



University of Connecticut Health Center

April 2013

Bureau of Rehabilitation Services: 2013 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Summary

Prepared by:

Kathy Kellett, MA

Julie Robison, PhD

Noreen Shugrue, JD, MBA, MA

Alison Kleppinger, MS

Kristin Adomeit, BS

Irene Reed, MA

University of Connecticut
Health Center

263 Farmington Ave.
Farmington, CT 06030-5215

Table of Contents

| | | |
|------|--|---|
| I. | Introduction | 1 |
| II. | Background | 1 |
| III. | Methodology | 2 |
| IV. | Results | 3 |
| | A. Community Rehabilitation Provider Survey | 3 |
| | B. Counselor Survey | 4 |
| | C. Consumer Survey | 5 |
| | D. Key Informant Interviews | 6 |
| | E. 2011 MIG Needs Assessment: Vocational Rehabilitation Focused Analysis | 7 |
| V. | Recommendations | 9 |

I. Introduction

In Connecticut, the Bureau of Rehabilitation (BRS) offers Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services to help individuals with significant physical and mental disabilities find and maintain employment (<http://www.brs.state.ct.us/aboutus.htm>). These services may include a broad range of assistance and are offered to eligible Connecticut residents at no cost. Besides having significant physical or mental disabilities, a consumer's disabilities must also cause considerable employment barriers, and they must require VR services in order to become employed. Through individualized VR services offered by BRS, consumers are supported during the preparation for employment, job search, application/interview process, getting hired, maintaining employment, and working towards achieving all their employment-related goals.

Gathering data from individuals with disabilities and from others involved in the provision of VR services helps BRS to explore VR service needs and evaluate the impact of its services. Outcomes from surveys as well as data from administrative records play an important role in informing VR professionals, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders and are a significant source of credible information for planning future programs and services. VR services have the potential to empower individuals with disabilities and may lead to higher-quality employment and more meaningful careers.

II. Background

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) published new guidelines in the fall of 2009 for conducting a three-year Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA). This includes an assessment of the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the state, specifically the VR needs of:

- individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services;
- individuals with disabilities who are minorities;
- individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the vocational rehabilitation program; and
- individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment system.

As a requirement of the CSNA and as part of the annual State Plan, the Connecticut BRS developed a strategy to follow the new RSA reporting outline with results of a comprehensive assessment and to identify the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the state. To meet RSA expectations and identify unmet needs for populations specified by RSA, the 2013 BRS CSNA includes a focused analysis of data from targeted Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP), BRS Counselor, and Consumer surveys, and outcomes from Key Informant Interviews. In addition, the CSNA reports relevant findings from a subset of the 2011 Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment, including data from Employer and Provider surveys as well as a People with Disabilities survey, a small number of whose respondents had current or recent experience with the VR system.

This summary report briefly describes the methods used in the 2013 CSNA assessment, the results, and offers conclusions and recommendations.

III. Methodology

The 2013 CSNA is comprised of five parts: 1) Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) survey, 2) BRS Counselor survey, 3) Consumer survey, 4) Key Informant interviews , and 5) Focused analysis of a subset of data from the 2011 Medicaid Infrastructure Grant Needs Assessment (MIG NA). The complete 2011 MIG NA reports can be viewed at <http://www.connect-ability.com> under the Research Papers tab.

The CRP, BRS counselor, and consumer survey instruments, as well as the semi-structured key informant interview guide were all developed by the University of Connecticut Health Center research team with input from BRS and the State Rehabilitation Council.

A. CRP survey

The CRP survey comprised five overall areas: background information, service needs, minority individuals with disabilities, community rehabilitation providers, and interagency collaboration. Participants were recruited at the annual CRP conference on June 7, 2012 in Rocky Hill, CT. A total of 55 CRPs representing 31 agencies attended the conference, and 42 CRPs completed surveys, resulting in a response rate of 76 percent.

B. BRS Counselor survey

The BRS counselor survey comprised ten overall areas and included service experience with individuals with most significant disabilities, unserved and underserved populations, and minority individuals with disabilities. All BRS VR counselors (n=83) who attended one of three regional meetings held in the fall of 2012 completed the survey. The response rate was 100 percent.

C. Consumer survey

The consumer survey comprised six overall areas including experiences with VR services, employment barriers, and BRS staff and employment goals. The sample consisted of 991 BRS VR clients from the BRS database whose cases closed during a six month time period, February through July 2012, *without finding employment*. It included 422 with a case closed status of 28 (without employment but received services under a plan) and 569 with a case closed status of 30 (without employment and did not receive services under a plan). People whose cases closed without finding employment were surveyed in order to explore their experiences and better understand their needs and barriers so that ways to improve services can be considered and implemented where appropriate.

Each of the 991 clients received a mailed survey. Nonresponders received a second mailed survey and following the second mailing a randomly selected 150 nonresponder clients were identified to be contacted by phone.

The combination of mailed surveys and telephone calls produced a final response rate of 25 percent.

D. Key Informant interviews

Ten interview questions focused on various target populations including those with significant disabilities, and those identified as unserved and underserved. Key informants were asked to

describe major gaps or barriers that exist within VR and measures that can be taken to better serve individuals with significant disabilities. Key informants were also asked to provide input about supported employment, community rehabilitation providers (CRPs), and the state workforce investment system and how services involving these supports could be improved.

BRS identified 25 individuals representing various organizations throughout the state as key informants. Of these, 23 participated and two did not respond to interview scheduling requests. The response rate was 92 percent.

E. 2011 MIG NA: Vocational Rehabilitation Focused Analysis

Three groups of consumers who participated in the 2011 MIG NA consumer surveys were identified: clients who received no VR services, those who were served by VR within the three years, between April 1, 2008 and April 1, 2011, and were closed, and clients who were served by VR and were active as of April 1, 2011.

Of the 1,813 2011 NA respondents, 87 are former BRS clients and used VR services in the three years between April 1, 2008 and April 1, 2011. Thirty-two respondents are current BRS clients and were active as of April 1, 2011.

The first part of the analyses using the 2011 MIG NA data compared those with no VR (n=1694) to the closed (n=87) and active (n=32) groups.

The second part of the analysis examined the subset of current employed consumers (n=398) and compared those with no VR (n=339) to those with any VR, either closed or active VR group, (n=41)

The third part of the analysis looked only at the subset of VR users and compared the closed VR group (n=87) with the active VR group (n=32).

A brief summary of pertinent outcomes from the 2011 Employer and Provider surveys was included. These describe employer and provider practices and the unique challenges they experience related to the employment of people with disabilities.

IV. Results

A. Community Rehabilitation Provider Survey

The CRP survey evaluated the service needs of individuals in several groups including individuals with significant disabilities, minority individuals, unserved and underserved people with disabilities. Barriers that exist for these groups and suggested ways BRS and CRPs can improve service provision are highlighted below. The role and availability of CRP services, the degree of interagency collaboration between certain agencies and barriers that prevent them from working together effectively, are also mentioned.

Service needs for clients with significant disabilities

- Some clients need mental health assessment or substance abuse counseling, but this is only sometimes available.
- More than half of CRPs indicated that while some clients need support services and assistive technology, these services are also only sometimes available.

- Other areas of need include improving self-advocacy skills, soft skills training, and pre-vocational skills training.

Service needs for minority individuals with disabilities

- The greatest service needs are outreach programs and publications that target this group to raise awareness of the availability of services.
- Training that focuses on self-esteem development, advocacy, and personal empowerment would benefit this population.

Service needs for unserved and underserved populations of individuals with disabilities

- Job skill training is essential for both unserved and underserved populations.
- Accessible and affordable transportation is needed to assist consumers in participating more fully in the VR program and to meet their Employment Plan goals.
- Disability awareness is important for the unserved population.
- The most critical employment barriers to address are lack of employer awareness, language barriers, and inadequate job skills training.

Community Rehabilitation Providers

- While CRPs were split on whether or not more CRPs are needed, it was suggested that particularly more multilingual CRPs may be needed to broaden services to Spanish and other non-English speaking BRS clients.

Interagency collaboration

- Barriers that hinder interagency collaboration include different agency expectations, lack of funding, and lack of staff.

B. Counselor Survey

The Counselor survey evaluated service experiences with individuals in several groups including individuals with most significant disabilities, unserved and underserved and minority people with disabilities. VR counselors evaluated CRP and supported employment services, providing feedback on agency or local area partnerships and specified BRS initiatives.

Service barriers reported by counselors are listed below for three different groups of clients.

| Population | Service barriers |
|--|---|
| Individuals with most significant disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of accessible and affordable transportation to assist consumers in participating more fully in the VR program |
| Unserved/underserved individuals with disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of accessible and affordable transportation to assist consumers in participating more fully in the VR program • Lack of family support and employer understanding • Language |
| Service needs for minority individuals with disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language and culture |

Additional survey outcomes and suggestions made by VR counselors in the categories below indicate the strong, positive role and opportunity BRS has to more fully integrate people with disabilities into employment through improvements in training, employer outreach, and other services needed to support job seekers.

CRPs and supported employment services

- CRPs are knowledgeable about the services BRS consumers need, but they do not always hire and train qualified staff to provide those services.
- The most common barriers to supported employment services include lack of funding, inaccessibility to services and lack of time.

Agency or local area partnerships

- A clear partnership was indicated between BRS and DDS.
- Partnerships between BRS and DOL and DMHAS need to be strengthened.
- Barriers to be addressed in the BRS/DDS partnership include different agency expectations, lack of staff knowledge, and training, and long wait period for services.
- Barriers between BRS and DOL are similar but include insufficient number of staff in both agencies to address service needs.
- The partnership between BRS and DMHAS is also challenged by different agency expectations and lack of staff knowledge and training, but unlike DDS and DOL, long-term support was mentioned as an ongoing challenge for the BRS and DMHAS partnership.

BRS initiatives

- BRS initiatives are beneficial, but need improvement.
- The purpose of the Autism Spectrum Committee is not clear and better collaboration to improve it is suggested.
- Barriers are common to a number of different initiatives and include transportation, lack of employer engagement, limited employer outreach or limited job opportunities.

Transportation

Assistance with transportation in the VR program is an ancillary service and is available to help individuals access other needed services and/or help them meet their Employment Plan goals. Reports of transportation as a barrier to employment, whether for ancillary services or to help a consumer get to work, is an important policy issue for people with disabilities who want to work. However, BRS services can only assist with transportation for VR-related activities.

C. Consumer Survey

The consumer survey evaluated experiences with VR services, BRS staff, employment and related barriers of individuals whose cases had closed without finding employment. People whose cases closed without finding employment were selected in order to explore their experiences and better understand their needs and barriers so that ways to improve services can be considered and implemented where appropriate.

Service experiences

- Most clients were satisfied with the location of the office and its accessibility as well as their involvement in setting job goals, their counselor's respect, and their involvement in choosing the services they received.
- Fewer individuals were as satisfied with length of time to receive services, the services themselves, counselor responsiveness, and overall experience with BRS.

Employment experiences

- Less than a quarter of respondents reported currently working.
- The majority of clients who reported working were dissatisfied with benefits, opportunities to advance, and wages.

Employment barriers

- Lack of job search skills
- Discrimination against people with disabilities
- Insufficient VR services

Experiences with BRS staff and employment goals

- Overall, respondents were satisfied with BRS staff and their employment goals.
- Gaps in services indicate the need for better communication and follow-up, more consistency in providing training or educational support, and developing a broader range of employment opportunities through collaboration.

D. Key Informant Interviews

Key informant questions focused on various target populations including those with significant disabilities and those identified as unserved and underserved. Key informants were asked to describe major gaps or barriers that exist within VR for people with significant disabilities and measures that can be taken to better serve these individuals and to provide input about supported employment, CRPs, and the state workforce investment system and how services involving these supports could be improved.

Populations that were identified as either unserved or underserved included the following.

Unserved populations

- People who fall through the cracks in the BRS eligibility criteria, such as certain transition-age students, students placed out of state, persons with mental health and addiction issues.
- Individuals who require significant ongoing supports and a portion of the autism population.

Underserved populations

- Persons with hearing disabilities, transition-age youth (including students in Corrections and Section 504 students), non-English speakers, persons on the autism spectrum, persons with severe disabilities who have the most significant needs, persons with

cognitive disabilities, mental illness and substance use disorders, the Native American population, persons who live in rural areas, and those who are homeless.

Barriers

The most commonly perceived gaps identified in the BRS system include:

- Lack of knowledge of BRS services, and gaps in BRS workers' knowledge of particular disabilities, such as deafness and autism.
- Other gaps mentioned include poor communication with deaf clients, a slow eligibility process, and lack of coordination among case managers and job developers.

Supported employment and workforce investment system

Supported employment was described as a key service for a subset of BRS clients, especially those with intellectual or mental health disabilities and those on the autism spectrum.

The workforce investment system is perceived as a key BRS partner whose collaboration has enhanced training and internships opportunities. Limitations described in the system include:

- Limited knowledge of some employer priorities.
- An emphasis on speedy outcomes at the expense of hard to place individuals.

Community rehabilitation providers

There were mixed opinions on both the quantity and quality of CRPs. There may be a need for additional CRPs in some geographic areas and to serve underserved populations such as those with autism and hearing disabilities. While many existing CRPs do an excellent job, others produce lower quality results and require additional training. Informants also noted a need for increased cultural competence in both CRPs and BRS workers.

Positive responses about BRS

Informants related several positive observations about BRS, its employees, and progress over the years. BRS employees were described as dedicated, creative, and responsive to ideas that would enhance their clients' welfare. They also praised efforts to enhance inter-agency cooperation through Connect-Ability and other channels.

E. 2011 MIG NA: Vocational Rehabilitation Focused Analysis

Although the 2011 MIG NA was completed for a broader purpose and not focused on VR outcomes, a VR-focused analysis of that data provides an opportunity for combining existing information with new information to inform the State Plan. While only about seven percent of MIG NA respondents had recent or current experience with the VR system, it is instructive to compare their responses with those of other persons with disabilities. Results of the focused analysis below are by VR group followed by the Employer and Provider outcomes.

No VR versus the closed group versus the active group

Demographics: similarities

- Most consumers in the three groups were unmarried, of working age between 30 and 54, more likely to have completed high school, and reported an insufficient amount of money to make ends meet.

Demographics: differences

- Respondents in the VR groups were more likely to report excellent or good health.
- Individuals with VR reported a lower rate of physical and mental disability and had a lower percentage of substance use disorder than consumers with active or closed VR cases.

Work experiences: similarities

- More than half of consumers in all three groups reported they had worked in the past but were not currently working.

Work experiences: differences

- A greater percentage of those in the active VR group reported actively seeking work, but a larger proportion of those with no VR reported not actively seeking employment.
- The prospect of getting a job in the next 12 months was believed to be more likely among those in the active group and least likely among the no VR group.
- Active VR users (29%) were the most likely to have turned down a raise or promotion.

Current employed consumers: No VR group versus any VR group

There were more similarities than differences between these groups.

- On average, consumers with no VR worked only about one hour more per week than those in any VR group.
- The greatest percentage of consumers in both groups reported earning hourly wages between \$8.25 and \$9.99.
- The majority of consumers in the two groups believe they use a lot or some of their talents in their current job.
- Most consumers in both groups reported their main job as a service job.

VR users only: Closed versus active

This subset analysis explored differences between closed and active VR users and examined the importance of AT and supports, transportation barriers, and challenges consumers face in the process of getting or maintaining employment.

Employment-related similarities

- Both groups noted the importance of computer aids, communication aids, and transportation aids in getting and maintaining employment.
- Both groups reported that disability-related health complications, self-regulation, interpersonal problems, and lack of education and training make it difficult to obtain or maintain employment.

Employment-related differences

- While multiple types of supports were reported to be important to consumers in both groups, support from co-workers was significantly more important for consumers in the active group.

Employment barriers

- Transportation difficulties continue to be a barrier to employment for both groups.
- Compared to the closed group, a slightly greater percentage in the active group reported the barriers of not having a person available to provide transportation and problems with the public transit system.

Employer outcomes

- Results from the Employer survey demonstrated mixed attitudes related to hiring people with disabilities.
- More than two-thirds of employers agreed that employers are generally reluctant to hire someone who they know has a disability (70%).
- Two-thirds of employers also agreed that the benefits outweigh the costs of hiring an employee with a disability (67%).
- Forty-seven percent of employers participating in the 2011 NA reported they have hired people with disabilities.
- Over half of employers were willing to provide a job reassignment (58%), change a person's hours (56%), or provide modifications to the physical environment (53%), but only one-third were willing to provide technology (e.g., voice recognition software) or allow a person to telecommute (29%).
- Employers in for-profit organizations appear to have the greatest number of challenges to overcome in hiring people with disabilities.

Provider outcomes

- Providers are concerned about the mixed attitudes of employers including their lack of awareness and knowledge about people with disabilities and their reluctance to hire them.
- Connect-Ability and its development of a Technical Assistance Center is furthering the employment of people with disabilities by providing a broad range of supports and continues to inform employers, service providers, and job seekers about employment and other topics related to people with disabilities.
- Providers underscored the importance of providing consumers with more training including targeting youth with disabilities and improving transitional services.
- Providing accommodations and a lack of meaningful job opportunities for people with disabilities is a barrier.

V. Recommendations

The CSNA incorporated input from all participants in the VR system including consumers, counselors, CRPs, and other informants with interest in and knowledge of the system. Each of these sources yielded recommendations for BRS consideration in improving its outreach and services to its constituents, particularly those with significant disabilities, minorities, unserved and underserved individuals, and those who may benefit from supported employment and the

state’s workforce investment system. In many cases, the same issues were noted by multiple sources. The most prominent issues mentioned in multiple places included the following:

- Opportunities for increasing system efficiency and effectiveness;
- The need for increased communication and education about the nature and availability of BRS services;
- Subsets of the BRS constituency that appear to be underserved, such as those with hearing disabilities or autism;
- The need for increased cultural competency among BRS counselors and CRPs;
- Opportunities for more effective relationships with employers; and
- Lack of transportation as a barrier to effective BRS services

Specific recommendations on these issues and others gleaned from each of the five elements of the CSNA are noted below.

CRP recommendations

Some suggestions indicate what CRPs think BRS should do and others indicate what they think they should do as CRPs to improve services.

| Suggested action: | BRS | CRPs |
|---|---|--|
| Improve service provision to clients with significant disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase transportation options and funding to assist consumers in reaching VR goals • Make better connections with employers • Provide more coordination with service providers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop better connections with employers • Increase employment services staff • Coordinate more effectively with BRS |
| Increase service provision to minorities with disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop better transportation options to assist consumers in reaching VR goals • Provide information about services in multicultural formats • Add more culturally diverse individuals to staff | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve cultural competence • Provide information in multicultural formats • Increase collaborative efforts across agencies • Increase transportation options for clients to assist them in VR-related activities |
| Improve service provision to unserved and underserved individuals with disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase transportation options to assist consumers in reaching VR goals • Improve interagency collaboration • Raise public awareness through outreach, and additional pre-employment training | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise public awareness • Increase interagency collaboration • Participate in more CRP training and additional pre-employment training |

Counselor recommendations

Suggestions to improve services are listed below for three different groups of clients.

| Population | Recommendations |
|--|--|
| Individuals with most significant disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raise awareness of transportation options• Jobs skills and soft skills training |
| Unserved/underserved individuals with disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase agency outreach to community organizations• Provide transportation training/options for both groups• Increase staff outreach to unserved consumers• Increase interagency collaboration |
| Minority individuals with disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase bilingual and multilingual staff, forms, vendors• Staff training for cultural competence |

CRPs and supported employment services

- Further evaluate CRPs and the adequacy of the services they provide.
- Find alternate funding options, seek more Employment Opportunities Program (EOP) funding, and increase collaboration with DDS and DMHAS.

Agency or local area partnerships

Recommendations for BRS and partnership agencies are overwhelmingly the same:

- Provide better communication.
- Improve coordination of services.
- Increase employee education and training.

BRS initiatives

- Improve agency collaboration.
- Increase employer outreach.
- Develop more work sites across several initiatives.

Transportation

- Improve transportation options and services where appropriate to support consumer participation in VR programs.

Consumer recommendations

- Improve staff/client interactions, including better dissemination of information, ideas, concerns, goals and results.
- To avoid gaps in counselor services, develop and implement protocols when clients have to be transferred to a different counselor (i.e., a letter to the client explaining the reason for a transfer and introducing the new counselor; conduct a briefing between the current counselor and new one for a more seamless transfer).

- Provide more comprehensive education and training to clients, including training on advanced computer skills and on-the-job training to increase opportunities for better wages and promotions.
- Continue to develop a network of employers who are disability-friendly in an effort to create more work opportunities for people who are qualified and want to work.
- Provide more outreach to clients whose cases are closed and offer additional VR services.

Key Informant recommendations

Suggestions to address barriers

- Increase visibility for BRS with schools and employers and in the community through education about what BRS is and what it offers.
- Create and train specialists (both BRS counselors and CRPs) in particular disabilities such as deafness, autism and brain injury.
- Simplify the eligibility process, expedite intake, and create a fast track alternative for those ready to begin a job search.
- Promote better method of coordination among case managers and job developers across state agencies, including the sharing of job leads and employer ties.

Suggestions to improve supported employment and workforce investment system

- Expand the availability of supported employment to transition-age students.
- Provide better training for job coaches.
- Modify performance metrics in workforce investment system to allow incentives for working with hard-to-place individuals.
- Increase mutual understanding between employers and workforce investment system

Suggestions to strengthen CRP services

- Provide additional training.
- Enhance cultural competence.
- Hire more individuals of varied backgrounds and additional persons with disabilities.

2011 MIG NA: Vocational Rehabilitation Focused Analysis

The following recommendations are suggested to address some of the major challenges identified by respondents in the 2011 MIG NA.

- Provide additional information about VR services
 - Consumers with no VR are the largest group not actively seeking employment and should be targeted for receiving additional information.
- Provide education and job specific training to help consumers move to a better or higher paying position.
- Increase awareness about accommodations and other supports to enable more employment opportunities for VR consumers (e.g., flexible work opportunities, such as telecommuting, part-time and more flexible schedules, freelance jobs)
- Improve and expand transportation options to assist consumers in meeting their Employment Plan and to ensure the maximum benefit of participating in VR.