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Demand for VR Services Increasing

The tough economic climate facing Washington State is creating greater demand for Vocational Rehabilitation services. There are three factors driving increased demand, two of which stem from the coming implementation of HB 2782. The bill, which came out of the last session of the State Legislature, establishes the Disability Lifeline, a new approach to providing General Assistance benefits. The same legislation also creates the Washington Connection, a benefits portal which will inform the public about available DSHS services and provide opportunities for online referrals (in some cases enabling customers to directly apply for DSHS services online). The third factor is that 10 thousand Washingtonians have exhausted 99 weeks of unemployment benefits.

In passing HB 2782 the legislature revised the state's approach to providing General Assistance Benefits. These benefits had not previously been time limited. Beginning December 1, that changes. Recipients will be limited to receiving benefits for two years within a five year period. The new approach also aims to increase coordination between divisions within DSHS to provide essential services such as access to community-based mental health services, chemical dependency treatment, access to housing vouchers, and a small cash benefit. The way the law is implemented will determine the fate of the DSHS customers who have been receiving General Assistance benefits. Since the passage of the law, further budget cuts have precluded recipients of Disability

Lifeline benefits from being made eligible for Medicaid.

The legislature created a role for DVR in its new approach to providing General Assistance. Partners at the Economic Services Administration (ESA) will be required to let their customers know about DVR services if they are interested in going to work. ESA staff are only supposed to refer those customers after using a screening tool (which was developed by DVR) to determine if the referral is appropriate. An increasing number of referrals have been coming from ESA even ahead of the implementation of the new law. Over the last two fiscal years there has been a 71% increase in the number of ESA clients seeking DVR services. Sadly, the success rate of these customers has been low. Although DVR's Senior Leadership Team is confident in the referral tool developed, ongoing dialogue between DVR and ESA will be necessary to address any challenges that arise in the referral process.

The Washington Connection increases convenience for the public yet it may create challenges for the systems they wish to utilize. In the case of DVR, people will not be able to apply for services online because this could create unintended consequences for meeting the 60 day eligibility determination requirement.

Those interested in services will be able to request a referral to the office nearest them. The State of Illinois, which has a Vocational Rehabilitation Program roughly

See Demand (on page 21)



SAVE THE DATES

The 2011 Quarterly Meeting Dates for the WSRC are:

January 20-21, 2011
Thurston County

April 28-29, 2011
Whatcom County

July 21-22, 2011
Thurston County

October 20-21, 2011
Spokane County

Details on exact locations will be forthcoming. All activities open to the public. Reasonable accommodation will be happily provided upon request by contacting JoAnne Lang at: langjk@dshs.wa.gov or by calling 360-725-3692.

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Demand *(continued from page 1)*

twice the size of ours, has already implemented a similar benefits portal. In the first year the Illinois VR program received six thousand referrals.

A third factor which may increase demand for services is a result of the economic downturn. Ten thousand Washingtonians have exhausted 99 weeks of unemployment benefits. A portion of those unemployed workers have disabilities and may seek DVR services. Some are not people with disabilities, and therefore are not likely to seek services from DVR. Still others may have chronic health conditions (which they may not have thought of as disabilities, but) which may create barriers to employment

that DVR can support them to address.

The implementation of the Disability Lifeline, the Washington Connection, and the exhaustion of unemployment benefits will increase pressure at the front end of the Vocational Rehabilitation services system. This pressure will echo throughout each phase of the VR process in the coming months and years. This development raises the question of how to balance the pressure and competing demands.

Further increased demand for services comes at a dicey juncture for DVR.

After exiting Order of Selection, (the state of operation requiring DVR to establish a waiting list for services) in February 2008, DVR has achieved full caseload capacity. Full caseload capacity means that the agency is serving roughly 13 thousand people each month, one thousand of whom have their cases closed. DVR leadership contends that if that ratio can be maintained, reentering Order of Selection can be avoided. But is maintaining that ratio likely given the influx we anticipate? That remains to be seen.

Council Requests Dialogue with DSHS and Technical Assistance from RSA

On September 20, the Council Chair and Executive Director, the Interim Director of DVR, and the Chief of Staff for DSHS met to discuss the substance of a request for technical assistance sent by the WSRC to the Rehabilitation Services Administration in partnership with the Client Assistance Program and the Governor’s Committee on Disability

issues and Employment. The technical assistance request which was sent on September 17 has yet to be answered. It addressed three key matters: concerns about how DSHS would implement the Disability Lifeline legislation, requests made by DSHS to approve or reject the purchase of customer equipment costing more than five thousand dollars, and whether or not DVR is able to participate in the DSHS

Client Registry. The discussion was constructive and will be ongoing. The outcome of the dialogue is that DSHS will no longer take the same approach to oversight regarding the purchase of customer equipment. Our next conversation is scheduled in December.

PROPOSED JANUARY QUARTERLY MEETING AGENDA TOPICS:

Review of Implementation Strategies for Disability Lifeline & Washington Connection

Council Elections

Welcome the new DVR Director

Presentation on DSHS Client Registry

UPDATE:

Status of the hiring process for the next DVR Director

First round of interviews completed;

Top 2 candidates to complete next round

STAY TUNED...

REMEMBERING LARRY COBURN

Larry Coburn, a long-time and dedicated VRC working in Wenatchee, died October 29 of complications from cancer.

He was appreciated by colleagues for being big-hearted and thoughtful. Outside of work Mr. Coburn was a pilot who enjoyed flying. The WSRC expresses condolences to Mr. Coburn’s family, friends, & colleagues.

Washington State and the nation lose a distinguished leader, Paul Steven Miller of Mercer Island, dies at age 49

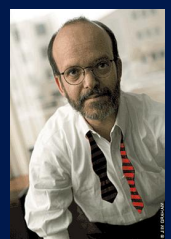


Photo by Jim Graham

Paul Steven Miller died of lung cancer October 19, 2010. Mr. Miller, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and of Harvard Law School, was a person of short stature. He was one of the longest serving Commissioners at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Deputy Director of Consumer Affairs, during the Clinton Administration. Mr. Miller was renowned for his expertise regarding disability and employment discrimination. From 2006-2009, He served as the Chair of the Disability Studies program at the University of Washington where he was also the Henry M. Jackson professor of Law. President Obama appointed Miller to be a special policy advisor. Mr. Miller was known for his sense of humor. Paul Steven Miller is survived by his wife Jennifer Mechem and their two daughters Delia Mechem-Miller, 10, and Naomi Mechem-Miller, 5. He will be sorely missed.

OPINION- What May Be Lost to “Right Place, Right Time” Rhetoric?

Has there ever been a particularly good time to have a disability and a barrier to employment? For the last four years, discussion of whether or not DVR is the “right place at the right time” for its customers has become a common refrain within the division. Yes, there are limits to what DVR can and should do. DVR cannot make people go to work who do not want to, or ignore clear and convincing evidence that someone cannot benefit from services. DVR is prohibited

from paying for a customer’s rent or insurance. It cannot buy food or attire, unless it is needed for work. That leaves so many possibilities open.

Rhetoric also has limits. Taken to the extreme the right place right time refrain could be interpreted to mean expecting customers to come to DVR with most of their barriers to employment addressed at the starting line, and coming prepared with a career path mapped out. Is that a reasonable expectation?

Where is the Rehabilitation in telling someone to come back to DVR after he does most of the heavy lifting somewhere else?

As emphasis on production has increased and caseloads have grown, it is not difficult to understand why questioning whether DVR is the right place at the right time gained currency, but there are more important questions to be answered such as: What is DVR’s purpose? What priorities will it establish to achieve it?

How do the services DVR buys address the barriers to employment customers present? Uncertainty and scarcity are affecting DVR’s customers, and therefore its work. Scarcity and fear do not have to define what DVR becomes. The people who comprise DVR possess the talent, the heart, and the good judgment to tackle the more challenging questions without drawing fear-based conclusions. This is the “right place at the right time” to exercise the judgment in answering the questions that will define DVR going forward.

Spokane Customers Packed the House to Offer Input

More than fifty customers with open DVR cases in Spokane County turned out to offer constructive input based on their observations of the DVR service system. The forum began with three consecutive appreciations from customers who were pleased with their services.

A core group of DVR customers who are hard of hearing, offered impassioned and specific feedback about how their experiences as people who have lost hearing late in life differs from those who are born Deaf or who become Deaf in childhood. One woman spoke about wanting to “belong to the English speaking world” in which she grew up rather than using American or other sign language. She went on to advocate for DVR to provide and publicize the availability of assistive listening devices at each of its offices. Another speaker who was also hard of hearing discussed the challenges faced when trying to acquire an effective hearing aid. He spoke of the road

blocks and frustrations he experienced in a sales position requiring telephone contact with customers. Like this customer, speakers who were hard of hearing generally conveyed a profound sense of isolation and encouraged DVR to provide training for Counselors which highlights effective ways of meeting the distinct needs of people with profound hearing loss late in life.

One Deaf speaker compared and contrasted her experience with DVR, with that of her sister (also Deaf). The sister secured support from DVR to attend Gallaudet University (the only University in the world to provide all instruction and extracurricular activities in ASL). The speaker’s Counselor did not support Gallaudet as part of her plan. The Counselor urged the speaker to attend Washington State

University and use the services of an interpreter. The speaker felt that the two opportunities were categorically different because in an environment where ASL was the primary language, her sister would “learn to be an independent Deaf adult” while the speaker believed that by attending WSU, where English is the primary language, she “would learn how to depend on an interpreter.”

Beyond the specific perspectives by those who were hard of hearing or Deaf, some comments highlighted a need for stronger communication during case transfers necessitated by staff turnover.

This forum again highlighted the scarcity that many customers of DVR currently face. While homelessness, lack of access to medical care, and prescriptions were not central topics of discussion, some who turned out were facing these unmet needs. This makes their journey to work all the more challenging.

The WSRC

Public Comment in 2010

In 2010, the WSRC hosted 2 customer forums in Olympia, 1 in SeaTac, and 1 in Spokane. We received a total of 115 (non duplicative) comments in person. Four people provided comment by telephone. Thirty-two people provided written comment in response to the public notice advertising the forums. American Sign Language interpretation was provided at each forum. Other spoken language interpretation provided included: Spanish (at 2 forums), Amharic and Tigrinya (at one forum respectively). The Council provided a written summary of each forum to DVR’s Senior Leadership Team.

We’re on the Web!

Visit us at:

www.wastrehabcouncil.org

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