public Comment on Policies and Procedures: (Blind)
The designated State agency assures it will comply with all statutory and regulatory requirements for public participation in the VR Services Portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, as required by section 101(a)(16)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act.

2. Submission of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and Its Supplement: (Blind)

The designated State unit assures it will comply with all requirements pertaining to the submission and revisions of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement for the State Supported Employment Services program, as required by sections 101(a)(1), (22), (23), and 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act; section 102 of WIOA in the case of the submission of a unified plan; section 103 of WIOA in the case of a submission of a Combined State Plan; 34 CFR 76.140.

3. Administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan: (Blind)

The designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate, assures it will comply with the requirements related to:

a. the establishment of the designated State agency and designated State unit, as required by section 101(a)(2) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

b. the establishment of either a State independent commission or State Rehabilitation Council, as required by section 101(a)(21) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

The designated State agency or designated State unit, as applicable has established a State Rehabilitation Council

c. consultations regarding the administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, in accordance with section 101(a)(16)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

d. the financial participation by the State, or if the State so elects, by the State and local agencies, to provide the amount of the non-Federal share of the cost of carrying out the VR program in accordance with section 101(a)(3). (Blind)

e. the local administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, in accordance with section 101(a)(2)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

The designated State agency allows for the local administration of VR funds No

f. the shared funding and administration of joint programs, in accordance with section 101(a)(2)(A)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

The designated State agency allows for the shared funding and administration of joint programs: No
g. statewideness and waivers of statewideness requirements, as set forth in section 101(a)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

Is the designated State agency requesting or maintaining a waiver of statewideness for one or more services provided under the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan? See Section 2 of this VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan. No

h. the descriptions for cooperation, collaboration, and coordination, as required by sections 101(a)(11) and (24)(B); and 606(b) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

i. all required methods of administration, as required by section 101(a)(6) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

j. the requirements for the comprehensive system of personnel development, as set forth in section 101(a)(7) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

k. the compilation and submission to the Commissioner of statewide assessments, estimates, State goals and priorities, strategies, and progress reports, as appropriate, and as required by sections 101(a)(15), 105(c)(2), and 606(b)(8) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

l. the reservation and use of a portion of the funds allotted to the State under section 110 of the Rehabilitation Act for the development and implementation of innovative approaches to expand and improve the provision of VR services to individuals with disabilities, particularly individuals with the most significant disabilities. (Blind)

m. the submission of reports as required by section 101(a)(10) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

4. Administration of the Provision of VR Services: (Blind)

The designated State agency, or designated State unit, as appropriate, assures that it will:

a. comply with all requirements regarding information and referral services in accordance with sections 101(a)(5)(D) and (20) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

b. impose no duration of residence requirement as part of determining an individual’s eligibility for VR services or that excludes from services under the plan any individual who is present in the State in accordance with section 101(a)(12) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

c. provide the full range of services listed in section 103(a) of the Rehabilitation Act as appropriate, to all eligible individuals with disabilities in the State who apply for services in accordance with section 101(a)(5) of the Rehabilitation Act? (Blind)
d. determine whether comparable services and benefits are available to the individual in accordance with section 101(a)(8) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

e. comply with the requirements for the development of an individualized plan for employment in accordance with section 102(b) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

f. comply with requirements regarding the provisions of informed choice for all applicants and eligible individuals in accordance with section 102(d) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

g. provide vocational rehabilitation services to American Indians who are individuals with disabilities residing in the State, in accordance with section 101(a)(13) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

h. comply with the requirements for the conduct of semiannual or annual reviews, as appropriate, for individuals employed either in an extended employment setting in a community rehabilitation program or any other employment under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as required by section 101(a)(14) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

i. meet the requirements in sections 101(a)(17) and 103(b)(2) of the Rehabilitation Act if the State elects to construct, under special circumstances, facilities for community rehabilitation programs (Blind)

j. with respect to students with disabilities, the State,

   i. has developed and will implement,
      A. strategies to address the needs identified in the assessments; and
      B. strategies to achieve the goals and priorities identified by the State, to improve and expand vocational rehabilitation services for students with disabilities on a statewide basis; and

   ii. has developed and will implement strategies to provide pre-employment transition services (sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(25)).

(Blind)

5. Program Administration for the Supported Employment Title VI Supplement: (Blind)

a. The designated State unit assures that it will include in the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan all information required by section 606 of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)
b. The designated State agency assures that it will submit reports in such form and in accordance with such procedures as the Commissioner may require and collects the information required by section 101(a)(10) of the Rehabilitation Act separately for individuals receiving supported employment services under title I and individuals receiving supported employment services under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

c. The designated state unit will coordinate activities with any other State agency that is functioning as an employment network under the Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency program under Section 1148 of the Social Security Act. (Blind)

6. Financial Administration of the Supported Employment Program: (Blind)

a. The designated State agency assures that it will expend no more than 2.5 percent of the State’s allotment under title VI for administrative costs of carrying out this program; and, the designated State agency or agencies will provide, directly or indirectly through public or private entities, non-Federal contributions in an amount that is not less than 10 percent of the costs of carrying out supported employment services provided to youth with the most significant disabilities with the funds reserved for such purpose under section 603(d) of the Rehabilitation Act, in accordance with section 606(b)(7)(G) and (H) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

b. The designated State agency assures that it will use funds made available under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act only to provide supported employment services to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including extended services to youth with the most significant disabilities, who are eligible to receive such services; and, that such funds are used only to supplement and not supplant the funds provided under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, when providing supported employment services specified in the individualized plan for employment, in accordance with section 606(b)(7)(A) and (D), of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

7. Provision of Supported Employment Services: (Blind)

a. The designated State agency assures that it will provide supported employment services as defined in section 7(39) of the Rehabilitation Act. (Blind)

b. The designated State agency assures that:

i. the comprehensive assessment of individuals with significant disabilities conducted under section 102(b)(1) of the Rehabilitation Act and funded under title I of the Rehabilitation Act includes consideration of supported employment as an appropriate employment outcome, in accordance with the requirements of section 606(b)(7)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act
ii. an individualized plan for employment that meets the requirements of section 102(b) of the Rehabilitation Act, which is developed and updated with title I funds, in accordance with sections 102(b)(3)(F) and 606(b)(6)(C) and (E) of the Rehabilitation Act.

(Blind)

Additional Comments on the Assurances from the State (Blind)