

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES PROGRAM

**DRAFT STRATEGIC PERFORMANCE
PLAN GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND
MEASURES**



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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 the progress of the VR program and provide appropriate, targeted support to state agencies toward the achievement of desired outcomes.

The plan identifies long-term performance goals, objectives and measures that RSA will monitor in cooperation with the VR agencies. These goals, 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 and identifying factors that may inhibit success, RSA will use the plan to help state VR agencies 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 and monitoring, and implementation of strategies designed to improve performance.

The next section of this document describes the focus of the plan and what RSA hopes to achieve with its development. The subsequent section discusses the plan’s performance goals, objectives and draft performance measures. The final section

identifies the next steps in the long-term strategic performance planning process for RSA's VR Program.

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, objectives and measures related to employment and earnings for individuals with significant disabilities and to receipt of VR services by transition-aged youths. The plan targets and highlights goals and objectives that encourage achievement or maintenance of economic self-sufficiency and that increase or maintain 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 on related performance measures and provide appropriate, targeted support to state VR agencies in the achievement of desired outcomes.

The goals, objectives and measures are designed to work together to provide a complete picture of the VR Services Program's performance. The objectives and performance measures 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 a state's VR services program and its application at the VR program participant level is inappropriate.

The plan addresses long-term goal achievement and performance monitoring and supplements existing short-term performance measures used by RSA, including 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.

GOALS, OBJECTIVES AND MEASURES

GOAL 1: ASSIST INDIVIDUALS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES TO ACHIEVE OR MAINTAIN ECONOMIC SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

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 they 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 solely on public programs and benefits for income support.

To monitor the extent to which individuals are achieving or maintaining levels of income that could allow former VR participants to be self-sufficient, RSA will work with VR agencies to examine a variety of factors related to the income being achieved by VR participants who are employed with earnings at closure. By using a variety of measures, RSA believes that a more robust measurement system is possible, for example, through inconsistencies between measures which will provide opportunities to further examine factors that could be affecting results. Multiple measures focused on each of the objectives may also lead to identification of issues related to specific subpopulations of former VR participants that would merit further analysis by state agencies and RSA as part of the monitoring process. To the extent possible, RSA will also identify ways to support state agencies in analyzing performance by occupational class and other demographic characteristics. This will help take into account circumstances where large numbers of individuals working in relatively lower-paying categories of occupations may skew results and prevent large numbers of individuals from achieving earning levels equal to either the state average weekly wage or SGA levels. In addition, monitoring demographic characteristics of consumers will help ensure that all eligible VR participants are being provided opportunities to receive VR services and that comparisons to benchmarks, such as state average weekly wage, are valid.

RSA will establish baseline measures to monitor the percentage of individuals who are employed at closure with earnings in order to monitor the degree to which various levels of economic performance through employment are achieved. Each year RSA will

monitor agency-level performance against these measures to determine the degree to which individuals with significant disabilities as a group within an agency are achieving levels of performance above the benchmark level. Given varying economic and programmatic circumstances in each state (e.g., levels of unemployment, inflation), RSA will monitor performance by agency, using each agency's prior performance to establish baseline targets and to monitor annual progress. Using each agency's prior performance as a benchmark will also allow agencies to monitor the impact of their own programmatic initiatives to assist VR participants in achieving earnings that will support them in being self-sufficient.

In addition, results for certain key subpopulations, such as transition-age youths, occupational classes, and consumers with a variety of characteristics will be selectively monitored, to the extent that resources allow. Progress towards achievement of economic self-sufficiency can be monitored by annually examining a variety of measures and subpopulations at the state level, thus allowing states to focus on their own history of performance and incremental improvements in that performance.

DRAFT MEASURES OF GOAL 1 OBJECTIVES

The ultimate measure of whether VR programs are accomplishing their missions as an employment program is the rate at which VR participants achieve employment with earnings after completing a VR program, also known as the "rehabilitation rate." RSA expects to continue to measure rehabilitation rates to monitor the effectiveness of VR programs in assisting individuals with disabilities in achieving employment.

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 determine if there has been an increase and the extent of the increase in the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who have achieved or maintained earnings equivalent to their state's average weekly wage, as indicated in Objective 1.2. "State average weekly wages" are an indication of whether VR participants are gaining or maintaining employment that is not only competitive with their nondisabled peers but is also reflective of average wage levels in each state and territory.

Another way to measure whether individuals with significant disabilities are achieving economic self-sufficiency is to monitor the percentage of individuals who work 35 hours

or more per week in competitive employment in the integrated labor market, as indicated in Objective 1.3. Progress could be tracked by monitoring the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities achieving this level of full-time competitive employment on an annual basis across a multiyear time frame, with the 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 such that VR participants who were not employed at intake gain employment after receiving VR services, as indicated in Objective 1.4. 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 an individual continues to be eligible for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI). The SGA levels for 2008 are \$940 a month, and \$1,570 a month for individuals who are blind. These amounts are 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 1.5, 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 equal to or greater than the SGA standard at closure on an annual basis. Because different SGA levels are established for individuals who are blind versus for those with other significant disabilities, achievement of SGA levels should be tracked separately for VR participants for whom blindness is the primary disability and for those with other significant disabilities.

Objective 1.1: Increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieve an employment outcome with earnings after receiving services under an IPE

1.1 Measure: Of all individuals with significant disabilities who exited the VR program after receiving services, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome with earnings.

1.1 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISDs who achieved an employment outcome with earnings}}{\text{all ISDs who exited the VR program after receiving services}}$$

Objective 1.2: Increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved earnings equal to the state average weekly wage

1.2 Measure: Of all individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved earnings equal to or greater than the state average weekly wage.

1.2 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISDs who achieved earnings equal to or greater than the state average weekly wage}}{\text{all ISDs who achieved an employment outcome}}$$

Objective 1.3: Increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who worked 35 hours or more per week in a competitive employment outcome

1.3 Measure: Of all individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who worked 35 hours or more per week in a competitive employment outcome.

1.3 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISDs who worked 35 hours or more per week in a competitive employment outcome}}{\text{all ISDs who achieved an employment outcome}}$$

Objective 1.4: Increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who were not employed at application who achieved an employment outcome with earnings

1.4 Measure: Of all individuals with significant disabilities who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE and who were not employed at application, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome with earnings.

1.4 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISDs not employed at application who achieved an employment outcome with earnings}}{\text{all ISDs who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE and who were not employed at application}}$$

Objective 1.5: Increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities whose income from employment is equal to or greater than the substantial gainful activity (SGA) level at closure

1.5 Measure: Of all individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities whose income from employment was equal to or greater than SGA level at closure.

1.5 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISDs whose income from employment was equal to or greater than SGA level at closure}}{\text{all ISDs who achieved an employment outcome}}$$

GOAL 2: ASSIST INDIVIDUALS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES WHO RECEIVE PUBLIC SUPPORT AT APPLICATION TO INCREASE EARNINGS THROUGH EMPLOYMENT.

Goal 1 and Goal 2 are meant to be complementary, representing significant portions of the population receiving VR services but with somewhat different needs. Depending upon timing, some individuals may move between the two goals based upon their individual circumstances. Some individuals with significant disabilities may need to work and may be receiving support from public sources at application. Some individuals may be unable to work more hours in order to increase their financial self-sufficiency because of the nature of their disability or their circumstances. Unlike the majority of the target population addressed in Goal 1, the Goal 2 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 the outcome to be 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 provided by 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. For the purposes of this plan, “public support” is defined as “financial support or services received from SSI, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), General Assistance (state or local government), SSDI, Medicaid, and workers compensation.” Ideally, if VR participants increased 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 up to the maximum feasible for each individual, as indicated in Objective 2.1, is another way for individuals with significant disabilities to increase their earnings. 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 are able to work only 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.

DRAFT MEASURES OF GOAL 2 OBJECTIVES

Goal 2 focuses on individuals who receive public support at application and seeks to monitor whether this population achieves additional hours and earnings from paid work. In order to measure progress on Goal 2, RSA will work with state agencies to measure whether overall hours, mean hours worked per individual, and median hours worked are increasing. RSA will also measure earnings from such work overall, as well as the mean and median earnings from work. RSA will monitor public support at closure for individuals who received public support at application to see if such support is decreasing, as might be expected if participation in work and earnings are increasing. In addition, RSA will monitor the percentage of individuals who are no longer receiving public support at closure. Measuring both the median and mean number of hours worked, earnings, and cash payments from public sources will help determine if these measures are being influenced by individuals whose hours of work, earnings, or levels of cash payments are far above or far below the mean levels. As with Goal 1, RSA will monitor performance by agency, using each agency's prior performance to monitor annual progress.

RSA will determine which sources of public support should be measured to monitor results related to Objective 2.3. RSA will work with other federal agencies to collect and monitor such data. For example, RSA intends to work with the Social Security Administration using an existing data link to examine data on employment earnings and disability income cash payments. In addition, RSA will work with state agencies to identify valid and reliable sources of public support data.

Objective 2.1: Increase the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities receiving public support at application who achieve an employment outcome with earnings

2.1 Measure: Of all individuals with significant disabilities who exited the VR program after receiving services and who were receiving public support at application, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome with earnings.

2.1 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISDs receiving public support at application who achieved an employment outcome with earnings}}{\text{all ISDs who exited the VR program after receiving services who received public support at application}}$$

Objective 2.2: Increase participation in paid work for individuals with significant disabilities who received public support at application

2.2 Measures:

1. The number of individuals with significant disabilities receiving public support at application who achieved an employment outcome with earnings and increased the number of hours worked per week.
2. The total, mean, and median hours worked of individuals with significant disabilities who received public support at application.
3. Of all individuals with significant disabilities receiving public support at application who exited the VR program after receiving services, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome with earnings and who increased the number of hours worked per week.

2.2.3 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{ISD receiving public support at application who achieved an employment outcome with earnings and who increased the number of hours worked per week}}{\text{all ISDs receiving public support at application who exited the VR program after receiving services}}$$

Objective 2.3: Increase earnings from paid work for individuals with significant disabilities who received public support at application

2.3 Measures:

1. The total, mean, and median earnings from work for individuals with significant disabilities who receive public support at application.
2. Of all individuals with significant disabilities receiving public support at application who exited the VR program after receiving services, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities who achieved an employment outcome and who increased their weekly earnings.

2.3.2 Calculation:

ISDs receiving public support at application
who achieved an employment outcome and who increased their weekly earnings
all ISDs receiving public support at application who exited the VR program after
receiving services

Objective 2.4: Decrease the amount of cash payments from public sources for individuals with significant disabilities who receive public support at application

2.4 Measures:

1. The total, mean, and median cash payments from public sources for individuals with significant disabilities who received public support at application.
2. Of all individuals with significant disabilities receiving cash payments at application who exited the VR program with an employment outcome, the percentage of individuals with significant disabilities whose cash payment decreased after achieving an employment outcome.

2.4.2 Calculation:

ISDs receiving cash payments at application
who achieved an employment outcome and whose cash payment decreased
all ISDs receiving cash payments at application who exited the VR program with an
employment outcome

GOAL 3: PROVIDE TRANSITION-AGE YOUTHS WITH SERVICES TO PREPARE FOR AND OBTAIN EMPLOYMENT.

Consistent with the mandates of the *Rehabilitation Act*, RSA seeks to emphasize preparing transition-age youths for employment and with 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 ages 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 have 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 addresses 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. Objective 3.1 focuses on all transition-age youths with disabilities, not just on those with significant disabilities. By emphasizing access to vocational rehabilitation services, Objective 3.1 will ensure that youths with disabilities, regardless of the nature or extent of their disability, will be able to participate in vocational rehabilitation services, including services to ensure their disabilities are correctly classified so they can receive services.

Objective 3.2 focuses on increasing the percentage of transition-age youths with disabilities who achieve competitive employment after participating in vocational rehabilitation services. As with the adult vocational rehabilitation service participants who are the focus of Objective 1.3, the intent is to ensure that transition-age youths are prepared to compete in the integrated labor market. Progress could be tracked by monitoring the percentage of transition-age youths with significant disabilities achieving

competitive employment on an annual basis across a multiyear time frame, with an expectation that the percentage will increase over time.

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 in monitoring the performance of programs on providing 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 the 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 they may be subject to more employment turnover early in their careers.

While Goal 3 focuses on all eligible transition-age youths with disabilities, RSA and state agencies will continue to monitor the progress of the subpopulation of transition-age youths with significant disabilities.

DRAFT MEASURES OF GOAL 3 OBJECTIVES

As with other populations, increasing the rehabilitation rate for transition-age youths is critical. In theory, transition-age youths who receive services early in their work careers stand a better chance of staying employed in their later years. Thus, Objective 3.1 will measure the rehabilitation rate for transition-age youths.

Participation in the VR program is critical for this population. RSA will monitor the number and percentage of transition-age youths who receive services under an Individual Education Plan and an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE).

Measurement of progress on Objective 3.3 will be similar to those for Objective 1.3. RSA and the state agencies will monitor annual increases (or decreases) in the percentage of transition-age youths who achieve competitive employment at closure. Since it may take longer for transition-age youths to achieve closure, given that their IPEs may include more extensive education components than those of their adult counterparts, seeing progress on this measure may take some time. However, by emphasizing the importance of competitive employment for this critical population, RSA expects that over time there will be incremental progress towards increasing the percentage of transition-age youths who achieve competitive employment.

The Department of Education has set a priority to serve students with disabilities who have IEPs. Thus, Objective 3.4 proposes to increase the percentage of transition-age students with IEPs who receive vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE.

Objective 3.1: Increase the percentage of transition-age youths who receive services under an IPE and who achieve an employment outcome with earnings.

3.1 Measures:

1. The number of transition-age youths who achieved an employment outcome with earnings after receiving services under an IPE.
2. Of all of transition-age youths who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE, the percentage of transition-age youths who achieved an employment outcome with earnings.

3.1.2 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{TAYs who achieved an employment outcome with earnings}}{\text{all of TAYs who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE}}$$

Objective 3.2: Increase the percentage of transition-age youths with disabilities who receive vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE.

3.2 Measures:

1. The number of transition-age youths who exit the VR program after receiving vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE.
2. Of all persons who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE, the percentage of transition-age youths who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE.

3.2.2 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{TAYs who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE}}{\text{all persons who exited the VR program after receiving services under an IPE}}$$

Objective 3.3: Increase the percentage of transition-age youths with disabilities who achieve a competitive employment outcome after receiving vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE.

3.3 Measures:

1. The number of transition-age youths who received services under and IPE and who achieved a competitive employment outcome.
2. Of all transition-age youths who received services under an IPE, the percentage of transition-age youths who achieved a competitive employment outcome.

3.3.2 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{TAYs who achieved a competitive employment outcome}}{\text{all TAYs who received services under an IPE}}$$

Objective 3.4: Increase the percentage of transition-age youths receiving special education services under an IEP who receive vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE.

3.4 Measures:

1. The number of transition-age youth receiving special education under an IEP who received vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE.
2. Of all transition-age special education students, the percentage of transition-age special education students who received vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE and special education services under an IEP.

3.4.2 Calculation:

$$\frac{\text{transition-age special education students who received vocational rehabilitation services under an IPE}}{\text{all transition-age special education students}}$$

NEXT STEPS

RSA will develop and share draft measures with partners and stakeholders that will measure progress towards achievement of the goals and objectives identified in this draft VR Strategic Performance Plan. Once the measures are finalized, RSA will examine the performance of each state VR agency and conduct analysis to determine appropriate targets given agency size, consumer characteristics, funding contingencies and other factors. RSA will continue to work with state agencies in determining appropriate targets for performance that are sensitive to conditions in the state, and conduct additional analysis to determine realistic steps that could be taken to improve performance or maintain high levels of performance.