

## Public Comment on State Plan Policies and Procedures

As a part of the 2007 State Plan process, the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) hosted a public meeting on Saturday, April 29, 2006. Three locations around the state (Danbury, Hartford, and Middletown) were set up via a videoconference. Participants were able to see and hear everyone at each location. Nearly 5,000 consumers received invitations to attend the public meeting.

The draft of the 2007 State Plan was posted on the BRS Website to give the public an opportunity to review it prior to the public meeting. Consumers, family members, advocates and vocational rehabilitation professionals had an opportunity to share their comments about the draft state plan or about any issue related to vocational rehabilitation services.

Consumers addressed their comments to the BRS Director who was accompanied by the Bureau Chief, all three Regional Directors and four consultants (three BRS representatives were at each site). The Chair of the (SRC) attended the meeting along with one SRC member and one SRC volunteer.

Approximately 40 people attended the public meeting this year (*on a beautiful Saturday afternoon*). When necessary, a BRS staff person was able to meet with consumers immediately after comments were shared. A written response was sent to everyone who shared comments. Below is a summary of the general themes shared at the public meeting.

1. Counselors make excuses that their caseloads are too large.
2. Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) that are not performing their jobs should be changed.
3. Consumers with Asperger's are having a more difficult time in finding employment and understanding BRS services.
4. There is a delay in services and delay in BRS responses to consumers.
5. Consumers want counselors to listen to them.
6. Consumers sometimes see BRS as the powerful vs. the powerless.
7. Staff is more concerned with process than relationship building.
8. At least half of the consumers who shared comments made positive statements about their experiences with BRS. These comments highlighted the excellent service a counselor had provided or the kindness and the professionalism a counselor exhibited. One consumer drove nearly 90 miles round trip to say, "BRS saved my life." We expect that some will attend the public meeting to share less than successful outcomes. We were so pleased with the many who shared how BRS had made a difference to the quality of their lives and that of their families.

In cases where more detail was needed, follow-up meetings were scheduled with the regional directors and/or appropriate supervisors and counselors.

Approximately 40 consumers could not attend the public meeting and opted to submit written comments. All consumers received a response to their written comments from the BRS Director, the Regional Director responsible for the area in which the consumer lived, or a consultant with

specific knowledge of their topic. The following general themes were shared in the written comments:

1. Counselors take a long time to respond to consumer calls.
2. Constant changes in counselor assignment hindered services to consumers.
3. Counselors provided services different than what the consumers requested.
4. CRPs need to have their service delivery monitored more closely.
5. Services for consumers with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) need to be better defined.
6. Of the written responses, a quarter of them were positive comments about the services they had received from BRS and the improvements that had taken place in their lives as a result of the input from BRS.

These concerns reflect the same issues with which we have focused our energies this past year. We acknowledge that our service delivery was significantly impacted by the substantial number of retirements that occurred in 2003. Subsequently, staff have been promoted or reassigned to fill various vacancies that existed. In addition, new staff has been hired and have received a series of trainings to help them adjust to their new responsibilities. There is a natural period of learning that is needed to allow the new staff to become more proficient at their jobs. We anticipate that this period of change and adjustment will settle in the coming months and that consumers will see an improvement in the delivery of VR services.

Our relationships with the CRPs have improved over the year as they have participated more closely in several meetings to foster a better understanding of our consumers and their needs. The training for new counselors will help staff have a better understanding of CRPs as a resource for consumers.

We designated one resource person in each region to consult with staff regarding consumers with ASD. We also established the Autism Spectrum Committee that includes a team (including a clinician expert in ASD) that will review consumer cases monthly to develop specific options to address their needs.

These are just a few of the Bureau's recent strategies for addressing the issues related to CRPs and ASD. All of the themes identified by consumers continue to be concerns for BRS. They are highlighted in Attachment 4.12(c)(1) as ongoing goals and priorities and the strategies to address them as identified in Attachment 4.12 (d).

Of all the comments given during this public meeting process, only three specifically addressed the State Plan. These comments and the BRS responses are as follows:

### **Consumer 1**

*While reading different parts posted about BRS on the web site, I learned that the department is planning to add three counselors who will work solely with psychiatric clients. That is a fine idea. I also like the idea that a liaison person between DMHAS and BRS will also be a new hire. I wholly support Supported Employment for DMHAS clients.*

*If I could change anything about your services, I would be more upfront from the get go. Namely, I would make it crystal clear to incoming clients that the whole department of BRS exists solely to make taxpaying citizens out of them! Your mission is too vague to incoming clients.*

*I felt very intimidated by your intake process perhaps because I was not feeling very confident or good about being there in the first place. As a person with a psychiatric diagnosis myself, I feel that I would be a good candidate to work with others like myself. Kindly direct me to job descriptions or the application process.*

*One other fact disturbed me as I read about your financial estimations for the coming year. I cannot believe that your department can spend \$50,000.00 on a Mental Health Transitions Conference and then allot a mere \$2,500.00 for two scholarships for young clients. I sense a discrimination against people who have a mental illness by academia and yourselves. I would be interested in attending this Mental Health Transitions Conference. Kindly let me know if I am welcome there.*

**BRS Response:**

Yes, we are considering the hiring of three Mental Health VR Counselors who will assist each region on best practices for working with the psychiatric population. These counselors will be required to have a Master's Degree in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling and a concentration in issues regarding mental illness. We already have an interagency agreement with DMHAS and have been sharing the salary funding for our mental health liaison that has been working with both departments to improve the service delivery system.

Thank you for your suggestion that we are too vague in our mission. You are correct, the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services is to assist individuals with significant disabilities to return to, or retain employment. We believe that all individuals can be employed.

We do try to make the intake process friendlier. However, it is intimidating at the onset for individuals to enter into an environment that is different. That is why we try to see our consumers on a more frequent basis. We believe we need to build a trusting relationship with our consumers. If you are interested in employment you may want to look at the Connecticut Government website which is [www.ct.gov](http://www.ct.gov) and then go into the Department of Administrative Services who have state jobs listed.

Your last comment was on an expenditure of \$50,000.00 on Mental Health Transition Conference. Rest assured that we did not spend that amount of money on a conference. It would not be my goal, nor could our budget afford, to spend that sort of money on any conference as our resources are targeted to provide services to consumers. We did, however, share in the cost of the conference by supporting this well designed conference with \$5,000. We also supported 2 young adults transitioning from high school with \$2,500 scholarships. Our belief is that there are conferences or other opportunities that deserve support from us. We want the public to see that individuals with disabilities can and should be employed.

**Consumer 2:**

*One of the paragraphs on your website mentions CAP and having called an advocate today, she may be calling me back later. What alarms me and makes me more than a little curious is that the CT State services or is it Federal should have the need to employ an advocate or more to deal with dissatisfaction with VR counselors? Is there that much need?*

## **BRS Response 2:**

**Federal Regulations 34CFR part 370** mandates that there be a process by which consumers of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program have the availability of an advocate, not just for issues of dissatisfaction but many times a consumer may need assistance in understanding a policy or navigating through a federal or state system. The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor also calls upon CAPs to work on issues that may be out of the scope of VR but necessary for a consumer. For example: VR does not provide housing, but if that is a need of a consumer and they have limited resources we look to find other agencies that may assist. Since the VR Program is set up to assist consumers with significant disabilities towards employment there are many other issues one may need prior to employment or in conjunction with an employment plan. We look upon the CAPs program as a resource and partner to assist our consumers who may have additional issues.

## **Consumer 3**

*Why do you use four-year old data to base your budgets and services on?*

We use the 2002 study primarily because it is the most current data we have available to us, even though, as you correctly point out, it is 4 years old. But we do not base our budgets and services on this study. We simply wanted to point out that the number of individuals who could potentially benefit from BRS services far exceeds what we are able to do with the resources available to us.

We base our budget on financial resources available to us. We know how much money we can expect to receive from the federal and state government to operate the VR program in Connecticut. This is a fixed amount (approximately \$24 million each year). From this amount we have to pay all of our expenses, including personnel costs (salaries and fringe benefits), administrative costs (rent, utilities, supplies, postage, etc.), and services we purchase on behalf of our consumers. Because the money available is not unlimited, we try to strike a balance between all these major areas, including reserving approximately \$10 million for services we purchase for our consumers each year.

*Is it first-come, first-served?*

Not exactly. While the earlier one comes to us increases the likelihood that they will receive services sooner, we believe we have sufficient funds available to serve everyone eligible *who meets our current order of selection*. Under this order of selection, we currently provide services to everyone determined to have a significant (or most significant) disability. We do not currently serve individuals without a significant disability.

If we were to open our doors to individuals without significant disabilities, we would have to hire many more counselors, which would significantly increase our personnel costs. More counselors would also mean more supervisors and secretaries, higher rents for office space, etc. If we did this, we would not have enough money available to purchase the services needed by our consumers. While we would like to serve everyone with a disability, no matter how severe or significant, we are unable to do so with the resources currently available to us.

Your third question had to do with models for "Supportive Employment", where a consumer may need "support" on the job on an ongoing basis in order to be successful. "Support" in this regard

usually means providing the consumer with a "job coach" a few hours a week or month, to assist the consumer in resolving any problems that may come up in the work setting. It does not mean, as you understand it, that BRS "chips in" to the employer's hourly wage to make the wages competitive. BRS does not "chip in" wages when a consumer is employed in a competitive setting.

*When and where will the TV series on persons with disabilities air?*

That's an easy one! Just follow this link to CPTV....

[http://www.cptv.org/content/tv/ReadMore\\_AbleLives\\_Series.htm](http://www.cptv.org/content/tv/ReadMore_AbleLives_Series.htm)

In addition to these comments, consumers who attended the public meetings were given a survey to comment on the public meeting process. The results of that survey are listed here.

## **Bureau of Rehabilitation Services – Public Meeting Survey Results**

The following results are from twenty completed surveys.

### ***1) How did you learn about the BRS public meeting today?***

BRS Counselor      \_\_1\_\_

Family/Friend \_\_1\_\_

Flyer                      \_\_10\_\_

Other (*Please specify*)\_BRS; SRC; CAP – 2; Post Polio Outreach Group; &\_      \_\_Main  
Street Danbury Social Worker - Iris\_\_\_\_\_

### ***2) Was this the first BRS public meeting you attended?***

Yes \_\_15\_\_              No \_\_3\_\_

### ***3) What was your primary reason for coming to the public meeting today?***

To gather information \_\_3\_\_

To discuss an issue    \_\_10\_\_

- Extremely unhappy with services provided by Waterbury BRS to my wife.
- Horrible assistance with (*two counselors*) in the Waterbury BRS Office.
- To advocate for my son (*written testimony provided*).
- The flyer says *we want to hear from you*.
- To give information about what I have learned about Medicaid for the work disabled.
- I was sent a flyer.
- I'm getting more stress to go to BRS (New Britain?) than finding a job.
- To learn as well as share my experience.
- To tell of good BRS is doing.

### ***4) What is your primary association with the Bureau of Rehabilitation Services?***

Consumer      \_\_10\_\_

Agency      \_\_2\_\_

- Employee
- SRC Representative

- Husband of Client
- Client looking for part-time work near home
- Mother of Client
- Sent by CT Labor to try to get employed with aid from BRS.
- Advocate
- To get a job. (2)

**5) Were you satisfied with the way your question/topic was handled?**

Yes \_\_10\_\_ No \_\_3\_\_

- I am not assisted, collectively very rude to me.
- Talk is cheap. Once I see improvements I could answer yes or no.
- I appreciate that I was listened to.
- Very professional w/video from other locations.

**6) Was the location for the public meeting suitable for your needs?**

Yes \_\_15\_\_ No \_\_2\_\_

- N/A
- Only 20 minutes from home.
- I live in North Windham, so the travel was a little much.
- Could have been a little closer.
- Nice people in charge. Thank you for inviting me.
- I was lost for two hours. No bus. I walked from Expo. I was lost. It was far. (Hartford)

**7) Were you satisfied with the availability of parking at this location?**

Yes \_\_16\_\_

- Didn't know about parking in the back. I parked on Main Street (Middletown).
- You had to enter the building from the rear; I parked in front across the street – if I get a ticket, I will not pay it. (Middletown)

**8) Was the date and time of the public meeting suitable for your schedule?**

Yes \_\_16\_\_

- However, next time I'd appreciate a closer location.
- Saturdays are great – don't affect workday.
- I was able to get here after my part time job.
- Worked well. Saturday is excellent idea.
- Saturday is better for me.

**9) What did you like most about the public meeting?**

- I like the ability to tap into each location at the same time.
- Three locations coordinated via video.
- The success stories plus feedback.
- The effort to hear everyone's comments.
- Listening to more unhappiness, problems, and barely successful stories.

- People stated the good & bad of BRS, DSS, SS, Medicaid, etc. and Brenda Moore knew when to silence them because of the many people wanting to speak.
- Listening and seeing the other participants. Watching Brenda take down notes and her comments.
- Everybody got a chance to speak.
- The fact that they included consumers that deal with BRS.
- Lots of chance to talk.
- The way they had the hook-up.
- Now I know how to get here. I like it.
- You are going to solve the problems that I am facing.
- Hearing from other, their experiences.
- I would like to learn more about job, hearing aids.
- That I was able to hear other testimonies from other locations.

**10) What did you like least about the public meeting?**

- Perhaps using a 3-hour versus a 4-hour slot.
- If caption (CART) was provided at one location, it could have transmitted to three locations. Logistics – both sites could have displayed?
- Hard to hear Hartford.
- The video caused too much confusion, problems. Would be better to have all these meetings separately and then have the BRS staff to meet to discuss the meetings they had.
- Couldn't discuss all points of the state's BRS plan.
- Everything was good.
- The Men's room nearby is not wheelchair accessible. (*Hartford*)
- It was very informative. I just hope these comments make a difference in BRS.
- Way the room was set up. (*Hartford*)
- No face-to-face meeting.
- I wish more people came.
- I am enjoying to see public meeting.
- Nothing.

**11) I would recommend others to attend future public meetings**

Yes   14  

- I wish more staff attended to experience this event. It was groundbreaking!
- I'm not someone to answer because I'm impatient, so my answer would be no.
- Not sure.
- I will try

**12) In what ways could the public meeting be improved?**

- I was very impressed with this process. It's great that consumers and families had the opportunity to meet and discuss concerns directly with Brenda!
- Work out technical kinks.
- More information be made available, like the next meeting. Do you have more than one meeting per year? If not, I suggest 3-4 per year.

- Better seating, but excellent first try.
- Better teleconference equipment.
- The video quality could use improvement.
- Just to reiterate my comments, I think that BRS needs to do way more for “high functioning” clients in the mental health system. Mental health clients come from all walks of life. In my case I need professional training above college to succeed like New Horizons in Windsor and Hartford Graduate Center. And I don’t need counselors asking me “are you going to be able to find a job with this training” before they will give it to me.
- Not sure. This worked well.

***Additional comments:***

- I noticed two recurring comments: 1.)“I’m doing it myself.” This tells me that clients are not getting the message of “partnership: and support from BRS. 2.) Many clients are getting the message that counselors are too busy, can’t be bothered, are overwhelmed, etc. Counselors could use professional development in this area, as they are literally asking clients to accommodate their needs!
- Many of the comments by consumers were that the consumer did 90% of the work to move forward with very little help from BRS. They are struggling to do everything on their own. The budget needs to be increased significantly to hire qualified counselors, job coaches and other resources.
- Improvement with staff assisting the disabled. Need positive employment outcome with BRS. (*Two Waterbury counselors*) services have depressed me, anxiety attacks. Lost my self-esteem. Finally, I became the State of CT Brain Injury Association Group Facilitator at Waterbury Hospital to hear all others with different brain injuries and all of their problems with BRS. BRS says that they are to help us with independence through employment, but they do NOT keep their word.
- Please send a confirmation that you will address each of these – individually.
- Closer to home – I live in Stratford.
- Brenda More is very polite and helpful. I hope the meeting helps me get a better quality of life. Thank you.
- No Food!
- There are some counselors that really care about the disabled. One counselor I did deal with in the past. ... did not help me in anyway. I think she only reason she is in that job is to be able to go someplace and sit from 9-5, get a paycheck and leave. I think the only reason she still works for BRS is because she is a state employee.
- Provide better directions. Also bus directions hard to see where to go.
- It is good to have these types and should have them more often.
- Myself, I would encourage people to be PRO-ACTIVE in their goals and wishes. Do not assume that BRS will do ALL your homework. Work with your counselor. Communicate regularly. BE POSITIVE.

We appreciate all of the consumers that participated in the public comment portion of the State Plan process. Your comments help us to improve services to all of our consumers.