

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

Annual Family Support Plan

State Fiscal Year 2017

I. **BACKGROUND:**

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) is organized pursuant to M.G.L. ch. 6 paragraph 74-84 and operates programs authorized by State Law, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and by the Social Security Act. The MRC provides a comprehensive array of services to individuals with significant disabilities, intended to promote equality, empowerment and independence and to “create opportunities for independent living and work.”

The MRC serves individuals with all types of disabilities as its constituency. While each MRC program has a unique focus and eligibility criteria, the Commission’s overall mandate and purpose are to assist eligible individuals with disabilities, regardless of age, nature of disability or functional ability, to maximize quality of life and self-sufficiency in the community. Consistent among all services and across all programs, is a consumer-focused and consumer-directed planning and service delivery process that respects, and is driven by, informed decisions of empowered consumers.

In general, consumers of MRC services are individuals with disabilities who choose to control their involvement with MRC personally. In many cases, the provision of service to the *individual* is, by nature, a support to the family as well. For example, assisting a disabled youth who is transitioning to adulthood to find accessible, affordable housing, build independent living and employment skills, and identify and connect with needed services and supports, will help the family who, until that time may have provided all of the assistance necessary to keep the individual home and out of institutional care. This independence can be achieved through support from such programs and services as Home Modifications, Assistive Technology, MassAccess Housing Registry, Transition to Adulthood Programs (operated by Independent Living Centers), Turning 22 Supported Living and Brain Injury Services, among others.

Additionally, an individual’s (and thus their family’s) economic status and self-sufficiency can be enhanced through MRC’s Vocational Rehabilitation Services to gain or maintain employment, or through MRC’s Disability Determination Services that may aid the individual’s application for Social Security benefits.

Although MRC is primarily an adult service system, there are a number of programs that are also available to, or of direct benefit to, children and youth with disabilities. Specifically, the Turning 22 Supported Living Program, Transition to Adulthood Programs, Youth Leadership Forum and Youth Leadership Network, Family Assistance Services of the Statewide Head

Injury Program, the Home Modification Loan Program, MassHousing Registry, and the services under the Assist Technology Programs including the AT Loan Program, MassMatch School Swap, the Requisition program are frequently utilized by families with children or young adults with disabilities.

Additionally, as the state agency designated to operate the Money Follows the Person Community Supports Waivers, MRC is assisting eligible young adults graduating from the Mass. Hospital School who are able to transition into community settings with a range of waiver services.

Finally, consistent with the Workforce Investment and Opportunities Act (WIOA), the MRC Vocational Rehabilitation Division increasingly serves youth and young adults in, or graduating from, high school. As the target population changes, services have been adjusted, and new service types developed to address the issues and needs related to transitioning from child and youth services to adult services, and adult life including independent living and employment. Currently over 30% of clients being served by the Vocational Rehabilitation Division are youth and young adults.

## II. **FAMILY EMPOWERMENT AND SUBSTANTIAL CONSULTATION:**

Consumer involvement has long been an integral aspect of all MRC programs and services and is integrated into service delivery, program development, and day to day operations of the agency. This begins with involvement of the consumer and, when appropriate, his or her legal guardian, in all aspects of development and implementation of his/her individual service plan, individual transition plan, or individual plan for employment.

Furthermore, consumer input is solicited through a variety of means, for the purposes of informing agency decision-making, program evaluation, planning and development. Avenues for consumer involvement include focus groups, formal and informal advisory committees, surveys, needs assessments and utilization of Individual Consumer Consultants who are engaged to share their expertise and experience and consult on specific projects.

In FY'16, specific avenues for empowerment and substantial consultation have included:

- Regular meetings of program-specific and topic-specific advisory committees, including State Rehabilitation Council, Statewide Independent Living Council, Assistive Technology Council, the Home Care Assistance Advisory Committee, and subcommittees of the State Rehabilitation Council including the Artists Beyond Challenges, Unserved and Underserved, and Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder Task Forces
- On-going communication with disability awareness and advocacy organizations including the Massachusetts Brain Injury Association, the Federation for Children with Special Needs, the Spinal Cord Injury Association, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, United Cerebral Palsy, and the Asperger Autism Network to obtain regular

feedback regarding the needs of their constituents and the effectiveness of MRC's programs and services in addressing those needs.

- MRC contracts with 11 consumer-directed Independent Living Centers to provide peer support, skills training in self-advocacy and independent living, and systems advocacy on a broad range of issues that impact the lives of individuals with disabilities. MRC maintains a system of regular communication with these centers regarding issues of concern to the community, types of services delivered, and types of supports most needed.
- Participation and collaboration with other state agencies on MassHealth's MFP Stakeholders group. Representatives of the MRC Waiver Unit, which operates the MFP Community Living Waive for MassHealth, actively participate in the stakeholder meetings, consulting with MassHealth in setting the agenda, presenting information, encouraging membership among consumers, their family members and providers and utilizing stakeholder feedback in program development.
- Involvement of consumer consultants in RFR development and review of responses, interview committees and program specific projects throughout the agency
- Consumer satisfaction surveys
- Consumer Needs Assessment survey
- Participation at all meetings of the Statewide Independent Living Council and support and consultation to its subcommittees
- An annual Consumer Conference, new regularly co-sponsored along with MRC by the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind (MCB), the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MCDHH) and the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC). The conference is planned by a committee of consumers and staff of the 4 sponsoring organizations.

### **III. FAMILY LEADERSHIP:**

As MRC emphasizes empowering the individual with the disability, the agency continues to build opportunities for youth development through mentoring, skills training, peer support and youth leadership training.

In FY' 16 MRC has:

- Built a network Pre-Employment Training Service providers across the state. These community based organizations will provide such pre-employment supports as job readiness soft skills training, individual support and internships that will allow high school students to explore the world of work and begin their connections with MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation services.
- Continued to contract with Partners for Youth with Disabilities (PYD) to further build the Statewide Mentor Match program. Mentoring relationships provide role modeling for youth and allow them to begin to imagine the possibilities for their futures, seeing others with disabilities utilizing resources, accommodations, and their own strengths to build successful careers and lives in the community.

- Contracted with Easter Seals to plan and coordinate the annual Youth Leadership Forum. Easter Seals, in addition to collaborating with MRC, worked with its community partners to conduct this 3 day forum that connects youth with disabilities to peer mentors and role models to promote job readiness, civic engagement and policy advocacy.
- Continued to support the year-round Youth Leadership Network, also in conjunction with Easter Seals, and now available in various locations in the state to allow for more youth and more diverse participation.
- Through the Acquired Brain Injury and Money Follows the Person Community Waivers, provided a range of services to allow more individuals to transition from Nursing Homes to community settings, and provided support and services to the individuals and to those family members who are part of the individuals' support network. The MFP Waiver includes "Family Support" as a paid service to "provide training and instruction about the treatment regimes, behavior plans, and the use of specialized equipment that supports the waiver participant to participate in the community. Community/Residential Family Training may also include training in family leadership, support of self-advocacy and independence of the family member." MRC continues to work UMass and MassHealth to identify and support new individuals and organizations that may be qualified to provide this Famil Training support to waiver participants and their families.

#### IV. **FAMILY SUPPORT RESOURCES AND FUNDING:**

MRC continues its commitment to maximizing efficiency of available resources for the benefit of individuals with disabilities. This involves gaining a comprehensive understanding of need, as is gathered by all means of substantial consultation described above, and then collaborating with partner agencies and organizations to develop new resources, supports and services, or to adapt existing resources to meet the needs of those with disabilities. Additionally, this entails ensuring that consumers have the knowledge of and access to these resources. As an example, MRC has worked with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, MassHealth and UMass, and other state disability agencies to develop and implement the Money Follows the Person Waivers. These waivers include the availability of such services as Respite Care, Individual Supports, Family Training Supports, Home and Vehicle Modifications, among others. This expansion of services, beyond what has been available through the MassHealth State Plan and disability agencies, allows community living to be an option for many who might otherwise be destined to remain in facilities. Among those served through these waivers are individuals who choose to return to a family home, youth who have graduated from the Mass. Hospital School, and others in nursing homes who choose to live in their own homes or apartments in the community. MRC actively outreaches to organizations and communities about this waiver and as a result is filling available Community Living slots at a rapid pace.

MRC's Independent Living and Assistive Technology Department's Requirement program works to refurbish and redistribute assistive technology devices and durable medical equipment to consumers in need. While Requirement serves people across the lifespan, it is often utilized by families with children with disabilities who outgrow devices and are now able to pass them along to others in need. Requirement staff are actively engaged with community organizations and provide outreach and information about the process for both donating and receiving equipment.

As the Vocational Rehabilitation Division continues to expand its work with high school students, new needs are identified and new services have been developed. This includes the Pre-Employment Training Services, as the traditional MRC Vocational Rehabilitation consumer is no longer an adult with a work history prior to becoming disabled. As more people with no work experience come into MRC for services, new types of programs to allow for skill development and hands-on experience had to be developed. It was also recognized that the issues related to public benefits for youth transitioning from depending upon their parents, require benefits counselors to have specific training and expertise. In FY'16 MRC responded to this need by hiring 3 Transition Benefits Counselors who provide outreach, education and individual benefits planning and counseling to youth and their parents. There is one Benefits Counselor assigned to each MRC District and they work closely with the area offices in that region to coordinate outreach, consult with counselors, consumers and families, and provide relevant training to MRC staff, staff at other state agencies, and community organizations and parent groups.

Additionally, MRC continues to be involved in partnerships and initiatives aimed at expanding services, maximizing resources, and ensuring that the right services get to those in need in a timely manner.

In FY'16, this has included:

- Working with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EHS), MassHealth, the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA), and other state disability agencies on the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (CMS)-funded Balancing Incentive Program (BIP). Massachusetts' goals include expanding and improving upon the "No Wrong Door" system for accessing home and community based as implemented through the MRC-supported Aging and Disability Resource Consortia (ADRCs), developing standardized functional needs assessment domains and ensuring the provision of conflict-free case management. MRC continues to be an active partner in the development and operation of the MassOptions information and referral system which began operation in FY'16, and has played a key role in developing and testing the Person-Centered Planning training curriculum that will serve as a national model for training case managers.
- Partnering with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to provide professional development and family engagement supports to Secondary Transition Staff in six school districts. During FY'16, this has included assisting schools to set up

their first Transition Resource fairs for parents, students and school personnel, coordinating outreach and education sessions with the MRC Transition Benefits Counselors at each of the target districts, facilitating schools' sharing of best practices with other school systems, and facilitating the working relationships of MRC-VR counselors with key transition-related personnel at each school district.

- MRC-VR continues to ensure the availability of a Rehabilitation Counselor at every public high school, and builds relationships with school personnel involved with transitioning students with disabilities, including Special Education teachers, Guidance Counselors and Transition Specialists.
- Collaborating with MassHealth and other state agencies to implement the Money Follows the Person and the Acquired Brain Injury Waivers, both of which expand services and supports available to eligible consumers.
- Leveraging Federal Grants for Assistive Technology, ADRCs, and improving upon services available to elders who have experienced brain injuries.
- In effort to continuously improve services to target populations, MRC continued to partner with community based disability organizations to identify unmet needs, define best practices and implement staff training. MRC continued its collaboration with AANE for staff training and consultation to ensure staff are able to address the unique needs of this often under-served population.

V. **ACCESSING SERVICES AND SUPPORT:**

To expand and improve upon methods of increasing awareness of service availability to its constituents, MRC continues to support various methods of outreach and education about available resources and supports, including, but not limited to families. This includes:

- Actively partnering with UMass and other state agencies to operate MassOptions, including ensuring that staff have been properly trained to be able to handle calls that come in to the agency.
- Contracting with UMass to support the Massachusetts Network of Information Providers (MNIP).
- Using the annual Consumer Conference to outreach to, inform and educate consumers about the wide range of available services, through workshops and information tables.
- Provide support to the Independent Living Centers, ADRCs, and Massachusetts Brain Injury Association to enable them provide extensive information and referral services, including Long Term Care Options Counseling
- Collaborating with other state agencies to enhance the No Wrong Door concept and implement the activities designed and funded through BIP.
- Support assistive technology informational websites, including GetATStuff.org, MassMatch and Requirement.
- Contract for Assistive Technology Demonstration and Loan Centers that provide information and access to assistive technology devices.

- Support the MassAccess Housing Registry, a website that allows individuals with disabilities and their families to search for available housing that meet their geographic, accessibility and financial needs.
- The Vocational Rehabilitation division continues to ensure the availability of a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor in every public high school in the state for the purposes of identifying students with disabilities and assisting them in accessing adult services.
- MRC hired and ensured training of 3 Transition Benefits Counselors who have already begun to conduct outreach and education, network with transition-focused workgroups and task-forces, attend parent organization meetings, and conduct staff trainings at relevant organizations to ensure their availability as a resource is known.
- Through contracts with Independent Living Centers, MRC supports the Transition to Adulthood Programs that provide skills training, peer support, advocacy and information and referral to transition age youth with disabilities. Through skills training and exposure to adult peer role models, participants in these programs learn skills, build confidence and learn about supports and services that may be available to them as they work towards independence. In FY'16 MRC has expanded these programs and will continue to work toward ensuring that they are available statewide. In addition, in this past year, all of the TAP programs have incorporated components that provide support and education to parents and guardians of the program participants so that they are better able to prepare their young adult for transition to adulthood.

**VI. CULTURALLY COMPETENT OUTREACH AND SUPPORT:**

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission is committed to facilitating access to services for those with disabilities from all communities. MRC employees Bilingual Counselors and Counselors for the Deaf (fluent in American Sign Language). In addition to ensuring a diverse and culturally competent staff, MRC contracts with providers to facilitate connections to services. For example:

- Application and outreach materials are available in multiple languages representative of Massachusetts communities.
- The agency contracts for over the phone and face to face translation services available for all programs.
- In addition to having Counselors for the Deaf at area offices, MRC contracts for ASL interpreters for individual and large group meetings and ensures that public events sponsored by the agency have ASL interpreters and CART reporters available.
- The Statewide Head Injury Program has, as one of its core services, Cultural Facilitators contracted to assist consumers in connecting to services, programs and activities within their communities.
- The Unserved/Underserved Subcommittee of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) works with the SRC to identify underserved populations and to develop

recommendations for action to increase access to and effectiveness of services to the groups identified.

- MRC also contracts with many multicultural service providers across the state, including a multicultural independent living center, multicultural home care providers, and cultural facilitation providers, among others.

## VII. **INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION:**

As evidenced throughout this report, the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission values interagency collaboration as a means of assuring that the best possible array of services is made available to people with disabilities across the lifespan, and with minimal disruption when changing service types due to changes in eligibility or need. To that end, MRC actively participates in cross-agency work groups and committees that address the needs of persons with disabilities, or to ensure that the needs of persons with disabilities are included in non-disability specific program planning activities. FY '16 Interagency activities have included:

- Active participation on the EHS-led Transition Workgroup whose purpose is to identify gaps and disruptions in services related to transitioning from one state agency to another or one service type to another within a state agency.
- Representation on the Transition Advisory Committee (TAC) in which state agencies collaborate to address Chapter 688 referrals, assignments and transfers, as well as the 688 referral process itself.
- Planning and sponsorship of the Consumer Conference in conjunction with Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the Statewide Independent Living Council.
- Active collaboration with EHS, MassHealth, UMass, and multiple state agencies, and with the MFP Stakeholders group for continuous evaluation, monitoring, planning and development of Waiver operations.
- MRC continues to work in conjunction with the Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA), the Aging Service Access Points and Independent Living Centers to facilitate the on-going development and operation of the Aging and Disability Resource Consortia (ADRCs) across the state.
- Also in collaboration with EOEA and its provider network, MRC is working to improve identification of, and delivery of services to, elders who have experienced a brain injury.
- MRC remains actively involved in the Balancing Incentives Program steering and subcommittees that continue to develop and implement strategies for increasing availability of home and community based services to allow for more people with disabilities to remain living in the community and to rebalance Medicaid spending in favor of community-based options over facility-based care.

- MRC continues to collaborate with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to provide professional development for High School Transition staff in six school districts. In FY'16, MRC has assisted school districts in setting up their first Transition Resources fairs for students, parents and school personnel, coordinated outreach and education with the 3 Transition Benefits Specialists at each of the districts, facilitated sharing of best practices information among school districts, and helped to build the relationships between school personnel and MRC-VR counselors.
- In line with the Workforce Investment and Opportunities Act (WIOA), MRC has strengthened relationships with state agencies through Memoranda of Understanding with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Department of Developmental Services, the Department of Mental Health, the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, MassHealth, the Department of Labor and Workforce Development and the Department of Transitional Assistance. These agreements identify ways in which each agency will collaborate with MRC in its goal of enabling persons with disabilities to gain competitive employment.
- MRC participates on the Autism Commission as multiple agencies work to improve services for individuals on the Autism Spectrum. In addition, MRC chairs the Employment Subcommittee of the Commission.
- MRC continues to have representation and participation on many interagency task forces, workgroups and partnerships including the Statewide Hoarding Taskforce, the Health and Disability Partnership, Building Partnerships for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities, the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, and multiple transition-related regional workgroups.

#### **GOALS FOR FY'17:**

In addition to continuing the myriad of programs and activities already described, MRC has goals for FY'17 to further improve, expand, increase access to, or better coordinate services that will further improve the lives of individuals with disabilities and their families. These include:

- Through the state procurement process, MRC will work to expand the availability of Transition to Adulthood Programs to all Independent Living Centers in the state.
- Also through the procurement process, MRC will identify a provider to continue to build upon the successes of the Youth Leadership Forum and the subsequent Youth Leadership Network.
- To address the concerns about transitioning from facility care to community living, the MRC Waiver Unit will develop Peer to Peer outreach that will connect individuals and families of individuals who have successfully transitioned from nursing homes with those currently residing in nursing homes. This peer program will provide information about the transition process, including the emotional aspects, from a peer perspective.
- Building upon the network of Pre-Employment Services Providers working along with VR Counselors in the high schools, MRC will procure the services of a provider or providers of

Family Support for High School Students with Disabilities. This procurement is designed to provide family support services to all high school students served by MRC to build the capacity to work to enhance family support to high school students with disabilities and improve their outcomes of successful transitions from high school to post-secondary education and competitive integrated employment. The provider(s) will develop a project advisory committee, provide outreach and information and referral to high school students and their families, including underserved communities, and provide education and technical assistance on the transition planning process, other service options for high school students with disabilities and their families, family support services around post-secondary education and other comprehensive transition training programs, and advocacy and support services for families.