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Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program  
Draft Strategic Performance Plan Goals  
and Objectives



U.S. Department of Education  
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## INTRODUCTION

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), a component of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) in the U.S. Department of Education, administers the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program (VR Program) under a mandate established by the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973*. The purpose of the VR Program is, in part, “to empower individuals with disabilities to maximize employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and inclusion and integration into society” (*Rehabilitation Act of 1973*, Sec. 2(b)). The VR Program is funded by federal and state governments and assists states in operating comprehensive statewide programs to assess, plan, develop, and provide vocational rehabilitation services for individuals with disabilities, “consistent with their strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice, so that such individuals may prepare for and engage in gainful employment” (Section 100(a)(2)).

RSA is developing a Vocational Rehabilitation Strategic Performance Plan for the VR Program in order to ensure a long-term strategic focus on program performance, performance improvement, and outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities. RSA will use this plan to guide its administration of the VR program and address its basic challenges. By identifying goals and objectives linked to specific populations and high priority outcomes, the plan will assist RSA in monitoring progress of the VR program and provide appropriate, targeted support to state agencies toward the achievement of desired outcomes.

The plan will identify long-term performance goals and objectives that RSA will monitor in cooperation with the VR agencies. These goals and objectives and related performance measures will provide RSA with the foundation to begin documenting practices that lead to successful outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities and transitioning youths, identify factors that may inhibit success, and identify effective practices that help accomplish the program’s mission of providing high quality vocational rehabilitation services that are tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities. RSA will use the plan to assist state VR agencies to focus their mandated planning activities on practices that will assure progress in providing high quality services for individuals with significant disabilities. Overall, the plan will promote results shaped by careful planning, monitoring of results, and implementation of strategies designed to improve performance.

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The next section of this document describes the intended focus of the plan, and what RSA hopes to achieve with its development. Section 3 discusses the plan's draft performance goals and objectives. Section 4 discusses possible strategies that RSA will consider toward achievement of strategic performance goals and objectives. The final section identifies the next steps in RSA's VR Program long-term strategic performance planning process.

## **FOCUS OF THE STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE PLAN**

The focus of RSA's Strategic Performance Plan for the VR program is to establish long-term performance goals and objectives related to employment and earnings for individuals with significant disabilities and receipt of VR services by transition-aged youths. The plan will target and highlight goals and objectives to encourage achievement of economic self-sufficiency and to increase earnings through employment. By identifying goals and objectives linked to specific populations and a limited number of high priority outcomes, RSA will be better equipped to monitor progress and provide appropriate, targeted support to state VR agencies in achievement of desired outcomes.

The goals and objectives are designed to work together to provide a complete picture of the VR Services Program's performance. The objectives provide a benchmark of performance. However, they will be considered collectively in assessing states' progress in achieving the goals. In addition, the unit of analysis of the plan is the state's VR services program and its application at the individual level is inappropriate.

The plan addresses long-term goal achievement and performance monitoring and supplements existing short-term performance measures used by RSA, including the standards and indicators. RSA will monitor achievement of the plan's goals and objectives and provide technical assistance to state VR agencies to improve performance. Standards and indicators will continue to be monitored as an accountability mechanism, as required by the *Rehabilitation Act*, while RSA implements this long-term focus on strategic performance. RSA will continue to work with the states to monitor performance on standards and indicators, place a greater emphasis on longer-term strategic planning toward achievement of annual goals included in state VR state plans, and phase in collection of performance information to monitor achievement of the goals and objectives identified in the plan.

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## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

**Goal 1: Assist individuals with significant disabilities to achieve economic self-sufficiency.**

**Objective 1.1: Increase the percentage of individuals who achieve earnings equal to the state average weekly wage.**

**Objective 1.2: Increase the percentage of individuals who achieve full-time competitive employment.**

**Objective 1.3: Increase the percentage of employment outcomes of VR participants who were not employed at intake.**

**Objective 1.4: Increase the percentage of individuals whose income from employment is equal to or greater than the substantial gainful activity (SGA)<sup>1</sup> level at closure.**

RSA believes that a major focus of the VR program is to assist individuals with significant disabilities in achieving economic self-sufficiency. The vast majority of VR participants (as reflected in the RSA 911 database) have one or more significant disabilities. The plan recognizes and focuses on the unique needs of this population. RSA believes that the dignity and independence of individuals with a significant disability are best achieved and maintained if individuals can achieve a level of economic self-sufficiency. While there are many potential definitions of this term, it ultimately means that such individuals would not be dependent on public programs and benefits for income support but would rather be earning a sufficient amount that such support would not be needed.

Generally, persons with disabilities do not earn at the same level as their nondisabled counterparts. The VR program provides services so that individuals with significant disabilities can compete for jobs with their nondisabled peers. One way to measure progress toward achievement of this goal would be to increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieve earnings equivalent to their state's average weekly wage, as indicated in Objective 1.1. State average weekly wages capture information that addresses whether VR participants are gaining employment that is not only competitive with their nondisabled peers but is also reflective of average wage levels in each state and territory.

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<sup>1</sup> SGA as defined by the Social Security Administration is recognized as a measure of the degree of self-sufficiency for disabled individuals.

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Another way to measure whether individuals with significant disabilities are achieving economic self-sufficiency is to monitor the percentage of individuals who are achieving full-time competitive employment in the integrated labor market, as indicated in Objective 1.2. Progress could be tracked by monitoring the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities achieving full time competitive employment on an annual basis across a multiyear time frame, with an expectation that the percentage will increase over time.

One of the critical elements of ensuring self-sufficiency for individuals with significant disabilities is to provide assistance so that VR participants who were not employed at intake gain employment after receiving VR services, as indicated in Objective 1.3. Comparing the percentage of successful placements of VR participants who were not employed at application across time will measure the program's contribution to helping individuals with significant disabilities achieve successful employment outcomes.

Substantial gainful activity offers the advantage of being a federally defined standard for a level of income that determines whether the individual continues to be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The SGA level for 2006 was \$866 a month, and \$1,400 a month for individuals who are blind. This amount is adjusted annually. Increasing the percentage of individuals, whose income from employment is equal to or greater than the SGA level at closure, as identified in Objective 1.4, is another way to measure whether individuals with significant disabilities are becoming more economically self-sufficient. Progress could be tracked by comparing the percentage of VR participants with income above the SGA standard at closure on an annual basis. Because different SGA levels are established for individuals who are blind versus those with other disabilities, achievement of SGA levels should be tracked separately for VR participants for whom blindness is the primary disability and those with other significant disabilities.

**Goal 2: Assist individuals with significant disabilities who receive public support at application to increase earnings through employment.**

**Objective 2.1: Increase participation in paid work.**

**Objective 2.2: Increase earnings from paid work.**

**Objective 2.3: Decrease the amount of cash payments from public sources.**

Some individuals with significant disabilities may need to work and receive support from public sources. Some individuals may be unable to work more hours in order to increase their financial

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self-sufficiency because of the nature of their disability or their circumstances. Unlike the target population addressed in Goal 1, this population often earns less than the SGA level, and receives SSI, SSDI, or other public financial support. Goal 2 will measure the progress of those who continue to need public support in increasing their earnings through employment. For this population, RSA would like to see additional participation in paid work and additional earnings from paid work. Ideally, these increases in earnings would result in decreases in the amount of cash payments and other benefits received from public sources.

There are a number of ways that RSA could monitor the progress of state agencies assisting individuals to increase earnings through employment. For example, as identified in Objective 2.3, the success of this goal could be measured by monitoring cash payments to VR participants from public sources for those VR participants with income below SGA who received public support. “Public support” would likely be defined as income from SSI, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), General Assistance (state or local government), SSDI, and workers compensation. Ideally, if VR participants increase their participation and income from paid work, they would become less reliant on public support. In other words, if work participation for those on public support increases, one would expect that public cash payments to these VR participants would decrease.

Increased participation in paid work, as indicated in Objective 2.1, is another way for individuals with significant disabilities to increase their earnings through employment. By increasing the number of hours worked, up to the maximum feasible for each individual, VR participants may be able to increase their income. The number of hours worked could be monitored by tracking the mean hours worked at closure on an annual basis, and comparing the results to the prior year. Because the number of hours worked is finite, and because a number of VR participants work part-time, it may be unrealistic to expect anything more than small incremental changes in the median hours worked over time. However, trend data will indicate whether progress is being achieved in increasing the number of hours worked by individuals with significant disabilities.

**Goal 3: Provide transition-age youths with services to prepare for and obtain employment.**

**Objective 3.1: Assist transition-age youths with significant disabilities to obtain vocational rehabilitation services.**

**Objective 3.2: Assist state and local education agencies to plan for the transition of students to employment-related activities after they complete school.**

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Consistent with the mandates of the *Rehabilitation Act*, RSA seeks to emphasize preparing transition-age youths for employment and their obtaining employment. For the purposes of the plan, transition-age youths include transitioning students and young people who have dropped out of or not completed high school. These individuals are a high priority population for RSA for several reasons. First, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education found that, compared to their peers who do not have disabilities, students with disabilities are more often unemployed and underemployed upon leaving school. Second, young people constitute a large segment of the vocational rehabilitation population. One study estimated that individuals between age 19 and 25 represent about 13.5 percent of all VR participants [Interim Report No. 4 of the Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services]. Third, the receipt of training and other services from VR agencies offers transitioning youths who having little or no work experience an opportunity to enhance their job potential. Fourth, focusing on transitioning youths introduces an element of early intervention because young people who receive VR services may be more likely to get and retain high quality jobs than those who approach the VR Program after they have been in the labor market or receiving public support for a number of years.

Objective 3.1. will address the extent to which transition-age youths obtain VR services toward an employment goal. Information that is collected for this objective will help determine the extent to which this high priority population is being served by state VR agencies and may be used to identify where additional services may be needed.

State VR agencies assist state and local education agencies to plan for the transition of students with disabilities to employment-related activities after they leave school. Objective 3.2 seeks to measure the extent of this assistance. Assistance could take many forms, ranging from providing general policy and service advice to state and local education agencies, coordination of vocational training, counseling, and education, and more direct involvement with specific VR participants through consulting on, and participation in the development and implementation of the Individualized Education Plans or Section 504 plans.

Coordination between VR agencies and schools is a critical to providing young people with VR services early in their career when it could make the biggest impact on their long-term achievement of high quality employment outcomes. Specific activities related to coordination that are to be addressed in state plans are addressed in Section 101(D) of the *Rehabilitation Act*.



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However, it is unclear how much coordination is actually occurring, and RSA does not currently collect information to measure the extent or focus of state VR agency coordinating activities. In order to ensure that state VR agencies are providing support to state and local education agencies, RSA will consider developing a system to collect valid and reliable information on the extent of outreach and coordination activities.

Ultimately, outcomes for transitioning youths will be monitored on the extent to which Goals 1 and 2 of this plan are achieved for this group. However, one of the complexities regarding monitoring the program performance of services to transitioning youths is that younger VR participants may not achieve employment outcomes immediately, but rather gradually, over time. RSA focuses on closure as a means of measuring achievement of goals and objectives. Accordingly, RSA may need to establish alternative outcome measurement methods for transitioning youths, because they may be less likely to achieve employment outcomes while still completing their education, and may be subject to more employment turnover early in their careers.

## **STRATEGIES TO BE CONSIDERED**

RSA has identified a number of preliminary strategies for improving VR performance at the national level. RSA will continue to develop and refine these and other strategies in order to determine how they might assist in accomplishing the plan's goals and objectives. For the purposes of illustration, the following draft strategies have been identified as potentially contributing to improved VR performance on a national level.

1. Improve RSA and VR state agency analysis and use of program data.
2. Upgrade RSA's management information system.
3. Share information and best practices about performance among VR agencies.
4. Work closely with other federal agencies responsible for employment programs and programs that impact the provision of VR services.
5. Improve the efficiency of the VR program.
6. Use RSA's discretionary programs strategically to improve the performance of the VR program.
7. Provide state agencies with financial incentives for improved performance using reallocation funds.
8. Track the performance of specific sub-populations.
9. Establish individual state agency performance targets.

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10. Work closely with the Office of Special Education Programs to share information about effective practices for serving transition-age youths and coordinating services between state VR agencies and local and state education agencies.

## **NEXT STEPS**

RSA will solicit feedback on the draft goals and priorities identified in this document from its partners in state VR agencies, representatives of the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, and State Rehabilitation Council members. RSA will also post this document on the Web site to solicit feedback from as wide an audience as possible. Based on this feedback, RSA will make appropriate changes to the goals and objectives and begin to identify draft measures of the objectives. RSA will then go through a similar process of sharing the draft measures with partners and stakeholders. Once the measures are finalized, RSA will, examine the performance of each state VR agency, and conduct analysis of appropriate targets given agency size, consumer characteristics, funding contingencies, and other factors. RSA will continue to work with state agencies in determining appropriate targets of performance that are sensitive to conditions in the state, and conduct “gap” analysis to determine realistic steps that could be taken to improve performance or maintain high levels of performance.

Individuals and organizations that wish to submit comments on this document should send them to the following RSA e-mail address: [OSERS.RSAStrategicPerformPlanComments@ed.gov](mailto:OSERS.RSAStrategicPerformPlanComments@ed.gov)

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