

**Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT)**  
**November 27, 2023**  
**3555 Timmons Lane**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, Conference Room A**  
**Houston, TX 77027**  
**In person and via Zoom**

**Council Members Present:**

Gennadiy Goldenshteyn, Chair, Dallas  
Peggy Schmidt, Vice Chair, Lucas Virtual  
Mark Baird, San Angelo, Virtual  
Glenda Born, Austin, Virtual  
Lisa Cowart, Sour Lake  
Michele Dobbins, LaPorte  
Cheryl A Fuller, Austin, Virtual  
Norine Gill, Taylor Lake Village  
Michele Harper, San Marcos Virtual  
Kiffany Jefferson, Rowlett Virtual  
Joe Powell, Irving Virtual  
Emily Robinson, Pflugerville  
Jordan Smelley, Burleson Virtual  
Daniel Solcher, Allen  
Karen Stanfill, Houston  
Patrick Sturdivant, San Antonio Virtual

**Council Members Absent:**

Jennifer Clouse, Temple

**TWC Employees Attendance:**

Ed Serna, Chairman Bryan Daniel, LaVonia Adetoro, Kimberly Berry, Shelly Caillouet, Corinna Capps, Daniel Clark, Heather Cooke, Larry Elliott, Monica Falcon, Lance Foss, Wendy Franklin, Lisa Godwin, Cindy Geisman, Mayra Gutierrez, Carey Hajovsky, Lauren Hargrove, Anne Hoscheit, Jamie Haywood, Malcolm Ifoezeh, Tasheara Jennings, Kirstin Johnson, Sumer Kutach, Dennis Kutach, Tony Lawrence, Anna Lee, Susan Lindsey, Diana Lopez, Tammy Martin, Scott McCune, Clell McCurdy Jr., Cassandra Medrano, Asha Mookala, Melinda Paninski, Tara Parker, Randall Pearson, Claudia Peden, Elsa Y. Perez, Jelondra Phillips, Daniel Prado, Andrew Ramirez, Summer Robinson, Aissa

Salazar, Jonas Schwartz, W Scott, Chris Speckhard, Kimberly Stanphill, Caren Thomas, Belinda Valero, Kevin Warren, Sara Weems-Pena, Rikka Weintraub, Erin Wilder, Sue-Ellen Woodlief, Laura York, Nedra Zeno

## **Public Attendance: 54**

### **Welcome**

- The meeting was called to order at 8:00 A.M. by Gennadiy Goldenshteyn, Chair.
- Welcome, opening comments and introductions.

### **Overview of VRD Region 5 Gulf Coast, Susan C. Lindsey, Regional Director and Tasheara Gobert, Deputy Regional Director**

- Six stand-alone offices, 287 full time employees, five contract workers, five management units that have three to seven office locations
- 2024 Initiatives
  - Steady Pace Wins the Race using the customer satisfaction survey as the driver.
  - Leaders of the Future unique employment opportunities with Johnson Space Center being the premiere example. Others Space Center Houston, MD Anderson Cancer Hospital, Port of Houston Ship Channel, Cruise Ship Terminals, and Kemah Board Walk offer a wide variety of employment opportunities.
  - STEP (Skills Training to Employment Project) Program includes Harris Health System with 100% participation.
- Student Activities
  - Pre-ETS Services 19,050 services delivered in FY 2023
  - Summer Earn and Learn S.E.A.L, Camp Empower for Deaf/Hard of Hearing Students, NASA Job Shadow Experience, Paving the Pathways to Success

## **VRD Region 5: Customer Experience, Tommy Hughs and Sarah Lee**

- Both Sarah and Tommy shared their experiences with VR. They both attend St Thomas University and are working on their degree in Pragmatics.

## **VRD Region 5: Employer Partnerships Cornelius Booker, Equal Opportunity Specialist, JSC/NASA, Beth Painter, Talent Acquisition, Whataburger and Jermarkus Booker, Volunteer Coordinator, Harris Health**

- Cornelius Booker spoke about his full experience throughout his disability including VR services.
- Beth Painter provided her experience as an employer working with VR on the S.E.A.L and Paving the Pathways programs.
- Jermarkus Booker works with Harris Health systems and VR STEP Program
- Question and Answer

## **State Annual Plan Update, Rikka Weintraub, Program Manager for Policy, Planning and Statewide Initiatives, TWC VRD**

- Edits
  - RSA TA 2401 an update was made. Clarified the ration of qualified VR councilors to VR customers 1 to 100. Clarified VR qualified vocational rehabilitation standards in accordance with the guidance. TWC VR considers VR counselors qualified to preform nondelegable duties that would include making eligibility determinations and assigning individualized plans for employment based on minimum initial standards for hire and based on successful completion of required training, and then initial six-month probationary period that allows demonstration of performance. The minimum initial standards for hire that VR has are aligned with the 34 federal regulations, 361. As long as the Texas VR counselor classification verification takes a minimum of six months to complete probation, during which time a qualified vocational rehabilitation supervisor or a qualified VRC designated by a supervisor, will approve the counselor's

- eligibility determinations and IEPs to ensure appropriate decision-making documentation and application of wordage.
- RCT membership was updated to match October 31 appointments.
- One more update in progress is the annual estimate section being recalculated based on FY2023 data.
- Public comment period for the Combined State Plan is December 12- January 12.
- Norine Gill commented that there isn't anything in the plan regarding audits. How are audits received and the selection for an audit and the process?

Chery Fuller commented that the Combined State Plan contains sections prescribed in the planning guidance from RSA and the discussion of audits is not part of the plan. However, it is an important part of the program. She offered to provide an update on that separately. Ed Serna provided that the agency itself has an internal audit group that includes VR, and that RSA also conducts random audits of the program. He suggested that a high-level overview of the reviews, audits and monitoring for TWC and TWC VR be presented to the RCT for better understanding. Jordan Smelley suggested adding policies and mechanisms in place for VR distributing of funding (providers not being paid timely).

## **TWC Commissioner Chairman Bryan Daniel and TWC Executive Director Ed Serna**

- Chairman Bryan Daniel addressed the council.
- TWC Executive Director Ed Serna address the council. He focused on the need for VR awareness to expand to other levels of individuals such as doctors, optometrist, audiologist, school counselors , rehabilitation facilities, those who the VR customers might interact with first.

## **VR Division Report, Cheryl Fuller, VR Director**

- General Updates

- October 31 farewell to Commissioner Arron Demerson,
- November 13 welcome Commissioner Joe Esparza
- Senate Bill 464 Designating October 17<sup>th</sup> as Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Day. VR partnered with the Governor's committee on People with Disabilities to develop a plan to include Entrepreneurs with Disabilities Day in the overall activities for National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October. VR developed a page on their website with basic information for individuals interested in seeking self-employment.
- Update on Combined State Plan Goals, Strategies, and Success Measures
  - 52 activities/projects are complete, 23 are in progress, 17 ongoing and 4 are in queue.
  - Goal 1 Improve provider recruitment, retention, and support.
    - Strategy 1.1 Streamline vendor requirements, processes, procedures, and documents. 6 Completed
    - (Star)Strategy 1.2 Ensure payment rates are competitive and equitable. 1 Completed, 1 Rate Review Report
    - Strategy 1.3 Ensure that a process is established for regular rate review and updates (comprehensive rate review) In Queue
    - Chair Goldenshteyn asked for conclusion of the report. Mrs. Fuller responded that her takeaway was rates need increasing across the board. And this report will also give VR an opportunity to consider how they can use incentive payment structure to encourage more providers to serve rural areas. Report out on PCG this afternoon.
    - Christopher Speckhard provided:
      - Statewide Service Provider Activity Rates 2019 Q3 – 2023 Q3
        - All Providers – Using close to 50%, increase since 2019-2021, provider base remains stable after cleanup of active provider list
        - Contract Providers Only – Increased activity to 62%
    - Karen Stanfill asked what efforts are being done in trying to increase providers? Mrs. Fuller responded that regional staff are actively engaging potential providers to try to

recruit them to become VR providers. At state office with the support of procurement and contracting department is trying to extend the open enrollment periods. Also, looking at recommendations from the PCG report.

- Goal 2 Streamline VR policy, process, and procedure and improve workflow processes and tools to facilitate timely service delivery.
  - (Star) 2.1 Streamline or redesign policy, procedure, forms, and approvals process to improve ease of navigation/application for VR staff. 4 Completed, 5 Current
    - Self-Employment redesign
      - Per request from RCT, a summary of how VR assist people with self-employment goals was provided in the binder.
      - Karen Stanfill asked if an RCT member could be included in this process and Mrs. Fuller confirmed that yes RCT members will be identified to participate.
    - Customized Employment (in WIOA)
      - Contracted with San Diego State University in partnership with Griffin Hamas and Associates to help VR design infrastructure, provide training, and the provide mentoring and technical assistance to implement these services.
      - Open Enrollment Solicitation for providers that wish to participate. Hope to post after January 1, 2024. Not included in the Standard for Providers until the pilot is completed.
    - Peer Supported Employment
    - October 25 a procurement awarded to Form Communities Inc. for VR Peer Specialist Training and Endorsement services. Will help develop the training and the participant manual for the endorsement.
  - (2 Star)2.2 Facilitate coordination of services with providers and improve responsiveness to customers. 5 Current Quarterly provider call; Contracts executed for customized employment services design and VR Peer Support Specialist Endorsement & Training: Concept approved to go to pilot for System Partnership/ Service Coordinator Project; HHS/TWC/TEA Project

- 2.3 Improve workflow processes and business systems to improve timeliness, efficiency, and consistency of VR services provision. 3 Completed third and final release of ReHabWorks redesign project.
- Goal 3 Recruit and Retain VR staff.
  - 5<sup>th</sup> Major Project 1. Communication 2. Seek additional sources of nonfederal funding and 3. Doing more.
  - There are five universities in Texas that have programs focused on rehabilitation counseling. We are working these universities to make sure that these students know about careers in VR.
  - (Star) 3.1 Identify and implement strategies to improve staff recruitment and retention, employee engagement 5 Current, 3 complete University/VR Forum, Employee Engagement Comm.
- Goal 4 Improve and develop additional user-friendly resources to maximize customer choice.
- Goal 5 Improve VR staff knowledge and system capacity to enhance service delivery to customers.
- Goal 6 Increase and enhance partnerships with employers to 1) understand employer needs, and 2) build awareness about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.
- Chair Goldenshteyn asked Mrs. Fuller, how does VR pay for all this stuff? He stated that feedback from VR customers, staff and providers is not favorable. Mrs. Fuller asked for clarification. How are services and rate increases FY2024 budget? Conversation about budget is one that is ongoing internally. Mrs. Fuller provided a recap of budget process.

Expenditure rates are driven up faster than projected. That means three strategies. First, we are trying to get much better at being accurate in the amount of funding that is tied up in a service authorization and the timely release of unused funds once the service is provided. Second, we are working with Mr. Serna to identify other sources of nonfederal funding in the short term that could be used to match the current federal grant. Third we are identifying partnerships that can result in third-party cooperative arrangements. If providers have provided services and submitted a correct invoice, they should be getting paid. We are putting together a communication plan and working on communication first internally but quickly thereafter externally is my top priority for this fiscal year.

**PCG Study Report, Katie Alijewicz, Deputy Project Manager, Senior Consultant, Joseph Carbeau, Engagement Manager, Associate Manager, Maya Cox, Project Manager, Associate Manager, Terry Donovan, Project Manager, Senior Advisor, Margaux Hoagland, Senior Data Analyst, Abelina Zuniga, Stakeholder Engagement Lead, Consultant**

- Provided PCG's study and methodology
  - Reviewing the structure and payment rates in TWC-VR contracts
  - Explore provider recruitment and retention in underserved areas
  - Evaluating provider requirements to lesson burdens and improve efficiencies where possible
  - Data Source: Collect and Analyze Data, Market Research, Stakeholder Engagement
  - Time Study February 13, 2023-March 03, 2023
- Summarize data analysis
- Recommendations are still under review and consideration by TWC leadership
  - Recalculated Rates
  - Configuring the Fee Structure-Mileage Reimbursement, Durable Medical Equipment, Communication Access Services, Orientation and Mobility Services and Business Process of the Program – Authorizations, Documentation Requirements, Invoice/Payment Process
  - Augmenting Provider Base in Underserved Areas – Benefits Planning, WRAP Wellness Recovery Action Plan, Rural Incentive Rate
  - Communication and Implementation – Minimize misunderstandings, involve service providers as “champions”, Establish feedback opportunities from the beginning for all affected, design a logic model/evaluation strategy
  - Business Process Reviews – Hospital Services (for contracting/authorization involving payment processes, Durable Medical Equipment (explore alternative rates and processes to expedite services and cover provider's cost), Mileage reimbursement process (across services, mileage reimbursement for travel is perceived as a burden, complex and insufficient
  - Unserved/Underserved Areas – In Depth Analysis of options to add/increase services in unserved/underserved areas.
  - Demonstration of PGC's Technology Solution – Vendor Billing System (a web-based portal where vendors can enter and



update required business information, can upload staff certifications, can submit service invoices and track payments

- Data Driven Rate Monitoring and Decision Making – Monitor provider cost annually, facilitate regular rate studies of services
- Q and A
- Full report will be provided to RCT

## **VR Performance Update Christopher Speckhard, Manager VRGIS Team, Information, Innovation, and Insight (I|3) Division**

- State FY Q4 2023 VR Performance Update, Chris Speckhard
- Full Report is included in the binder.
- Participates 10% or more over year in target.
- Q2-Q4 Post Exit 88%, target 85%
- Credential Rate 46%, about 6 points above target
- Measurable Skills Gain (MSG) 48%, target 43%
- Success Rate 53% positive trend
- Participants Served largest number in Intellectual and Learning Disabilities
- Disability Types slight decrease in legally blind comparing PY22 to a rolling four quarters of SFY23
- Median Earnings continue to grow 300 to 400 increases.
- Successful Retention Rate basically all disability categories have successful retention rate when employed Q2-Q4.
- Participants in PY23 TBI 881, Stroke 640, and Spinal Cord Injury 650. Retention rate for all is between 88%-90%
- Blind or Visually Impaired PY20-22 Successful Exits 26%.8% Service, 16.2% Office and Administrative Support, 13.5% Education Legal, Community Services, Arts and Media

## **RCT Committee Reports**

- Policy, Procedure & Personnel Development, Karen Stanfill, Chair
  - Individualized Plan we met with TWC VR Staff and provided them the research we had. Will follow up with them on their thoughts of developing a guide for customers.
  - Merit Raises for VR staff that have completed one year of service but have not been accepted into a graduate program. VR shared that this has been accepted.

- Employee Retention Goals, TWC sent out 115 exit interviews with only 24 completed. These surveys were shared with us and will be reviewed.
- Digital campaign for VR recruitment is still being discussed.
- Agency Approvals process is being reviewed to identify reduction.
- Membership and Education, Lindsey Geeslin for Emily Robinson, Chair
  - Follow 88<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session Cindy Geisman
    - Interagency Aging Services Council to be established with Health and Human Services. VR will have a member on the council. Matt Bernard and Kira Hollywood OIB will be VR representatives.
    - Improper use and treatment of assistive or service animals. Law makes it a misdemeanor to knowingly represent an animal as an assistance/service if it is not trained or equipped to assist a person with a disability.
    - Study regarding best practices for assisting students in postsecondary education, students with autism spectrum disorder. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board is responsible for implementing this new law. TWC VR representative on this council is Laura Villarreal.
    - Over the counter hearing aids. Once this rule has been issued VR will update guidance for VR staff.
    - Rider 49, apprenticeship opportunities for people with disabilities. VR will provide an inventory of all current apprenticeship opportunities for people with disabilities to legislature by October 1 of each even number year starting October 2024. This report will also be distributed to the RCT.
  - Membership is current
  - New Member Orientation is being updated.
- Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment, Lisa Cowart, Chair
  - CSNA town hall and survey evaluation has started.
    - Ways to provide VR input is a survey conducted by Texas A&M that is internet based. This took place April – June 2023. This focused on services and quality of services. 585 participants, 334 providers and 155 staff.

- This confirmed Town Hall strategies that a need to increase provider availability and raising employer's awareness of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities. Uncertainty over government benefits was a key theme.
- Availability and quality of VR service provider question was edited to add availability due to high numbers in 2020 CSNA. When adding availability this number drop.
  - Statistics full report is in the binder
- Ad-Hoc Public Engagement Committee, Gennadiy Goldenshteyn
  - RCT members will participate in more onsite events including participation in conferences.
    - RCT will have an exhibit table at the TWC Annual Conference 2023.
    - Coordinate with Lisa Godwin if you know of any events.
  - Web presence
    - RCT has fully engaged with a developer for the RCT Website.
    - Domain src-texas.org
    - RCT will maintain its webpage presence on TWC's website.
    - RCT will launch LinkedIn and Facebook purpose is to drive traffic to the website
- Ad-Hoc RCT Bylaw
  - Bylaws will be reviewed and edited by next meeting
  - Edits will be distributed to the council members for discussion and vote at the February 2024 meeting.

**Liaison Reports** The full reports are included in the binders. Each representative gave an update.

- Client Assistance Program (CAP), Karen Stanfill
- Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP), Peggy Schmidt
- Partners Resource Network (PRN), Lisa Cowart
- State Independent Living Council (SILC), Patrick Sturdivant
- Texas Education Agency (TEA), Emily Robinson
- Texas Workforce Investment Council (TWIC), no verbal report

## **New Council Business**

- Peggy Schmidt was announced as RCT Vice Chair unopposed. Vice Chair was vacant due to James Williams moving out of state.
- Approve August minutes, Karen Stanfill Motioned to approve August RCT Minutes as is. Norine Gill seconded, voted on and approved.
- FY24 Budget \$58,350. The current balance \$46,300 no concerns. At this time there are no other expenses to report. FY24 ended with a credit \$12,314.17 other expenses were \$17,975.00.
- RCT budget is funded with federal VR grant and included under innovation and expansion activities in VR State Plan.
- Walk in items
  - Glenda Born asked that presenters give more information and not just refer to looking at a PowerPoint, chart, statistics etc. Need to accommodate visually impaired.
  - Jordan Smelley announced Ability Expo in Dallas.
  - Jordan Smelley asked about the process of VR state appropriations. Cheryl Fuller explained the process including Public and RCT involvement opportunities. She will work with RCT Executive Committee to add an agenda item for February meeting.

## Public Comment

- Liana De La Cruz
- Mack Marsh

## Adjourn