



Transcript of Conference Call Presentation

Vocational Rehabilitation and Transition Services: The Vermont Strategy

presented by

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Carrie Sword: Hi, everyone. This is Carrie Sword with the National Transition Alliance. I want to welcome you to this topical teleconference on Vocational Rehabilitation and Transition Services: The Vermont Strategy. We will be hearing about four innovative projects in Vermont concerning vocational rehabilitation. I would like to thank Olga Pschorr for her work in helping to conceptualize and coordinate this call.

First, I'll be introducing Diane Dalmasse of Vermont Vocational Rehabilitation and then she will be introducing the other speakers. That will be followed by a ten to fifteen minute discussion period.

I also wanted to let everyone know that Mary Davis is on the line. She is a rehabilitation program specialist with Rehabilitation Services Administration under the Federal Department of Education. She will be able to answer policy-related questions at the federal level.

Diane, the floor is yours.

Diane Dalmasse: Thank you. This teleconference will briefly outline four innovative initiatives currently underway for youth with disabilities as they transition from school to adult life. These include—

- 1) An update of our current partnership with the Vermont Department of Education to expand transition services and interagency collaboration through State and Local Core Transition Teams;
- 2) An overview of the role of the Transition Specialist, VR counselor;
- 3) Information on Vermont's Jobs Initiative, an innovative partnership between Vocational Rehabilitation, Mental Health, and the Department of Corrections to improve employment outcomes for youth with severe emotional behavioral disabilities; and
- 4) An overview of Vermont's Work Incentive Initiative, which is designed to reform and improve work incentives for youth and adults on Social Security.

The four speakers include Peter Baird, who currently works for Vocational Rehabilitation as the director of the Vermont Work Incentive Project, funded by grants from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Social Security Administration. Before acting as director of the Work Incentive Project, Peter was the Social Security Specialist for VR. He also assists us in terms of research and analysis on work incentives, legislative issues, and generally with Social Security problems and issues. Before that, Peter worked in Indiana for the Office of Medicaid Policy and Planning.

Our second speaker is Ray Haynes, who has worked — unbelievable, but true — for Vocational Rehabilitation for eighteen years. Ray has specialized as a school-to-work counselor for the last five years. In addition to serving youth with disabilities from all of our Rutland County High Schools, Ray also specializes in services to individuals with traumatic brain injuries.

The third speaker is Michael Ferguson, a special education consultant for the State Department of Education. She has a primary responsibility for transition programs for high school students. Prior to her work in Vermont, Michael was the director of community-based services for a large non-profit VR organization in Connecticut serving more than three hundred consumers per day in a variety of employment settings. She has also worked as coordinator for a community-based employment program that was JTPA funded and has a long history of supporting youth with disabilities in special education.

The fourth and final speaker, Olga Pschorr, currently works for VR as the School-to-Work Transition Specialist. Olga has a primary responsibility for youth-funded supported employment

projects and is currently working on a legislative initiative to expand services to under-served populations of youth with disabilities. Olga has worked in supported employment and VR programs in Vermont for over ten years and also specializes in services for youth and adults with specific learning disabilities.

These are four very talented people who have a lot to share about some innovative programs in Vermont. I am proud to present Michael, who is going to start off talking about partnerships and the Core Transition Team.

Michael Ferguson: I'm going to start off the conversation painting a visual for you. We'd like to welcome you to the Tower of Babel and ask you what language you speak. We ask that you imagine a medieval castle with four or five different turrets. Each turret has one of those comic book bubbles and in each bubble is the initials for a planning document. These are the transition planning documents that any one student may encounter as they leave high school, no matter what age they are, and move on to post-secondary options.

The first turret has the bubble IEP, the second IPP, the third IWRP, and the fourth ITP. Now, these all mean transitions, and the IEP is pretty standard to you. The IPP is our developmental services or Department of Mental Retardation planning document and it means an Individual and Personal Plan. Then there is the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's planning document, which is IWRP, Individual Working Rehabilitation Plan. And then SRS has a planning document for their transition services and they call it an Individual Transition Plan.

Trying to develop a common language here becomes twice as hard because this picture of this

medieval castle with the turrets and planning documents is a year and a half old. And every one of them has changed except IEP. The IPP has now changed to something that I'm not really clear about and the IWRP from Voc. Rehab. is now an IPE. The ITP from SRS, which is our social welfare agency, is now an ISA. So, the biggest challenge we have in Vermont is developing a common transition language. And we'd like to talk to you a little bit today about how we do that.

The Vermont approach is to develop Local Core Transition Teams based on the concept of local influence and local control, which Vermont is very famous for. It's partly because we have a very rural nature and school boards and local governing offices have a lot of autonomy. The idea of Local Core Teams came about as a result of the five-year systems change project that started here in Vermont. There was a lot of money and staff to provide support to schools and kids. They developed local core teams and were supported by a State Core Transition Team. The members that came to the state team were members of the Department of Education, Division of Voc. Rehab., Social Rehab. Services, Developmental Services, DMH, DET (Department of Employment and Training), and Corrections. We also have a parent representative group there.

Local Core Teams took on similar membership. They would have members from the local SRS office or the local employment and training office, local schools, special ed. administrators, and case managers. They would start planning for kids and this was fairly successful. At one point, there were sixteen or eighteen teams that were up and running. Again, there was a lot of money and staff and light during the systems change grant. As the funds for

that systems change transition grant ended, some of the light and attention and staff went away.

When I started at the Department of Education a year and a half ago, one of the charges I had from the state core transition team — with my partner, Olga, who is with us today — was to do a survey of how many teams still existed, what kind of shape they were in, and what we could do to reinstate the local dialogue. It was readily apparent to us that most of the Local Core Teams had died away. There were only eight that were up and running and they didn't meet very often. There wasn't a lot of enthusiasm around their meetings.

Part of the survey purpose was to find out why they fell apart and what we could do differently as we started to try to reinstate the enthusiasm and the purpose of the Local Core Transition Team. The reasons why they fell apart varied: they met too often, there was too much work to do (like minutes or reading), or people didn't always want to come because the agendas weren't appropriate to their attendance.

We took note of the reasons the teams fell apart. With the State Core Team and my partner, Olga Pschorr, we set out the objective of revitalizing or redeveloping local core teams on an average of three per quarter. I'm not sure why we choose three. We figured it was a fair number, that it would force us to stay attuned to the local initiatives, and it would also serve students.

I am happy to say that today there are sixteen teams that are alive and well and another one in the planning stages. The reason we were able to have so many teams come back on line was that we listened to why they fell apart the first time and changed some of those things. Then we said to the local transition team, "What are the things you need

here? What are the things you didn't like before? Give yourselves permission to meet as often as you think is necessary. Broaden your agenda. It doesn't have to be just case-by-case student transition planning. It could also focus on creative summer employment development."

One of the other reasons that we had success is that we are now involved in a collaborative effort. The Department of Education and the Division of Voc. Rehab. are providing support for the teams that are out there. I get out and see teams, help them through, do some facilitating, and help them generate some creative ideas. Other VR counselors do the same. VR has been a big player in this process.

The other interesting thing is that I have really encouraged Local Core Teams to be big. In the past, they were primarily building based. One supervisory union high school would be the whole team. I am trying to encourage people to get involved on a county basis. Sometimes that would bring in one, two, or three supervisory unions. This helps them to do some networking and information sharing. It's good for the kids because it gives them more options.

Again, Vermont tends to be very rural. There are not always a lot of transportation options in many places. There are not a lot of employment options outside a very small town. If we operate on a broader countywide or regional basis, people can learn about other opportunities and it helps that collaborative effort.

How do we start these meetings? How do we create them? I'm a firm believer in keeping things very simple. There are two meetings. We have a strategy meeting, and usually, at this point, it's been initiated by local Voc. Rehab. counselors saying

they are feeling a need in their region to have a local core team. So, we strategize. We say, "Okay, who should come? Who is the list of everybody that needs to be there?" And then we pick the place and time. It can't be any longer than an hour and a half because we don't want people to get "meeting-ed" to death. And then we invite everybody. The Department of Education invites all these people that we have identified at the strategy meeting and we co-invite with the special ed administrator or administrators from that region.

Then, we have a kick-off meeting. Basically, it's a brainstorming, cheerleading, defining-why-you're-here meeting to really get people to support local ownership. The concept is that these are their students and community. They have more knowledge about what can happen and where the wrinkles are and how to problem solve around these wrinkles than anybody at the state level. We just try to build the enthusiasm, mission, and focus of these local teams.

We are getting the sense that each new team is starting to develop a culture or environment. It's all about transition. It's all about moving kids with disabilities into post-secondary options. Just listen to what the different regions have decided they want to tackle first. One Local Core Team has decided the first thing they are going to do is develop a local resource guide. Another one has decided that they are going to use an Anticipated Needs Survey that we do on a state level to start planning for the future. The Anticipated Needs Survey document, quite honestly, sometimes dead-ends. The information gets gathered and people don't ever see where it goes next.

One team that cuts across three supervisory unions decided to look at a regional road map for

kids fourteen to twenty-one across a variety of disabilities. Then they can start planning services and anticipating budget.

One local team has decided to become very political. They have decided to network with all their state legislators and local representatives, inviting them for the Local Core Team. They want to make sure that the people that have some political clout can hear where some of the gaps are. They want them to understand what happens to kids that don't have a smooth bridge.

Some teams are doing some collaborative community grant writing with transition focuses. Another team is doing some intra-agency professional development, sharing information back and forth.

That's what we have got happening here. It may change soon. I'm going to hand this over to Ray Haynes, who is really the person that can tell you how it plays out on a local level. So, here he is.

Ray Haynes: Good afternoon. This is Ray Haynes. I served as a general caseload counselor initially in a region of the state. Currently, I do school-to-work transition on a full-time basis with my caseload. Within the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, approximately 12% of our state caseload are students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. General caseload counselors are currently assigned to each of the Vermont high schools to support early identification of youth with disabilities. All of these counselors work to ensure that the individual plans for employment are in place before the student graduates.

It's reasonable to say that we vary a great deal in our approach to providing consultation and early identification and services to youth throughout the state, as I am currently the only counselor who

deals primarily with students with severe disabilities. However, there is an innovative partnership in Chittenden County, our largest county in the state, with a school-to-work initiative. A school-based VR counselor position is being piloted in the Burlington region at the high school.

We currently are seeking legislative appropriations to create three additional VR transition specialists for the year 2000. The Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation has long-term goals of creating one transition specialist counselor to work within each of our regional offices.

I have been in working capacity as a regional specialist for approximately five years. Prior to that I had been in that region for eight years and had a section of the county as my own to serve with two high schools in it. One part of the county was receiving certain kinds of services because I had a special interest in schools and youth. It became apparent to our regional manager at the time that we needed to give a more consistent message and service delivery to the schools in my county, which consists of eight public high schools and one private high school. It's made up of eight supervisory unions, so we have eight different sets of administrations to deal with when it comes to youth with disabilities along with a variety of financing. So, the challenges for each of these school districts vary a great deal.

What has happened with the introduction of sending one person to each of these schools is that we can share ideas and information across the county and innovative plans that were happening from other parts of the state system, regardless of what economic capacity they had. The ability to problem solve around issues with students and youth with disabilities and their transition needs

developed a great number of resources for them. If it could be done someplace else in the state, it could be done in their school system. They just had to find ways of paying for it and ways of getting the technology.

The problems I ran into initially were the issues of developing relationships with the special educators themselves. Because we talk different languages, as referred to in the Tower of Babel, we had to first get to understand one another. Once we got through that hoop — which took more than a year, sometimes with bruised egos on both sides — we had to be very honest about the fact that we had to have the best interest of the student at heart.

We started talking about how we all work together to support outcomes in each of the four areas of transition planning, (i.e., independent living, employment, community participation, and post-secondary education). We were able to build a relationship that included the use of core transition teams to allow outside agencies and adult agencies work more closely with education and understand what their roles are in transition planning. We now have the school-to-work movement, which goes hand in hand with special education's work in community-based learning. Special education has been doing that for years. Now school-to-work has those approaches as well. The two combine really well and students with disabilities fall really well within the school-to-work framework and that movement of skill-based learning.

One special educator that I've been working with for about eight years told me that she really didn't like me when she first met me because I came in and talked about the fact that I wanted to know what the students were going to have for skills when they exited high school. I wasn't necessarily inter-

ested in the diploma that they were going to have because skills are what is marketable in the world of work. Even though Voc. Rehab. is charged with the employment piece of the transition plan with our other partner, the Department of Employment and Training, it was apparent that schools lacked information about resources. Initially, as an adult agency employee, I served as more of a resource for them for lots of other things besides employment options to help them understand what was out there for them to tap into. When you become a really useful resource for them to help them financially and with programs, they tend to become friendlier towards you in public education.

Over the last five years, three alternative education programs have been developed out of some of the high schools to deal mainly with students with emotional behavioral disabilities. We have a specialty program for adolescent sexual offenders that has been developed in the county as well over the last five years. Of those seven or eight core teams that were still in existence after the grant ended, three of them were in my county. We are the ones who continued using the core team concept. What held us together was Voc. Rehab.'s taking the initiative to facilitate that happening within that area.

In addition, we bring together partners from all those agencies that were discussed to talk about common trends and issues and to get the understanding of agencies and schools in order to complement each other's work in transition planning. The last piece of transition planning that we are doing now is using trends in the Anticipated Needs Survey to help students make a smooth transition. What I see happening now is that I'm working myself out of a job because schools are

becoming very proficient at giving students skills and work opportunities during their school as part of their school program. At any given time in Rutland County, we have between a hundred and two hundred kids every day out working as part of their school program. One high school has fifty-three students every day who are out working in either community-based learning or paid employment or some training program in the community. These are students who are still in school programs and not in adult-based programs yet.

Now I have students that come to me for transition planning during the last three or four years of school who have experienced three to four jobs and really have an idea about what they want to do within their career. This is a lot different than when I started five years ago or eight years ago doing school-to-work and transition planning. Our school districts are now more than willing to support students in transition who are involved in summer youth employment, which is a Job Partnership Training Act program. It's a career exploration piece for them to better serve the student's needs in the next school year and their career planning process.

So, all in all, things are moving forward and we are doing a lot of innovative things and have more collaboration with schools in the region. I have the pleasure of introducing Olga Pschorr, who is a school specialist working in support and employment and transition activities on a state level and servicing grants and programs and acting as the technical resources person for the state. Here's Olga.

Olga Pschorr: Vocational Rehabilitation is currently the lead partner in Vermont's Jobs Initiative, which is a partnership with the Department of Corrections and the Department of Mental Health

to expand transition services and employment outcomes to youth with emotional behavioral disabilities. We also have a bit of a Tower of Babel for youth with EBD and have a lot of discussions around this project with the different definitions of SED, severe emotional disturbance, and emotional behavioral disabilities. We prefer to use the term "emotional behavioral disability" because we see it as a bit more kid and student friendly, surprising as that might be.

There's a saying in the children's mental health world that, when adults disagree, children fail. And this is a project where adults do agree that bridging the gap for these kids must be met by a collaborative team approach.

In Vermont, as background, young adults with EBD typically face a great deal of instability as they leave the educational system and other youth services systems, such as SRS and children's mental health. These youth often don't fit into the adult mental health systems because they don't meet the eligibility requirements of having a major mental illness. I would argue — and believe that all three of these agencies would also argue — that these youth should not be found eligible for adult mental health services because their needs are distinct from individuals with chronic mental illness. While these youth are often eligible for services within Vocational Rehabilitation, our history has shown us that they often cycle in and out of our services with little success.

The Jobs Program is essentially a supported employment model that includes an intensive case management component. The program focuses specifically on youth that are most at risk and have the most intensive support needs. The project actually began at a local level in 1992 as a pilot

project at the Washington County Mental Health Children's Services program in Barre, Vermont. As a result of the innovation of that program, the leadership of the children's mental health director and executive director, and the support from state level collaborators, the project has been replicated in two additional areas for FY99. Our long-range goal is to replicate the program statewide.

Each of the Jobs Programs is based in the community and that has been extremely important to the kids who participate in the program. They often drop in — the programs are located on a bus line generally — and it's a kid-friendly environment. They are staffed by a program coordinator and a team of two to two and a half employment training specialists. General VR counselors work at this point with each of the three programs and Restart coordinators from the Department of Corrections provide referrals and consultations with each program. Approximately 20% of the referrals to the new program are from the Department of Corrections.

In my short experience at the state level for the last four years, I have found that it's relatively rare that more than one agency steps up to the plate together to fund a major initiative. I would argue that it's extremely rare that three agencies have been able to work together to jointly fund services. This program actually is funded with a three-way split between each of these agencies.

So, how did we actually get to this point? In 1996, we pulled together a very small team of state-level players to look at the issues of youth with EBD. This included state partners from Education, Corrections, Mental Health, SRS, and Vocational Rehabilitation. We identified within a relatively short period of time what the needs were for these

kids. We also determined that each year the Agency of Human Services sees about two hundred youth with severe emotional disturbance exit state's custody or age out of children's services. Data from the National Transition Longitudinal Study also showed us some very poor outcomes for these youth. Almost 60% of youth with EBD are arrested at least once three to five years out of high school, 54.7% of EBD youth drop out of high school, and nearly 50% of young women with EBD became parents as well.

We also did a point-in-time study through Vocational Rehabilitation of 155 youth with EBD. We found that about 35% of these kids were also involved in corrections, and 28% had substance abuse issues, while 41% were receiving Social Security benefits.

We knew that we had a very high needs group of kids and that the outcomes associated with these kids were very negative.

We also had a project that had been in place that was innovative and was having some good results and employment outcomes, but wanted to take a closer look at other outcomes for these kids as well. So, we took a very close look at pre- and post-measures for kids who had been successfully closed in the Jobs Program and began to identify some cost-benefit statements. For example, on entering the program, 60% of these kids had received ANFC (welfare) benefits. At closure, only one continued to receive benefits at a reduced rate. We also found that although 25% of the youth were involved in corrections on entry into the program — and they were intensely involved, these were all kids who had a history of sexual offense — at closure, none of them had reoffended and none of the other successful closures had offended.

We were able to jointly come together and sell this partnership to the Department of Corrections, Department of Mental Health, and VR to replicate the program.

To date, on our replication efforts, we now have doubled the number of youth with EBD currently working. These new programs have been up and running for about six to eight months and we expect that these numbers will increase over time. We also have a proposal at the legislature to continue the replication. If funded, our proposal would create one additional Jobs Program for FY-2000. I'm sure Ray Haynes will be advocating for that to be in the Rutland area. We also will create three transition specialist VR counselor positions and a long-term funding source for positioning youth who are un-served currently in supported employment as they exit from high school.

I'd now like to hand our discussion to Peter Baird, the Director of the Vermont Work Incentive Initiative.

Peter Baird: Thank you very much, Olga. I'll be talking about a different type of program today because this is not a program aimed at youth in transition. However, it's an initiative that can be very helpful for youth in transition.

Vermont Work Incentive Initiative is a program funded by grants from the Social Security Administration and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. It's aimed at lowering the barriers to employment that face people who receive either Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). This program is really designed to help adults with disabilities who receive SSI or SSDI and who are looking for work. However, when a child turns eighteen, they would be eligible for the things that this program offers, especially

the expanded benefits counseling we are going to be offering, and maybe the peer counseling, and also the Medicaid buy-in that will be available for persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, we are going to be exploring over the next few months how the benefits counselors we have hired might start working on transition issues or start doing training on transition issues and how they might be helpful toward other initiatives we have in the state.

Olga said that 41% of the youth served by the jobs program were on Social Security. SSI and SSDI were really designed to be a retirement program for persons with disabilities, which is a real shame considering that a lot of these people enter the SSI or SSDI programs in their teens and twenties and generally never leave. When a person on SSI or SSDI decides to seek employment, they are confronted by a very confusing system of support that is better designed to support retirement. For far too many of these people, the choice to work is really determined more by the disincentives in the Social Security program they are in than their actual ability to find and maintain employment. Even if they are able to overcome these disincentives, they face state and federal agencies and other social service programs, organizations that are really poorly prepared to respond to their needs and help them find employment.

We did a series of seventeen focus groups with people on Social Security all over the state and looked at a lot of data from both within Vermont and other states. We discovered there are a lot of structural disincentives in the Social Security system and that we really needed to develop better strategies to help people on Social Security who are trying to find work.

The reality, as I said earlier, is that most people on SSI or SSDI are on it for the rest of their lives. And this is really despite advances in assistive technology and medicine and the Americans with Disabilities Act, things that were designed to help people with disabilities into mainstream society and provide greater opportunities than ever.

This project is really trying to tackle three primary causes of low employment among people who receive SSI or SSDI. First, people who receive Social Security often have no idea about how work affects them in it. It's just information that isn't available to them nor can they get accurate answers from anyone. They'll go to Social Security and get one answer and go to Voc. Rehab. and get a different answer or mental health and get a third answer. Often, the answer they get is wrong in all cases. Second, beneficiaries who actually go to work risk losing essential health care benefits that are just irreplaceable through any other means except through the Medicaid program. This is a major disincentive. And third is that vocational services really haven't played a big enough role in the various disability programs that we have had.

The purpose of the Vermont Work Incentive Initiative is to test ways to overcome these causes of low employment and look at ways to remove the barriers for people on SSI or SSDI. The first thing we are doing is more of a direct service component. We have hired seven benefits counselors, and these counselors will be specializing in understanding how employment affects the whole range of benefits a person receives, not only their Social Security, but also their health care, food stamps, housing assistance, and any of the benefits that they are eligible for. Benefits counselors will be strategically located in Vocational Rehabilitation offices and Mental

Health centers throughout the state and will also spend some time in the Social Security office and independent living centers. They are going to be the expert resource on how employment affects all these benefits to really help people understand so they can make an informed choice. Informed choice is really the goal we are working towards. Since we have youth in transition, in the VR program, they would all be eligible to use these benefit counselors' expertise. We're also in the process of training the benefits counselors. They will be learning more, getting better at their jobs, and really getting integrated into where they will be working.

The second thing we're doing, which is really our primary policy change, is implementing a Medicaid buy-in in the state of Vermont. A Medicaid buy-in for persons with disabilities was part of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997, and it's now a state option for the Medicaid program in all states to provide Medicaid coverage to anybody who meets the Social Security definition of disability. They don't actually have to be on Social Security, they just have to meet the definition. Anybody who has net income under 250% of the federal poverty level — take-home pay basically of \$20,000 a year or less — would be eligible for this buy-in.

The buy-in in Vermont will be relatively low: just a \$12 or \$25 a month premium for the medical insurance, depending on how much they earn. They would also have to pay a normal Medicaid co-pay to get started. But it really is a significant change because, for too many people, going to work meant losing their health care. This is a way for people who have disabilities to go to work and keep their health care. We're deep into the rule-making process on this Medicaid buy-in and should be able

to offer this benefit to everyone in the state by either September or October of this year.

The third major thing we are doing (on a trial basis) is to change the way cash benefits are delivered to people who receive Social Security disability insurance. Under current rules, when a person earns as little as \$125 a week, they are in danger of losing their entire Social Security benefit, which can be \$800-\$1,000 a month. Because of that loss of cash, a lot of people are afraid to earn over \$500 dollars a month. I'm working on a system where people's benefits gradually reduce as they earn more money.

And the fourth thing we're doing through the Vermont Work Incentive Initiative is providing a greater scope to employment outcomes in mental health centers. We are going to be working with the New Hampshire Psychiatric Institute to introduce Individualized Placement and Support services into the mental health centers. That will provide a much greater emphasis on vocational outcomes in mental health centers.

Mary Davis: Just to let you know something that you may not know, there is an executive order out and a task force has been formed on employment for adults with disabilities. However, it was decided that the issue was so important that a subcommittee has been formed to look at youth employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. I am representing our commissioner on that task force. One of the things that they are going to be looking at is the systems such as those described today. They will be wishing to highlight states with model approaches to the whole issue of transitioning individuals from school into "post-secondary options." I like the term "post-secondary options" rather than just "work," although employment is the bottom line of what we're after.

That little pitch aside, I have a question for the last presenter regarding this demonstration that he's doing with the SJ. Is the money that's going to help sustain the benefits coming directly out of your grant?

Peter Baird: No. We are actually working on a waiver right now with the Social Security Administration to basically to do a system where instead of a person having an all or nothing program in their SSDI check, they would get the full check if they earn \$499 a month.

Mary Davis: How far along are you with that?

Peter Baird: We have submitted the waiver. I was in Washington last week and had a meeting with them. Right now, they don't have legislative authority. Assuming that they get this authority this summer, which appears to be very likely, they expect a three-month approval time. It's highly likely they are going to approve this because they are, in fact, funding the program that is doing this. The cost of doing it is really minimal. The Social Security Administration agrees with that, especially on a trial basis of a few hundred people, which is what we are planning.

Mary Davis: Thank you.

Christy Treese (Idaho): This is Christy Treese from Napa, Idaho. I work as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in Valley View School District and Napa School District. I appreciate all the information that you have given me today. This is my first year working with the school district, so I can relate to what you were talking about regarding trying to establish rapport and good PR with school districts.

I have a couple of questions. One concerns the transition specialists that you are talking about. Are they hired from vocational rehabilitation?

Olga Pschorr: Yes. The legislative initiative would help us to hire three additional transition specialists in FY-2000.

Christy Treese (Idaho): Okay. Now, is that the same position that I would have as a transition specialist or is it something different that is going to help the school-to-work counselor?

Olga Pschorr: Well, what's different in this proposal would be that these counselors would have a long-term employment support fund for youth with disabilities who are typically not found eligible for existing supported employment projects when they graduate from high school. We have found that there are a number of kids who need more substantial support, such as one-on-one training, as they exit. This would provide those counselors with additional funds to ensure that those kids also receive support and employment options.

Christy Treese (Idaho): Thank you.

Carrie Sword: I have a question for Michael Ferguson. Michael, you talked about several planning forms that you were using at the beginning. Are you still using all of those same forms or has there been any success in collaborating and trimming that down?

Michael Ferguson: Well, that's going to be the long-term goal of the State Core Transition Team and my initiative from the department. In Vermont, we all work together so often that we developed this sort of common ground, but we do have our own turf. The other documents I was talking about are documents that get generated from each department: VR, Developmental Services, or Mental Health. Hopefully, from the bottom up, the eventual outcome will be a common planning document. That's the goal.

Sandy Hall (Wisconsin): Hello. This is Sandy

Hall from Wisconsin. During the transition years, the student becomes an eligible VR client. What does the school pay for? What does VR pay for? Or do you decide that at a local level?

Ray Haynes: In Vermont, we have a policy guideline that speaks to this. We do not pay for services up until they are ready to transition and in that last year of high school before they exit.

We will start helping support students in that last year of transition as they move out into the world of work, post-secondary education, independent living, and community participation.

Michael Ferguson: I would like to add that the IDEA legislation guides transition planning from a school perspective. We look at the four post-secondary options and work out exactly what a particular student's unique needs are and how these linkages are going to be made. When the team comes together, it's usually a collaborative effort, but the guidance is under the IDEA regulations for transition planning.

Sandy Hall (Wisconsin): Thank you.

Olga Pschorr: I also would just like to add that we do have a state policy for transition planning through vocational rehabilitation. But we have also learned that it's difficult to define that policy so rigidly that people do not look at a more flexible approach within their region. We'll be looking more closely at this when we have a team of transition specialists on board where we can really talk about what's policy, what's guideline, and what's best practice.

Christy Treese (Idaho): This is Christy again from Napa, Idaho. Ray was sharing that the school districts are now doing a good job in helping with community-based education for the kids to gain employment skills and then as the VR counselor we

pick up where they left off. I would like to ask Ray how he is now changing his role in this for the students since they are coming forward with more experience in jobs.

Ray Haynes: Our services are more concerned with doing career planning rather than just job placement. We help with job development, do a lot of work with post-secondary education training for students with learning disabilities, and make people aware of options that are out there.

So, that's how things have changed from initially eight years ago when I started with schools and what's happening now. I have students in engineering school at North Eastern in Boston. I have kids going to fine art dance schools in North Carolina and kids in Missouri who are on four-year post-secondary education plans and on career paths. They essentially will be my peers in vocational rehabilitation, I hope, when I get to retire.

Christy Treese (Idaho): So, your percent of case closures are sometimes two to three years out?

Ray Haynes: Yes, indeed. I have 160 clients on my caseload right now. But that's only because I hold onto those post-secondary education plans and see those students twice or three times a year and work with their colleges.

So, a third of my 160 clients are in post-secondary education training. We have a team approach in my regional office as well, so I get support in dealing with those cases.

Christy Treese (Idaho): Thank you. I see that some of these students are graduating before age twenty-one and they need some community-based employment or work services employment. Are you working in these areas as well?

Ray Haynes: Yes, indeed. Because some of the high schools have programs where the students have

jobs, especially with developmental disabilities, our adult service providers aren't necessarily ready to pick them up until they are exiting school eligibility at age twenty-one or twenty-two. But if they are set in their employment setting and it has been successful for two years already, we try to work around it and negotiate and find the necessary support for that. Some school districts have been willing to support the developmental disabilities on a local level to have that agency carry out the educational program.

Christy Treese (Idaho): So, you are doing a part school day and part developmental disability service for the kids that are in their senior year that are ready to transition out?

Ray Haynes: In some cases, yes, in our more innovative counties.

Michael Ferguson: Right. We want to be very honest here that that's how we would like to see it happen every place. So, as Olga alluded to, that would be best practice. This team continues to support best practice.

Christy Treese (Idaho): Thank you very much.

Mary Flannagan (North Carolina): Ray, this is Mary Flannagan in North Carolina. What I'm doing here is a brand new transition program that started in October. I work for the Division of Services for the Blind as the rehab. counselor in the transition program and my co-worker is an employment specialist. We work under a contract within the school district where we are located. The difficulty that I am running up against is that the expectation for the Division of Services is that you have to develop an IPE. But realistically, how can you identify a vocational goal for a fourteen or fifteen-year-old when they don't have a clue what they want to do? My question is: How do you

handle that type of a situation? At what point do you develop the IPE and what type of documentation do you use on younger students?

Ray Haynes: That's a very good question. And I suppose I have the most experience with that, given the time that I have had with students. What happens is that students who are fourteen are eligible for our services as they transition. I do have a fourteen-year-old on my caseload right now. And making them eligible for Voc. Rehab. services isn't the problem. The problem is developing their individual plan of employment. And you are absolutely correct. I don't do it until they need services in their junior or senior year but always before they exit high school.

How I determine what's the appropriate goal with them is based on their experiences in school. I advocate for a lot of vocational assessment in schools, such as work experiences, interest testing, and assessments that can be done in the school. At first I had to introduce a lot of these concepts into the schools because they were unaware of them. Those are some of the resources I brought to them.

The best example is using Job Partnership Training Act (JPTA) dollars for students during the summer to actually do career exploration with those dollars and then bring that data back to school with them so that it can be incorporated into their IEP team. Now, after five years, the IEP team does most of my work for me as a Voc. Rehab. counselor. What happens is that all the players are at the IEP team meeting now. Parents don't have to have three and four different meetings with agencies anymore. We all get the same information at the IEP team meeting because they have to hold those meetings. We all write our appropriate documents and they are all shared with one another. I have copies of

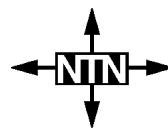
ITPs and IPPs and IEPs in my VR file with my IPEs. I don't usually write plans until their junior or senior year unless they need a specific service that we can provide such as work clothing or things like that that can't be afforded or easily fit into education funding mechanisms.

Mary Flannagan (North Carolina): Okay. Thank you.

Carrie Sword: I want to thank our guests from Vermont. I think it was a very informative call. Thanks to all the participants.

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