Florida Rehabilitation Council

Andy Houghton, FRC Chair
Quarterly Meeting Minutes-February 7, 2023

Members in person (Tallahassee) and on Teams (virtually):
Michael Adams, Tammy Davis, Andrew Houghton, Brent McNeal, Delaina Parrish, Victoria Gaitanis, Allison Klein, Lisa Mason

VR Staff:

Guests: Patricia Parrish, Doug Ingram, Beth Myer, Jane Greenfield, Caroline Sanchez, Chaz Compton, Gabriel Rodriguez, Howard Bell, Jane Johnson, Matthew Mottko, Robin Jones, Sarah Merchant, Tamra Henrichsmeyer, Adriana Duran, David Volper, Christina D., Barbara Carr, Emily Hough, Mariann Sampieri, Loden Coleman, Nikki D’Agostino

The following represents a summary of deliberations, advice, comments and motions that comprise this meeting of this FRC quarterly meeting. NOTE: Business was conducted during the January 17th meeting.

Call to order-Quorum established
Andy thanked everyone for being on the call. The council voted and approved the amended agenda and January 17 minutes.

Director’s Report-Brent McNeal, VR Director
• Quarterly summary: AWARE case management system is set to go live in June. Horace Brown is leading the ArtCIE grant initiative. Contracts are being developed for the 5 year program. The Customer Feedback Survey pilot is moving along as planned. Staff recruitment and retention is still challenging.
• Customer case status: Numbers are in line with last year’s at this time. No customers are on the waitlist.
• Pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS): Numbers are increasing from last year’s.
• Potentially eligible individuals who later applied for VR services: Same numbers as last year’s at this time, approximately 550.
• Expenditures by category: Contracted services numbers are down; Pre-ETS services are up and rising each quarter as services are expanding. As of Q2, total expenditures were $93 million.
• December ’22 caseload snapshot: The number of staff carrying a caseload has increased by 1 (377). Average caseload has decreased by 2 since last quarter (91).
• **Staff vacancies and turnover Q2**: Statewide average is 21.2%. Vacancies increased by 69 this quarter (162) so staff are tracking them on a unit level and area. Staff have been providing assistance by tracking vacancies at the unit and area level, allowing area leadership to prioritize filling vacancies.

• **Customers entering employment**: Numbers entering are consistent with last year’s at approximately 3,700 (Q2). Additional employment measures are required by RSA, e.g., whether the customer has maintained employment for the 2nd and 4th quarters after exiting the program.

• **Employment outcomes**: Customers entering employment are trending positively but unsuccessful closures are higher than pre-COVID.

• **Unsuccessful closures by reason**: Numbers are in line with last year at this time. Folks around the country are working on the “no longer interested” and “unable to contact” customers to get individuals back into the program to assist them in achieving employment.

• **Provider capacity**: The agency is working on a new certification policy for CBTACs providers (self-employment). Florida still leads the country in the number of Project SEARCH sites (37). Work-based learning experiences (WBLES)-56 schools/districts. Brent said the team will be reaching out to superintendents in the districts not participating to learn how VR can help them become involved with Pre-ETS. There are 27 new providers and 144 youth who have completed self-advocacy training.

• **Employment programs**: The ArtCIE initiative will be piloted in Washington, Hillsborough, and Duval counties. Partners include the Able Trust, the Institute for Community Inclusion and Service Source. Florida was selected to participate in the ASPIRE initiative in collaboration with DCF, Medicaid and Career Source to increase competitive, integrated employment for individuals with mental health conditions. The number of sites are expanding which support the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model of supported employment for individuals with serious mental health conditions. An online course in Discovery and Customized Employment has been implemented.

• **Ombudsman Report**: The office had a 93% satisfaction rate in outcomes for complaint requests.

• **Business Relations**: Representatives provided services to 179 employers. The team is involved with AWARE implementation. The agency is involved with the Moore Agency to expand outreach efforts to customers and businesses. Brent said he will get updated information from Derrinita about materials developed for social media channels to share with the council. He discussed contacting Roy, Kim or him if they know of anyone interested in working with the Business Relations team.

• **Additional Updates**: VR Communications participated in the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities conference (CARD) at USF and will be participating in SportsAbility later this year. Regarding membership, Brent discussed that there have been new applicants and that he has provided his recommendations to DOE leadership. He has also spoken with Beth Myer at FILC and CareerSource about getting appointments in both positions. A couple of individuals have withdrawn applications. The Governor’s recommended budget includes a 5% increase for all state employees except OPS. They are still recommending the increase for field staff and are working with DOE to move it forward. VR has the funds but is seeking the budget authority to spend the funds.

Customer Satisfaction Survey-Libby Moody: Libby reported that the pilot was conducted from Dec. 28th-Jan. 20th through 8 unit offices and was sent out to 2,405 former and current customers. They received a total of 556 responses, a 23.12% rate. Some of the data shared included:

• **Orientation**: 80.8% said orientation helped them understand what VR does.

• **Customer service**: 83% said their counselor was easy to talk to; 70.6% said the VR office was easy to access.

• **Employment plan development**: 81% agreed that their counselor listened to them. The most common (follow-up) responses to, “Were there services you expected to receive but didn’t”, were transportation, college or schooling, various payments, skills training, job coaching.
• Receiving services: 175 had received services from a provider. (Provider name) listened to me-74%. Data will be shared with providers.
• Problems related to providers, staff or services: 26% said they had a problem. Of that, 31% said it was resolved timely. Common problems were keeping in touch, communication and staff keep changing.
• Customer rights and resolving problems: 501 responded. 81% said they knew they could contact their counselor; 77% knew they could contact the supervisor; 70% knew they could contact DRF/CAP.
• Problems with VR staff or services: 486 responded. 24.9 said they experienced a problem; 18.5% said their problem was resolved in a timely manner. Most common problem-keeping in contact.
• VR program overall: 80% would recommend VR to people who could use their help. Great comments were received from customers in their own words. Additional data is included in the presentation.

Michael discussed that it’s great that the survey gets down to providers and that it may assist with training for providers who do not get favorable ratings. Counselor names are helpful too so that they can assist those who are struggling. Wording may need to be adjusted so all questions are answered. Libby said all data would be included going forward, including Pre-ETS and the unfavorable responses. Allison Klein discussed that the questions should be clear as to whether they’re about the vendors or staff. Allison asked if there were placement agencies who do more than just send out links to Google Links or Indeed (to be answered via email). The council liked the format and graphics. Andy asked for any additional questions to be sent to Roy/Kim.

Field Services-Antionette Williams, Bureau Chief: Antionette introduced herself as being the Bureau Chief of Field Services for 3 years and has over 25 years in rehabilitation services. Antionette introduced all the program area managers: Johana Valdivieso-Employment Programs; Kathy Davis-Business Relations; Armando Oliva-Learning and Development; Willette Bowers-Ticket to Work; Cory Parker-Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind and Monica Edwards-Policy and Field Operations. There are 33 FS staff at HQ. She discussed that Field Services develops policies and initiatives and implements programs, all feeding into the mission and vision of VR. Antionette discussed that there are 90 units with a good representation of diversity across the state. Service Source provides programmatic services to customers except for eligibility and case closure through offices in areas 2, 3, 6 and 7. The 7 Area Directors report to Antionette, provide direction to area staff and ensure they are compliant. 12 Area Supervisors and 57 unit supervisors work at the ground level to make sure customers and staff receive the support they need. The new AWARE case management system will streamline the VR process and capture required data. Initiatives are the ArtCIE grant, Florida Ready to Work, retention strategies and Statewide Supervisor’s Training. Goals are streamlining processes, improving performance, ensuring WIOA alignment and working towards standardization. Field Services is working with the Learning and Development Office (LDO) to develop training for existing managers to complement outside training. Additional information is included in the presentation.

Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA): Chaz Compton, from San Diego State University, said the purpose of the required assessment is for the agency to understand the needs of customers and how the agency can address the needs. The council discussed the questions asked by Chaz, which will be reflected in the final CSNA. Of note: The rehab engineering process is alleged to be redundant and slow. Feedback has been provided which suggests that customers should not have to resubmit the intake form every time they have a request for equipment unless the information has changed. It has also been asserted that communication between the rehab engineers, counselors and customers has bottlenecks which negatively impact customers’ employment productivity.
Chaz asked the Brent about providing data on if there were enough supported and customized employment providers in the state to meet the need; also, if there are areas where the need exists but there are not a sufficient number of providers.

**Florida AgrAbility-Beth Meyer, Executive Director of the Florida Independent Living Council (FILC)**

Florida AgrAbility is a partnership between the University of Florida IFAS Extension and the Center for Independent Living of North Central Florida (CILNCF). AgrAbility is a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that aids farmers, ranchers, other agricultural workers, and farm family members living with a disability. The main objective of the Florida AgrAbility Project is to assist farmers in overcoming barriers caused by disabilities and health conditions to continue farming. Beth will provide links and updates to Roy to disperse to members. The program will first focus on the folks currently in the farming community then move towards opportunities for referrals for work or self-employment in that community. Andy suggested the council receiving a presentation on the data when available. Brent said VR looks forward to partnering with FILC on the program.

**Employment Programs-Johana Valdivieso, Supervisor**

Johana Valdivieso, Employment Programs Administrator, introduced herself and her team: Independent Living and Special Grant Project Director-Horace Brown; Brandi-Boyer-Rutherford and Jesse Riddle-Transition Services; Peter Shepis-Adult Employment Services; Mirna Diaz-Supported Employment; Veronica Ebuern-Mental Health. Independent Living partners with 16 Centers for Independent Living (CILs) and offers information and referrals, IL skills training, advocacy, peer counseling and transitions. The Pre-ETS program, implemented through WIOA, covers job exploration counseling, work readiness training, counseling on post-secondary education opportunities, work-based learning experiences (WBLE), self-advocacy training and youth peer mentoring. Youth Transition programs include High School High Tech, Project Search, Youth Leadership Forum, Career Camps, Inclusive Postsecondary Education (IPSE) and Building Readiness in Construction Knowledge programs (BRICK). Adult Employment Services include OJT, post-secondary education, pre-placement training and job placement services. Supported Employment services are designed for individuals with the most significant disabilities and includes Discovery, customized employment, supported employment and supported self-employment. Self-employment provides opportunities to own a business with appropriate resources and supports. Certified Business Technical Assistance Consultants assist. The Mental Health program includes Individual Placement and Support (IPS), ASPIRE, substance abuse and mental health. Florida was 1 of 14 states to receive a $13.1 million grant from RSA for the ArtCIE grant, which will focus on competitive, integrated employment for individuals in sub-minimum wage settings with outcomes in the fields of Arts, Entertainment and Recreation. New in 2023: AWARE system implementation, training and support; programmatic case reviews and Community of Practice sessions focusing on topics relevant to everyday work of VR staff. Delaina discussed that healthcare rehabilitation organizations don’t seem aware of VR and Brent said that would be a great connection.

Additional information is included in the presentation.

**Deaf, Hard of Hearing and DeafBlind-Cory Parker, Supervisor**

Cory introduced himself as the Program Administrator for the unit which assists internal and external stakeholders by providing communication access, guidance and resources to help the population find meaningful employment and achieve independence. The team at HQ includes Stevie Fenton and Drew Wann. There are currently 15 interpreters throughout the state, through VR and contracted staff. In SFY '21-'22, VR served 846 individuals with Deafness, 1,122 with Hearing Loss and 29 who are DeafBlind. VR collaborates with the Division of Blind Services and the Florida School for Deaf and Blind.
The team has been working on a communication intake tool, providing questions to assist VRCs in the preliminary assessment, which counselors are finding very useful. A mentorship position is being developed and a series of employment services videos have been produced, which Cory will send the link to.

The unit hosted the annual SE Regional Institute on Deafness (SERID) conference, attended by 300 people representing 24 states. Challenges are recruiting staff interpreters; Pre-ETS referrals for DHHDB students; out of state schools and new procedures for replacement of cochlear implants and specialized hearing aids. Future plans are to launch ES training, increase webinar trainings to staff and reinstitute the annual retreat to bring remote colleagues together for training and consultation. Cory said to not let the DeafBlind community fall through the cracks as they are a low-incidence population. Increased salaries would help retain interpreters. Michael discussed the need for an individual who is Deaf to be on the Council. Brent thanked Cory and his staff for the great work that they do.

Additional information is included in the presentation.

Partner Reports: Beth Meyer, Florida Independent Living Council (FILC), discussed that the CILs provided over 56,000 services last year. They are still working with individuals affected by the hurricanes. Brent encouraged council members to visit the CIL in their area. Jane Johnson from the Florida Association for Centers of Independent Living (FACIL) discussed the JP-PAS program, which provides monthly cash stipends to individuals with disabilities who require personal assistance to work; some stipulations apply. The program is funded through delinquent sales taxes. The board has talked about expanding the program without the stipulations. The team has also been working with the managed care organizations to deliver transition services for people in the community who are at risk of being placed in a nursing home or who are in a nursing home and want to return to the community. In addition, they've been working with the state Dept. of Corrections (DOC) on an employment training program for individuals with disabilities. The CILs offer services to the DOC for ASL interpreter services to deliver training in the program, which is being implemented in various parts of the state. Delaina brought up having the council visit a CIL at the next council meeting. Roy will send Jane’s contact information to council members for follow-up.

Learning and Development (LDO)-Armando Oliva, Supervisor
Armando discussed that the unit’s mission is to advance the knowledge and improve the skills of VR staff by analyzing programs and providing learning and development opportunities through instructor-led training, self-paced online learning and support materials. LDO has 5 staff members, Lea Ann Gates, Lindsay Rassoull, Donna Farrell, Amy Somerset and Carolyn Renshaw. The team uses various training platforms, including eLearning, webinar support, workshops, support tools, follow-ups and evaluations. All require a collaborative process including evaluation, analyzing, designing, developing and implementing the training. A development timeline matrix is used, highlighting all of the training solutions available and the number of weeks it takes to develop those solutions. LDO supports New Counselor Training, staff/talent development, professional development, Learning Management System (LMS) administration and agency-wide training initiatives. Trainings are designed to be 508 compliant. When there are limitations, appropriate accommodations are provided.

Additional information is included in the presentation.

Ombudsman’s Office-Thomas “Wheeler” Clemons
The Ombudsman Office is an impartial service available to any VR customer who has questions or concerns or believes they did not get the services they expected. They listen and help in resolving complaints. The team consists of Wheeler, Holly Nickerson and Ginny Ellsworth who investigate and
attempt to resolve complaints. They listen to concerns, investigate, provide information and referrals and provide generalized guidance. They also assist field staff as needed. Concerns are relayed to counselors and supervisors who have 24 hours to respond and 7 days to resolve the complaint. Customers have a right to appeal decisions and can do so by requesting an informal review with the Area Director, mediation or an administrative hearing by contacting the VR Director. Decision letters include information on how to appeal the decision. Wheeler said he will look into possible trends on information and referrals. Brent thanked the team for their hard work.

Additional information is included in the presentation.

Andy thanked all the managers for their time and presentations today.

Public Forum: No public comment

Additional comments: Doug Ingram from the Florida Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (FRCB) was present to represent the council. Doug discussed that they have had trouble getting positions filled on the council and that it took 2 years for him to be appointed. Andy suggested combining mutual knowledge and experience with customers to learn from each other.

Brent thanked all VR staff and partners for presenting to the council today. Andy said that consistently, Delaina’s comments are always met with awareness and revelation and said the time invested in reviewing materials ahead of time rounds out the effectiveness of the council. Michael recommended that coming to Tallahassee and hearing from HQ staff should be in the regular rotation. Roy discussed that the May 9th meeting will be held in Cocoa Beach. The council is interested in visiting or getting a presentation from a CIL while in the area.

Adjourned