

Town Hall Responses 2021

Question: How is the waiting list coming along with the service delivery of people applying for Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS)?

- Answer: Category 1 is open. There are 1,178 people total on the waiting list in Categories 2 & 3, 861 in Category 2 and 317 in Category 3.

Question: Our agency recently stopped providing Discovery because of the constrictions of the training. I do believe that Discovery is a good piece that we could offer our VRBS clients and folks that are really struggling to get jobs. We do use our own form of Discovery internally. I would like to know the plan for Discovery and Customized Employment. Is VRBS going to still stick with Mark Gold & Associates (MG&A) for Discovery and Customized Employment certification? Or is there going to be some discussion about looking at other training options such as ACRE training that would fit that bill as well as MG&A?

- Answer: Montana VRBS has committed to performance-based certification for provision of Customized Employment Services. Marc Gold and Associates (MG&A) provides a performance-based certification with fidelity review. MG&A was chosen as a guide for the universal application of the Essential Elements of Customized Employment (CE). The training and certification are specific to the Employment Specialist and not the agency with which the individual is employed. To provide Customized Employment for VRBS, an individual must first complete a "gateway training." The "gateway training" is intended to align with "The Essential Elements of Customized Employment Universal Application" guidance created by Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Individuals then complete the performance-based process under the mentorship of a qualified mentor who will need to certify that the provider has adequately completed CE Benchmarks in the identified CE service delivery area (Discovery, Job Development). We appreciate continued feedback as we continue to develop sustainable CE service delivery statewide.

Question: How are VRBS and IL working to better improve our more rural and underserved communities and students? There is confusion because some of the services that Pre-ETS providers were able to provide in the past, such as job exploration counseling, we've now been prevented from providing and only the Rehab Counselor can provide.

- Answer: Montana VRBS staff have unique, graduate-level training and special certification to provide job exploration and career preparation services directly to clients and students with disabilities. Montana VRBS continues to be committed to providing high quality services to our rural and underserved communities.

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Comment: How is one Pre-ETS Specialist, who is covering such a large area, going to be able to provide those services, and provide them well, to as many students as need them? This is probably a funding issue, but it has really taken away from our opportunity to provide services in all our communities, especially to those students in rural communities.

- **Response:** Thank you for the feedback. We will continue to monitor and analyze the delivery of Pre-Employment Transition Services in rural areas.

Question: How are both IL and VR engaging youth? In IL and VR, we have to work within parental systems and student systems. Historically, Voc Rehab doesn't approach students and families until they are between the ages of 14 and 16. I am really hoping that students can take advantage of career days, opportunities like assistive technology days, and bring in some newer products that students may need to use throughout time.

- **Answer:** Thank you. Both VRBS and IL are committed to making sure students have access to Assistive Technology (AT). Recently all VRBS staff and Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) participated in training facilitated by MonTECH. VRBS has an AT team that meets monthly to ensure the agency is informed on latest, most modern technology and best practices in using AT.

Question: How are VR and IL working with students and schools so that assistive technology remains an open and accessible product, even after someone gets their first job?

- **Answer:** VRBS and IL value the partnership with the MonTECH program which serves students and adults with disabilities statewide. MonTECH can provide technical assistance and suggestions on Assistive Technology (AT) throughout the continuum of service delivery across the lifespan.

Question: How are VR and IL engaging the business community? Lots of adults with disabilities don't acknowledge that they have invisible disabilities and then the physical jobs that they were hired for aren't available to them and/or they cannot accommodate their disability in the correct way.

- **Answer:** VRBS continues to engage businesses through its dual customer approach. There is a designated Business Services Specialist who leads a team of individuals that provide diversity, equity, and inclusion awareness training through the Windmills curriculum. These specialists participate in community outreach and networking groups such as Job Service Employer Committees, Chambers of Commerce, and Society of Human Resource Management.

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VRBS and IL value informed choice. Our agency and staff respect the individual's right to decide to disclose their disability to an employer or not.

Comment: As a previous client of both Voc Rehab and Blind and Low Vision Services, I have to commend all the staff for the fine work that they do.

- **Response:** Thank you for your comment. We appreciate hearing positive feedback about our field staff and the great work they do. VRBS leadership is proud of the services our staff provide to Montanans with disabilities.

Comment: I really hope that VR and IL take advantage of teaching life skills and education skills at the same time, particularly in partnership with our university system for those that have intellectual disabilities and autism. I believe the academic and competitive integrated employment options are enhanced when everybody grows at the pace they need to grow.

- **Response:** VRBS supports enrollment in the LIFE (Learning Is For Everyone) Scholars Program, housed on the Montana State University Bozeman campus, through Individualized Plans for Employment. LIFE Scholars program staff recently gave a presentation about their program to the Youth Services Team. We anticipate continued partnership.

Comment: IL needs to strengthen advocacy skills, both self-directed and staff-directed for peers, to enhance Montana's Independent Living network, particularly in rural areas. COVID made it really hard to work remotely and continue to support the expansive areas served by IL.

- **Response:** Using the Person-Centered Planning Definition that was presented within the National Quality Forum final report dated July 31, 2020, the MTSILC has initiated an ongoing discussion on what steps the Department of Public Health and Human Services, specifically Addictive and Mental Disorders Division (AMDD) and Developmental Services Division (DSD), are taking in creating opportunities for the consumer to assume a leadership role in the facilitation of the services they receive.

Comment: IL needs to enhance Medicaid, housing, transportation, and education services and systems so that the five core services of our CILs can be met.

- **Response:** These continue to be priorities in the State Plan for Independent Living.

Comment: Congratulations to all the staff that were hired on this year. You have an incredible task before you, and I wish you much luck.

- **Response:** We appreciate the support.

Comment: I appreciate Voc Rehab extending the opportunity to us to participate in the Gateway Training for Customized Employment. We just really appreciate you guys keeping us on the radar when opportunities come up, so thank you for that.

- Response: VRBS will continue to extend invitations to events such as this as we work towards building a sustainable Customized Employment program.

Comment: I am with the Montana Blind Vendors Program, and I just want to thank Blind and Low Vision Services for working with us and encourage anybody with visual impairments to consider the business enterprise program. Thank you.

- Response: Blind and Low Vision (BLV) Services is excited at the chance to expand the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) program and extend the opportunity to more Blind vendors.

Comment: The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Montana passed a resolution that speaks to our happiness with the creation of the Bureau of Blind and Low Vision Services. We feel that that organizational structure gives blind Montanans a voice that we didn't have. It's been a multidecade issue about, starting when state law was set that created a stand-alone department for what's known today as Blind and Low Vision Services. What worked in 1979 obviously doesn't work in 2021 and we believe the bureau structure gives us what we sought in terms of making sure that blind people don't get shoved to the margins. That we get the deep, rich services that we have a right to. So thank you for that.

- Response: VRBS is proud of the evolution of programmatic structure to ensure the state is providing high quality services to individuals experiencing blindness and low vision.

Comment: NFB has restarted Newsline by advocating during the 2021 legislature to restore Newsline funding through the Montana State Library (\$60,000/year; \$120,000/biennium). Newsline is the only way the Blind can find out, in an accessible way, emergency information and a variety of things going on in the news locally. That funding pays for the service plus people to train and recruit subscribers to the service. During the pandemic, the worst pandemic in a hundred years, we were shut out. Up until June of 2019, Newsline was funded by the Division of Disability Employment and Transitions (DET) and most recently was funded through the Montana Telecommunications Access Program (MTAP), but that got dropped. It will be up to the 2023 legislature to decide how to fund the program or not fund the program, so NFB has two years to get it figured out. For DET and/or VR, funding Newsline is really like budget dust. It's so small it doesn't even register. However, for the State Talking Books Library, the funding for NFB Newsline represents a 60% increase in their biennial request which is very significant. However, as NFB searches for permanent funding, the main way that

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NFB Newsline is funded across the country is via Vocational Rehabilitation programs and second most popular funding for Newsline comes from the telecommunications access funding. The 10-cent fee on telephones generates more money than is needed for the MTAP program, and twice now the legislature has just scooped money out of that fund and put it into the general fund. The NFB in Montana wants Vocational Rehabilitation to do the right thing and help us make sure that blind Montanans get access to the information that everybody else does. This is no small matter, even though it's not a huge amount of money, and we would like to work with DPHHS to restore NFB-Newsline funding.

- Response: We are pleased that individuals with low vision and blindness in Montana have access to NFB Newsline. We will continue to explore options over the biennium.

Question: I wanted to confirm that authorizations for CRP services no longer have to go through the state approval processes and the local offices can actually authorize those services autonomously. Is that correct?

- Answer: That is correct. VRBS has updated the internal controls for CRP services. These updates are intended to promote efficiency and prevent delays in service delivery.

Comment: I have to give Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) a vote of thanks. 20 years ago VR was supporting me in my search for employment, and because of that support, I was able to get employment and am doing really well. You guys do good work.

- Response: Thank you. We appreciate you taking the time to share your success with us.

Question: I know that Category 1 is open and has been open for quite some time. I am wondering if it's anticipated that any other categories will be open, and if so, what is the timeframe for that? There are many, many, many people waiting for VR services that can't get them and opening categories is kind of an important thing.

- Answer: VRBS has been provided the opportunity to hire 10 temporary Vocational Rehabilitation Technicians through December 31, 2023 funded by the America Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). The intent of augmenting our program with these positions is to increase the pace with which we can invite people in for Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) development within the program's budget to address Montana's workforce shortages. The program cannot provide a specific timeframe, but we are optimistic that this will significantly reduce the waitlist. VRBS' goal is to provide high-quality services to as many people with disabilities as possible.

Question: It is my understanding that the SILC is choosing to stay within Disability Employment and Transitions Division (DET). So, what is DET doing to ensure the SILC is autonomous and independent of DET and can act as such?

- **Answer:** The Designated State Entity acknowledges its role as the fiscal intermediary to receive, account for, and disburse funds received by the state to support Independent Living Services in the state. The DSE assures that the SILC is established as an autonomous entity within the State as required in Sec 1329.14 of the WIOA regulations. The DSE does not interfere with the business or operations of the SILC that include but are not limited to: a. Expenditure of federal funds, b. Meeting schedules and agendas, c. SILC board business, d. Voting actions of the SILC Board, e. Personnel actions, f. Allowable travel, g. Trainings and; The DSE fully cooperates with the SILC in the nomination and appointment process for the SILC in the State.

Comment: I would like to see the SILC and VR do some kind of Public Service Announcement because there's still a lot of people out there that aren't familiar with the programs. I don't know how that would look, but I think it would be a great idea because I still talk to and refer a lot of people to IL and VR, and it's their first time ever hearing about them. I think we need to figure out how to let people know about the services that are available to them and how to access them. People continue to be uncertain about accessing services as a result of the pandemic.

- **Response:** VRBS staff across the state participate in various community events such as job fairs, health fairs, veteran's fairs, and conferences. VRBS intends to develop a social media presence over the next year.

The SILC has developed a new marketing plan including a new logo, generic email address, brochures, and participation in vendor events. The SILC is strategizing additional ways to broadcast their offerings through TV, radio, and social media platforms.

Comment: NCILS has a contract to provide Pre-ETS because Pre-ETS enhances Competitive Integrated and Customized employment opportunities for students with disabilities in Montana. NCILS knows that the path toward Competitive Integrated Employment begins when a child is in school. Educational services should focus on students' learning styles and incorporate assistive technology as appropriate for the individual student. Competitive Integrated Employment and inclusive community living should be a part of students' educational, transitional, and adult planning services.

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- Response: DET agrees and anticipates continuing our collaboration with the NCILS and all the Centers for Independent Living. VRBS continues to be committed to Competitive Integrated Employment outcomes.

Comment: Students should have more opportunities to be interacting with community mentors with and without disabilities both in the employment and community living arenas through volunteerism and/or job shadowing. Local VR and BLVS counselors, school districts, and the business community should be coordinating on both employment mentorship and experiential employment learning opportunities in the community while in school. Student IEP and 504 plans should be student led and driven.

- Response: Montana VRBS agrees and will continue efforts to promote integrated work-based learning opportunities and self-advocacy skills of students with disabilities through Pre-ETS.

Comment: When a student is transitioning from high school to college or career, they should be exposed to many experiences in employment and community living that are compatible with their interests, desires, and choices. DET should be engaging all applicable state agencies to collaborate to improve transitions for students with disabilities, to implement more Competitive Integrated Employment and/or Customized Employment opportunities. The State of Montana, the Office of Public Instruction and our Board of Regents should institute disabilities studies curriculums in both high school and on Montana university campuses. All students including those who experience Intellectual and/or Developmental Disabilities, should learn Disability History and independent living in the most inclusive settings and equitable ways.

- Response: DET also values collaboration and appreciates our stakeholders' advocacy in fostering collaboration and education.

Comment: The State of Montana should be promoting the accessibility of remote workplaces. COVID 19 has shown that assistive technology and remote work have changed work interactions and assistive technology has enhanced the work of all Montanans with disabilities. VR should be advocating for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for all individuals with disabilities who work in essential work occupational settings.

- Response: DET managed CARES Act funding to provide assistive technology to workers with disabilities at the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic. Additionally, DET distributed ClearMasks across Montana communities to ensure individuals with disabilities, service providers, businesses, and staff had accessible and appropriate PPE. DET has also fulfilled individual requests for people with disabilities to ensure safety in various settings.

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This transition to telework presents an array of challenges for many, but it also serves as a unique opportunity to reengage key segments of the workforce, such as people with disabilities. DET will continue working with businesses as the future of the workplace evolves.

Comment: Montana's four Centers for Independent Living (CILs) are providing valuable services that enhance and promote independence and inclusion in community living with or without supports. CILs provide five core services intended to enhance the lives of people with disabilities in Montana. Montana needs to ensure that each of these services can be provided in an accessible and equitable way. The CILs need to ensure that transitions and support for those transitions can be provided in all settings. As CILs we must support community living throughout all stages of life. Montana CILs should continue to support the Montana Youth Leadership Forum and Montana Transitions Conference.

- **Response:** DET agrees that the four CILs are integral partners and anticipates continuing to work collaboratively with the CILs on supporting the Montana Youth Leadership Forum and the Montana Transitions Conference.

Comment: CILs should advocate for accessible communities as well as ADA plans to be implemented in our Montana communities. Montana CILs should insist that the State of Montana be implementing Olmstead and "Money Follows the Person" planning for individuals transitioning out of institutional settings. CILs need to continue the leadership role that has been undertaken through advocacy in regard to SSA benefits planning, self-directed personal assistance services and more.

- **Response:** DET agrees and anticipates continuing our cooperative effort with the CILs towards these goals.

Comment: The State Plan for Independent Living should focus upon the disparate impacts in housing and disaster preparedness for people with disabilities. CILs need ensure that technology is accessible and affordable for our consumers. If there are pitfalls, regarding technology and products, centers must lead by example. CILs must advocate for visitable and universally designed housing throughout Montana.

- **Response:** The SILC will consider this feedback for inclusion in the next iteration of the State Plan for Independent Living.

Comment: In the transportation arena, CILs must advocate for accessible vehicles, community connectivity, and for future technologies and multi-modal transportation plans to include accessibility.



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- Response: DET agrees and supports the CILs and the SILC in their continued advocacy for accessibility. DET anticipates continuing our partnership and teamwork with the CILs towards this vision.