

Blind Premium Payment for Vocational Rehabilitation Employment Service Providers

Discussion Paper

Background

Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program has approximately 350 contracted Employment Service Providers (ESP) that provide a variety of employment services to VR customers to assist them in preparing for, obtaining and retaining competitive integrated employment. These ESPs maintain University of North Texas Workplace Inclusion and Sustainable Employment (UNTWISE) credentials for work readiness, job skills training, job placement, and supported employment. UNTWISE credentials ensure that ESPs have baseline knowledge about employment and disabilities, as well as TWC VR requirements and processes.

ESP must have additional knowledge and skills to effectively serve customers with certain primary disabilities or barriers to employment. Examples of primary disabilities which require specialized skills include Autism and deafness. TWC VR identifies training and credential requirements for providers interested in serving customers with these primary disabilities. Providers who obtain the necessary training and credentials in one of these specialized areas may then qualify to receive a premium payment when completing delivery of services to a customer with that disability. Premium payments compensate providers for the additional effort of obtaining and maintaining the required knowledge and skills, and with other costs associated with providing the specialized service.

Customers served by providers with this specialized knowledge and skill also have higher rates of success in achieving a successful employment outcome. For example, from State Fiscal Years 2017 through 2022 to date, customers with Autism who worked with a provider that obtained the Autism credential and qualified for the Autism Premium payment had a 15% higher success rate for Job Placement services and a 18% higher success rate for Supported Employment services than did customers with Autism working with a provider that did not have the Autism credential.

Issue

Blindness is a low incidence disability that requires specialized knowledge and skills to ensure that services for customers with visual impairments are accessible and successful. Many ESPs lack the specialized knowledge and skills and are therefore hesitant to serve VR customers who are blind or visually impaired. As a result, the availability of qualified ESPs for this customer population is limited, sometimes resulting in delays in customers receiving the services they need to prepare for and obtain employment.

This issue can be addressed by establishing a Blind Premium Payment for qualified providers. Providers would be qualified through completion of training requirements and obtaining a UNTWISE credential. Providers would not be required to pay a fee to participate in the training, which is available at no cost through Mississippi State University's National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision. In addition, blindness skills subject matter experts in TWC VR propose to supplement that online training by offering a two-day course to help providers apply and practice what they learn through the online courses and receive specific instruction related to VR services. Providers completing the training and passing an assessment administered by UNTWISE would receive a credential that would qualify them to receive the Blind Premium payment. The UNTWISE assessment would be available to providers for a nominal fee. A Blind Premium payment will serve as an important incentive for providers to take the required training and obtain the credential, thereby increasing the availability of providers available to serve customers who are blind or visually impaired.

1 To establish the proposed Blind Premium Payment, staff first identified a comparable professional
2 occupation that includes the knowledge, skills, and functions necessary to effectively serve people
3 who are blind and visually impaired. Staff identified the Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist
4 (CVRT) as the most comparable professional position after reviewing positions on the Department of
5 Labor's O*Net Online and the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation & Education
6 Professionals (ACVREP). According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) wage data, the average
7 hourly wage for a CVRT in Texas is \$45.96 per hour. Staff then determined an additional employer
8 compensation cost of 27.1% using BLS data for private industry workers in the West South Central
9 region as of December 2021. Staff added that percentage, \$12.46 per hour, to the CVRT average
10 hourly wage of \$45.96, for a total hourly rate of \$57.92. The proposed Blind Premium Payment is
11 then derived by subtracting the current TWC-VR hourly Employment Services base rate (\$46.00) from
12 the CVRT hourly rate (\$57.92) to establish a rounded hourly premium rate of \$12 per hour for
13 individual service and a group rate of \$6 per person, per hour. A group may not exceed six VR
14 customers.

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16 If approved, the Blind Premium Payment for each service will be calculated by multiplying the total
17 hours established in the base rate for the Employment Service by either the Blind Premium individual
18 service rate or group rate, as applicable. The Blind Premium Payment would apply to the following
19 Employment Services:

- 20 ▪ Work Readiness Training, such as Vocational Adjustment Training and Work Experience
21 Services,
- 22 ▪ Employment Assessments such as the Career Planning Assessment,
- 23 ▪ Job Placement,
- 24 ▪ Job Skills Training,
- 25 ▪ Supported Employment services, and
- 26 ▪ Self-Employment services.

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28 **Decision Point**

29 Staff recommends that the Commission establish the following:

- 30 • Training requirements and an associated UNTWISE credential for providers interested in
31 obtaining the knowledge and skills necessary to serve VR customers who are blind or visually
32 impaired.
- 33 • A Blind Premium Payment of \$12 per hour for individual service and a group rate of \$6 per
34 hour to compensate credentialed providers that deliver Employment Services to customers who
35 are blind or visually impaired.

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37 **The Rehabilitation Council of Texas**

38 The Rehabilitation Council of Texas received and reviewed the proposed Blind Premium Payment.
39 Based on the feedback, modifications were made where appropriate.