

Maine State Rehabilitation Council

Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

FY2024

October 1, 2023- September 30, 2024



I am pleased to submit my first annual report on behalf of the Maine DVR

SRC as the newly elected Chair. My name is Allison Wiest and have served on the SRC since August 2023 as the Parent Training and Information Center Representative. In addition, I am the parent of a child with Autism and an Intellectual Disability and therefore have navigated many systems of care in our state.

I was elected Chair for the Council on October 1, 2024 and I am still learning about the SRC along with my role in the leadership of this council. During 2024, the council struggled with minimal membership and lack of leadership. We did not have a Chair, Vice Chair or Treasurer since January of 2024. In addition, we had substantially low membership making it difficult to be effective in our work. The good news is that since October 1st, we have elected a Treasurer, nominated a Vice Chair and increased our membership to add 7 new members to the council including 2 disability advocates. In our November meeting we had our first quorum in many months and were able to begin planning for the year ahead. As a council we established our priorities including input on the comprehensive statewide needs assessment and the unified state plan. We also added a subcommittee to work on additional membership, a membership orientation process including materials, along with revision of the bylaws that have not been updated since January of 2013. I am looking forward to the growth and productivity of the SRC as well as continuing our partnership with VR to ensure consumers are receiving appropriate and meaningful services and programs.

**SRC Mission**

The mission of the Council is to partner with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in the development of state goals, priorities, policy, and practice; and to review and analyze the Division’s results and performance in support of securing and maintaining integrated employment, through a process of informed choice, for individuals with disabilities.

**SRC Responsibilities:**

The SRC is tasked to: review, analyze and advise regarding responsibilities under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by WIOA (2014), particularly related to:

* Eligibility and Order of Selection
* Extent, Scope and Effectiveness of Services
* Functions Affecting Individual Achievement of Employment Outcomes
* Application, Reports and Evaluations

In partnership with the designated State unit, the SRC is tasked to:

* Develop, agree to, and review State goals and priorities
* Evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program
* Submit reports of progress to the Commissioner in accordance with Section  101(a)(15)(E)

**SRC Members:**

*\*Cheryl Peabody – SILC Representative*

*Cheryl has a BS in Psychology from the University of Maine. She worked for the Social Security Administration for 17 years as a Disability Claims Adjudicator. She currently devotes her time doing volunteer work with several Governor-appointed councils and non-profit organizations involving education and advocacy for individuals with disabilities.*

*\*Kelly Osborn – Community Rehabilitation Provider*

*Kelly Osborn is the Senior Vice President of Client Services at Goodwill of Northern New England. Kelly is responsible for oversight of all workforce programs as well as healthcare services at Goodwill.*

*Darcy Gentle – 121 VR Program Representative*

*Darcy Gentle is a member of the Maliseet Community. Darcy attended the University of Maine, Augusta. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in Mental Health and Humans Services, an associate’s degree in social services, and her MHRT-C. Darcy also graduated from the University of*

*Southern Maine with a Master of Science in Counseling Rehabilitation. She has worked for the Maliseet Tribe for the last five years and provided Vocational Rehabilitation services to the Maliseet Tribe, The Micmaq Tribe, and the Passamaquoddy Tribes. The program has been very successful and will continue to be successful with the support and collaboration from all the programs that provide direct services to native communities.*

*Mary Adley – State Educational Agency*

*Mary Adley, Med, is the Coordinator for State Agency Programs at the Department of Education and has served as the Governor appointed DOE seat on the State Rehab Council since 2017. Mary collaborates with all state agencies including the Bureau of Rehabilitation, Department of Labor, on behalf of children and adults with disabilities. Mary has been an educator working in both the public and private sector as an instructor and administrator for students in grades K-12 for 33 1/2 years.*

*\*Libby Stone-Sterling – VR Agency Director*

*Libby Stone-Sterling, PhD has served as director of the Maine Division of Vocational Rehabilitation since 2018. Prior to becoming director, she served as the assistant director for eight years. Libby strongly believes in the importance of VR’s mission and is particularly committed to supporting young people with disabilities to reach their goals.*

*Sierra Wood- DVR Staff*

*Sierra Wood (She, Her) is a Casework Supervisor for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation in Augusta and a Certified UCLA PEERS® provider. She is a graduate of UMaine Farmington with a degree in Community Health Education. In her free time Sierra enjoys gardening, spending time with family and her two dogs, Lefty, and Luna!*

*Allison Wiest- Parent Training and Information Center*

*Allison Wiest has been with Maine Parent Federation since 2017 acting as a Family Support Navigator to support families individually, and currently as a Parent Trainer providing information to families and professionals. Allison creates family-friendly materials and presents training to support and educate families of youth with disabilities and special health care needs on how to navigate the many systems of care. She also provides education to agencies and professionals that work with individuals with disabilities and collaborates with school systems to bring education and resources to students and their families. Some of the trainings topics include, Education is Special, Transition Planning, Supported Decision Making and Self Advocacy for youth.*

*Isaac Gingrass: State Workforce Board*

*Isaac Gingras joined the State Workforce Board team in January of 2022 with over five years of state service with the Maine Department of Labor. Isaac has built his career in government service and helps to oversee the development of the State's WIOA plan for the State Workforce Board as well as overseeing rulemaking for the Department of Labor. Isaac lives in Augusta, Maine with his wife, two sons, and their dog.*

*Patricia Ngara: Representative of a Disability Advocacy Group*

*Patty earned her Bachelor of Science in Communication Studies from Northwestern University.  Her background is in media, marketing, and staffing.  She joined the Maine Department of Labor through the Special Appointment Program.  For the past 7 years she has provided services for Mainers at every stage of their employment journey.*

*Jennifer Kimble: Community Rehabilitation Provider*

*Jennifer, a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC), has worked in the field of supported employment since 1996. After spending ten years in Boston, she returned to Maine in 2002, working for MaineHealth Vocational Services as an Employment Specialist in MaineHealth Maine Medical Center's outpatient psychiatry department. She transitioned to Operations Manager in 2003 and began supervising Social Security’s benefits counseling program. First trained in Benefits Planning by Cornell University in 2003, she also obtained certification as a Community Work Incentives Coordinator from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2013. Jennifer took on the role of Director at Vocational Services in 2017. She chairs the Maine State Workforce Board’s Commission on Disability and Employment and is a member of the Maine State Rehabilitation Council and the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE).*

*\* Members that were only involved in the council work for a portion of FY 2024, due to expired terms and transitions in agency positions.*

A Year in Review

The SRC met bi-monthly during FY2024 With the exception of no meeting in March 2024. We also added a joint meeting with the DBVI in June. The annual meeting was rescheduled and being planned for the start of the new calendar year. This will be a joint meeting with DBVI. The SRC meeting agenda items included a success story from the field, financial reports, review of minutes, Director’s report, CAP report and general talking points. One standing topic was the membership of the SRC.

Membership was limited due to pending applications with the Office of Boards and Commissions in the early part of the year. However, by November’s meeting there was an addition of seven members. The Council continues to focus on building membership. Committee work was completed as a whole group due to the size of the membership. The council consistently has members of the public attend meetings

In addition, the SRC provided feedback on several DVR initiatives:

**Unified State Plan:** The DVR Director reported on the Unified State Plan and provided the council with the goals, objectives, and strategies that need updating. The need for measurability and deadlines were discussed, the council provided feedback and will be provided updates on the progress. One of the critical areas that the SRC will focus on is increased membership, strategies were discussed, see notes in membership section. Additional areas the council will provide input are timely access and delivery of services to clients, including regular communication and engagement between VR staff and clients served.

**RSA Corrective Action Plan:** Through the Director’s report the council members were involved in hearing updates and the progress of the CAP. This also included instituting internal controls.

**Staffing**: DVR had many vacancies through FY2024 which included multiple casework supervisors and rehabilitation counselors. Some offices were half staffed for a portion of the year this affects the ability to target the waitlist. The intake unit is helping to process intakes but the lack of staffing in transition age rehabilitation counselors continues to affect clients.

**Pre-ETS/Summer Programming**: DVR continues to prioritize Pre employment services and summer program for students. This year Maine Apprenticeship and Career Pathway (MAP) tour and the statewide in-school Boot Camp program were added. Over 250 students participating in these programs and several students participated in experiential job tours.

**Disability Innovation Fund:** DVR received the P2P grant worth 7.6 million over a 5- year period. This grant is a collaboration between Alpha One and Department of Labor. This was the second year of the grant and has allowed DVR to focus efforts on providing competitive and integrated employment opportunities for youth. Updates were shared and feedback was provided by the council.

**Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment:** The Council continues to focus on the data from the client satisfaction surveys and statewide needs assessment. The council members continue to share personal experiences and provide feedback. The goal is to provide insight to help shape strategies to better meet client need, provide a positive and person-centered experience, ensure appropriate services and placements within an effective systematic process.

**Client Assistance Program:**  CAP services continue to be provided by Disability Rights Maine. More clients are seeking CAP services. The CAP Representative shared data and stories of collaboration. A change in the CAP Representative occurred mid-year, and as of November the seat appointment had been made

**VR Success Stories:** Success stories were shared at all meetings. An example of a story: transition age youth with poor school attendance, was provided a school work experience with the school janitor and the student was successful and regularly attended school.

**DVR Wait List:** DVR continues to be in a wait list in categories 3 and 4. There are just under 500 people on the waitlist between the two categories, with most being in category 3. Due to staffing constraints- some offices being down by half of the staff, DVR has not been able to remove any from the wait list. DVR expects to hire staffing and have the ability to move people off the waitlist and into services by January 2025.

**SRC Membership:**  The council discussed the lack of membership, and how that affects our ability to perform the work of the council. We also discussed on a larger level that we are out of compliance and not meeting our obligations. We are dedicated to addressing this challenge, ideas to increase interest and membership were discussed and proposed included the following, focus on website messaging and revision of the website to include recruitment links, communication of SRC opportunities during VR client closure, e-mail blasts and word of mouth. Other ideas suggested:

* Create list of affiliated organizations and send outreach
* Compile organization and business list, invite to SRC
* Changing meeting times and allow business related agenda items to be first
* Go on meet and greets
* Invite VR client to meetings to their share story
* Creating more engaging marketing material and motivating messaging for outreach
* Seek younger members via colleges and social media platforms
* Establish a membership committee
* Business & Industry seats remain unfilled. The idea to consult with Liz Nitzel regarding business and industry recruitment was mentioned.

**SRC Officers/Leadership-** As noted above, the council did not have officers for a majority of the fiscal year. Kelly Osborne and Cheryl Peabody’s terms were completed and no nominations had been made. As of October, the council began to fill the officer seats.

**Guest Speakers:**

Market Decisions Research presented on the Client Satisfaction Survey results of the Comprehensive Needs Assessment at the July meeting. A number of concerns were raised specifically about downward trends, communication challenges and establishment of a more randomized process. The council will continue to provide feedback to reflect client voice and ensure client satisfaction.

Also at the July meeting, Andrew Maclean chair of the SRC-DBVI presented on the activities of the NCSRC spring conference that was held in Maryland. The provided a brief history, including how SRC operate and also shared his experience at the conference. He discussed the importance of learning and understanding the role of a council member and the SRC as a whole. He discussed bringing this to a joint DBVI and DVR annual meeting in the future.

In addition, he discussed the increased responsibilities of the SRC Administrator for both councils. The job description was shared and the council was able to provide feedback. The increased responsibilities of the Administrator would streamline processes for both councils.

**Data: VR services 10/1/23-9/30/24**

Below is a snapshot of the Individuals Served for the prior Fiscal Year.

**3,332** New VR Applicants

**621** Youth with Disabilities who received Transition Services

**6,560** Received Services through Employment Plans

**109** Individuals in Training /College Plans

**384** Individuals Successfully Employed (client cases are open longer to ensure identified employment goals are met)

2024 was a year of transition and as a council we learned a great deal. With 2024 behind us we will take the struggles we experienced as opportunities for growth. The council is re-energized with new membership and has dedicated leaders in place to accomplish the goals for 2025. We will enthusiastically and strategically tackle the projects ahead. We will continue work to recruit additional members, specially filling the business/industry seats. We will create a comprehensive new member orientation and training and we will update the bylaws that haven’t been revised since 2013. In addition, we will continue to provide insightful feedback and recommendations to the states VR program via the state plan and comprehensive needs assessment to ensure that consumers are receiving appropriate and quality services to create person-centered and meaningful work experiences. Given that many people with disabilities in Maine require VR supports to obtain and maintain successful employment, the SRC will continue our mission focus and work closely and collaboratively with DVR to accomplish this goal. We look forward to increased membership and committee work groups to accomplish the goals for 2025.

Respectfully Submitted,

Allison Wiest

Chairperson

Maine State Rehabilitation Council

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