

Highlights of Fiscal Years 1998 and 1999

During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, RSA undertook and participated in a number of activities that contributed to program change and improvement. This section of the report highlights and summarizes those activities in the following important areas.

Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act

With passage of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), the Rehabilitation Act was reauthorized for another five years. The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998 (1998 Amendments), contained in Title IV of WIA, streamline administrative procedures and expand consumer choice. They link the State VR Services Program to the workforce development systems of the various states and increase opportunities for high-quality employment for individuals with disabilities.

Building the Federal Employment Framework

Many activities initiated by RSA in fiscal years 1998 and 1999 were designed to link the Act to two important pieces of legislation: WIA and the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act (TWWIIA). While WIA coordinates employment and training programs in a unified statewide workforce investment system, TWWIIA is designed to provide individuals with disabilities health care and employment preparation and placement services to reduce their dependence on cash benefits. This is accomplished through the provision of Medicaid coverage needed to maintain employment, the option of maintaining Medicare coverage while working and return-to-work tickets allowing them access to services needed to obtain and retain employment.

Focusing on Results

During the two-year reporting period, RSA increased its efforts to establish methods and processes for collecting and analyzing information that captures the extent to which program objectives are being achieved, helps define priorities and provides focus for the future.

Improving Program Outcomes

Efforts to collect and analyze program performance information and to use that information to direct and shape program priorities are paying off. During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, the State VR Services Program increased employment outcomes, including employment outcomes of individuals with significant disabilities, and increased Social Security Administration (SSA) reimbursement to the public VR system.

Celebrating Innovation in the VR System

During the same two years, RSA sponsored or was directly involved in a number of projects designed to foster innovation. Projects highlighted include dissemination of best practices, collaboration and partnering, use of technology and the introduction of methods for measuring performance in the public VR system.

A more detailed discussion of progress made in each of these important areas during the two-year reporting period follows.

Reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act

The 1998 Amendments to the Act are the product of collaborative efforts between the legislative and executive branches of the federal government and the input of various constituencies, including individuals with disabilities, advocacy organizations and providers of services. The 1998 Amendments place particular emphasis on increasing opportunities for high-quality employment outcomes, link the VR program to a statewide workforce investment system, enhance the exercise of informed choice, streamline administrative procedures, establish provisions for presumptive eligibility and expand options for due process. Highlights in each of these important areas are provided below.

High-Quality Employment Outcomes

The 1998 Amendments to the Act emphasize high-quality employment, including competitive employment, and services to individuals with the most significant disabilities.

Through regulations issued by the agency, competitive employment is defined as employment in the competitive labor market that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis in an integrated setting. In a competitive employment setting, an individual with a disability is compensated at or above the minimum wage, but not less than the customary wage and level of benefits paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals who are not disabled.

To support the emphasis of high-quality employment, the 1998 Amendments authorize state VR agencies to provide technical assistance and other consultation services to assist eligible individuals who choose to pursue telecommuting, self-employment and small business operations.

To implement the emphasis on the attainment of high-quality employment outcomes, RSA planned to publish regulations to ensure that this statutory intent is translated into effective VR policies and practices.

The 1998 Amendments to the Act

- Increase the focus on high-quality employment outcomes and services to individuals with significant disabilities
- Participation of state VR agencies as one-stop partners under the Workforce Investment Act
- Strengthen the roles and participation of eligible individuals in developing their plans for employment
- Simplify procedures for determining eligibility by establishing presumptive eligibility for SSI recipients and SSDI beneficiaries
- Streamline state plan requirements by reducing them from 36 to 24
- Add voluntary mediation as an option for resolving disputes

Linking VR to a Statewide Workforce Investment System

The 1998 Amendments include numerous provisions that link the Act with WIA. Linking VR programs under the Act to a state's workforce investment system coordinates employment and training programs in a unified statewide system designed to help a greater number of people prepare for and maintain gainful employment. The intent is to establish a seamless delivery network through partnerships among the agencies, organizations and institutions focused on employment in the state.

Key to this collaboration is the provision of services through the one-stop service delivery model created under WIA. To respond to this provision in the 1998 Amendments, state VR agencies will participate as partners in the one-stop model through the establishment of cooperative agreements with other training and employment-focused agencies in the state.

Expanding Informed Choice

Disability, according to the Act, does not diminish the rights of individuals with disabilities to review their options and make choices about services and employment. The 1998 Amendments expand the informed choice provisions of the Act in several ways.

The provisions stipulate that individuals with disabilities are to be active and full partners in the rehabilitation process with respect to assessments for determining eligibility and VR needs, and in the selection of employment goals, services and service providers. To comply with the informed choice provisions of the 1998 Amendments, state VR agencies, in consultation with their State Rehabilitation Councils are required to develop and implement policies to ensure both applicants for services and eligible individuals have every opportunity to exercise informed choice throughout the entire rehabilitation process. These policies should include the provision of information and the necessary support services to assist applicants and eligible individuals in making informed choices.

An important provision in the 1998 Amendments is designed to ensure that individuals with disabilities take an active part in making informed choices about their future.

The 1998 Amendments also rename the Individualized Written Rehabilitation Program the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), and expand the role of the eligible individual in the development, monitoring, implementation and evaluation of that Plan. Eligible individuals or their representatives now have the option of developing their own IPEs, or requesting technical assistance in the development of their IPEs with respect to the selection of employment goals, services, service providers and procurement methods. In addition, eligible individuals still have the option to develop their IPE jointly with a qualified VR counselor.

Establishing Provisions for Presumptive Eligibility

The 1998 Amendments include a provision that will make it easier for disabled SSA beneficiaries to access VR services. Under the 1998 Amendments, individuals with disabilities who are receiving benefits from the SSA are presumed to be eligible for VR services, as long as they intend to pursue an employment outcome, since they have already gone through a stringent eligibility-determination process for Social Security benefits.

Under presumptive eligibility, an individual who is receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits is presumed eligible unless it can be demonstrated by clear and convincing evidence that the individual cannot benefit from services in terms of an employment outcome due to the severity of the individual's disability. Presumptive eligibility both speeds up and simplifies eligibility determination for these individuals.

Streamlining Administrative Procedures

The 1998 Amendments streamline the Title I state plan provisions by reducing the number of state plan requirements from 36 to 24 and by limiting the circumstances in which a new state plan, or an amendment to the plan, must be submitted to RSA. The intent behind steps to eliminate unnecessary administrative requirements and to streamline the administration of the State VR Services Program is to increase access to VR services for individuals with disabilities. The 1998 Amendments also establish the foundation for the participation of state VR agencies, as WIA partners, in the development of unified state plans.

Streamlining administrative procedures is intended to save monetary and personnel resources that state VR agencies can then use to provide services such as vocational exploration, job training and other employment-related services.

Expanding Options for Due Process

The 1998 Amendments expand the options available to resolve disputes between an individual with a disability and the state VR agency by authorizing mediation as a voluntary step before proceeding to a formal due process hearing. The appeal process may be handled by using one or a combination of three available procedures:

Informal procedure, where applicants, eligible individuals or their representatives settle issues and concerns with the state VR agency through informal means, such as negotiation.

Mediation, where individuals or their representatives and the state agency voluntarily agree to work with a neutral third party to reach agreement.

Formal hearing, during which an impartial hearing officer hears the facts of the case and makes a decision based on provisions in federal and state laws, regulations and policies.

Building the Federal Employment Framework

During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, RSA participated in many collaborative activities with other federal agencies that led to the creation of two major pieces of legislation, WIA and TWWIIA. The agency's focus was on establishing strong ties between the VR program and the program activities to be carried out by both WIA and the TWWIIA. Administered by the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and SSA, respectively, both legislative initiatives focus on increasing access to job training and employment and breaking down traditional institutional barriers among federal agencies addressing similar national employment issues and concerns.

The Workforce Investment Act

Under WIA, employment and training programs are coordinated in a unified statewide workforce investment system. This one-stop system, as it is called, creates opportunities at the state and local levels for partner programs, such as the state VR program, to provide core services and to coordinate common functions. The local area one-stop centers will develop with a great deal of autonomy and flexibility and, therefore, may create an infinite variety of specific requests for partner program participation.

The early phase of WIA implementation was characterized by significant efforts on the part of RSA to collaborate with new federal partners at DOL and to provide technical assistance to state VR agencies regarding their new roles and responsibilities. State VR agencies, in turn, signed cooperative agreements with other components of the statewide workforce investment system in order to provide training and technical assistance on the availability and benefits of VR services, and to promote the equal, effective and meaningful participation of individuals with disabilities in the workforce activities of the state. At the local level, VR agencies worked with other mandatory partners in the one-stop system by implementing Memoranda of Understanding with state-level partners. In addition to participating in developmental activities as a partner, RSA made efforts to educate the state and local Workforce Investment Boards and other partners about the requirements of the Act and appropriate ways in which state VR agencies might participate in one-stop activities.

Although WIA is still in the formative stages, it is clear that RSA and the state VR agencies have made a significant impact on the new workforce development system by making the mandatory partners aware of the specific responsibilities of the VR program and its services. State VR agency staff members are recognized as the primary experts on issues pertaining to the rehabilitation and employment of individuals with disabilities.

1998-1999 Efforts to Improve One-Stop Performance

- RSA and OSERS leadership participated in a federal interagency workgroup to promote the one-stop system and to proactively address systematic barriers to full implementation of WIA
- As part of this interagency effort, the OSERS Assistant Secretary and RSA Commissioner visited several one-stop centers around the country to demonstrate the administration's support for the one-stop system
- Formal agreement signed by leadership of OSERS and Employment and Training Administration (ETA) committing the two federal agencies to work together
- RSA-ETA Interagency workgroup established to foster a productive partnership between the two systems; second RSA-ETA workgroup established to troubleshoot and solve issues that arise during the implementation of WIA
- State VR Directors and leads for state one-stop system collaborated to ensure access to one-stop centers by individuals with disabilities
- Burgeoning recognition on the part of the one-stop system partners of the importance of including state VR agency staff members and individuals with disabilities in workgroups to plan and design the one-stop centers in order to ensure full accessibility
- Workgroup with state VR Directors established to address implementation issues related to the passage of WIA
- RSA and ETA jointly funded more than \$2 million in national systems change grants
- Participated in 1998 and 1999 ETA Joint Employment and Training Technology Conferences (JETT*CON) to highlight role of VR and improve accessibility in the one-stop system
- RSA presented pre-conference sessions and workshops at the JETT*CON that resulted in an improved understanding of the role of the VR program in the one-stop system
- Developed monitoring guidance for assessing state VR progress in implementing WIA requirements and for providing technical assistance to assist in resolving compliance problems
- Disseminated training modules on WIA, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended; and the role of VR in the Workforce Investment Environment
- Participated with other federal WIA partners in a workgroup to develop unified state plan guidance

The Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act

During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, RSA participated in a series of discussions and forums leading to the creation of TWWIIA. This important legislation was ultimately passed in December 1999, subsequent to the reporting period covered by this report. The intent of TWWIIA is to provide individuals with disabilities health care and employment preparation and placement services to reduce their dependency on cash benefits; Medicaid coverage (through incentives to states to allow them to purchase it) needed to maintain employment; the option of maintaining Medicare coverage while working; and return to work tickets allowing them access to services needed to obtain and retain employment and reduce dependence on cash benefits.

The legislation includes a Ticket-to-Work program, which will enable SSDI beneficiaries and SSI recipients to obtain VR and employment services from their choice of participating public or private providers. Nationally, according to the U.S. General Accounting Office, there are about 2.3 million individuals with disabilities receiving SSI and SSDI who will get a ticket under TWWIIA.

Once the new law is passed, state VR agencies will have the option of participating in the Ticket-to-Work program as an employment network or remaining in the current reimbursement system. Services provided by state VR agencies participating in the program will continue to be governed by state plans for the delivery of VR services under Title I of the Act. The providers will be paid on an outcome or milestone basis linked to the employment of the beneficiary and the beneficiary's ongoing success.

The Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have helped to create a societal expectation that individuals with disabilities can and should have the opportunity to work. Once its provisions are implemented, TWWIIA will provide the health care support essential to individuals with disabilities who want to work.

Focusing on Results

During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, RSA increased attention on ensuring that programs yield high-quality outcomes and results. To that end, the agency expanded efforts to collect and analyze information that captures the extent to which program objectives are being achieved. The intent is to use that information to define future priorities and areas of focus.

In this portion of the report, several efforts are highlighted including: funding of an ongoing, long-term Longitudinal Study that provides comprehensive information on the VR program; development of standards and indicators to drive state VR program consistency and accountability; and establishment of methods for collecting and reporting information required under the Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA).

Through the Longitudinal Study and implementation of the standards and indicators, RSA laid the foundation for collecting results-oriented data to allow managers to better assess program accomplishments. In addition to those efforts, GPRA requirements, as they will be implemented in fiscal year 2000, set the stage for holding RSA program managers accountable for achieving program results. Through GPRA, program managers are clarifying their missions, setting program goals and measuring performance toward achieving those goals.

Longitudinal Study Provides Comprehensive Information on VR Programs Under the Act

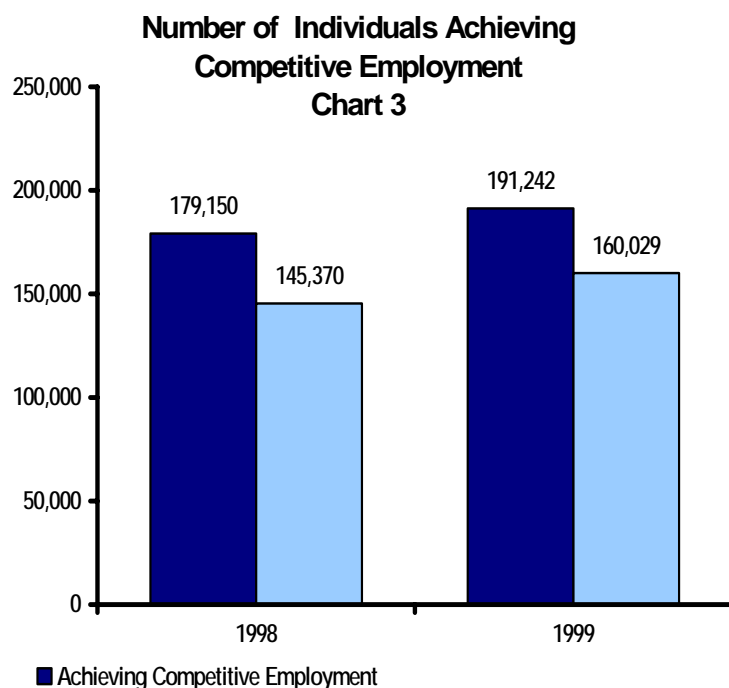
The Longitudinal Study tracks more than 8,000 VR consumers at 37 locations. It provides comprehensive information on VR programs under the Act, including types of persons served, resources available, costs, services provided and short- and long-term outcomes. In 1998 and 1999, RSA expanded the original scope of the three-year Longitudinal Study to allow for two additional years of follow-up.

Longitudinal Study findings emerging during the fiscal year 1998 and 1999 reporting period show that competitively employed individuals with disabilities with more than a high school education average 44 percent higher earnings than individuals not completing high school. The Longitudinal Study also shows that reading and math achievement levels are strongly correlated with the amount earned. Those competitively employed workers with disabilities who read less than the fourth grade level barely earn the federal minimum wage, while those who read above the twelfth grade level had 36 percent more in earnings than the poor readers.

The disparity between earnings and math achievement levels is even more dramatic. Those individuals with disabilities with math achievement levels above the twelfth grade level earn an average hourly wage that is 50 percent greater than those individuals with disabilities with math achievement levels at less than fourth grade.

In addition to correlating academic achievement to higher earnings, the Longitudinal Study also shows that higher paying jobs are more likely to offer health benefits. While only 35 percent of employed individuals with disabilities earning between \$5.00 and \$7.00 per hour received health benefits, 65 percent of individuals who earned more than \$11.00 per hour also received health benefits.

As the level of education rises, so does workforce participation. This is true for individuals with and without a disability. However, labor force participation increases much more slowly for people with work disabilities than for those without.



As shown here on Chart 1, the U.S. Census Bureau found in the 1998 CPS Survey (Table 298) that among the disabled population, 25 to 64 years of age, only 16 percent of those individuals with less than 12 years of education were in the labor force. Labor force participation rises to slightly more than 27 percent for those individuals who completed 12 years of school, increases again to nearly 41 percent for those with 13 to 15 years of education, and reaches more than 50 percent for individuals with 16 or more years of education.

Individuals with disabilities must be encouraged to seek high-quality employment, not simply stereotypic jobs or the most readily available jobs (e.g., entry-level and low paying jobs in the service industry). For these individuals to prepare for high-quality employment, they must have basic reading and math skills to be able to pursue advanced training.

Toward that goal, RSA will continue to support policy and programs that assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining the reading and math skills necessary to pursue advanced academic or technical training. In addition, the VR program will assist those individuals who are underemployed to acquire the additional skills or education they need to achieve true social and economic integration.

The Longitudinal Study findings will be used now and in the future to examine the success of VR programs under the Act in providing necessary services and assisting individuals with disabilities, including individuals with significant disabilities, to achieve gainful and sustainable improvements in employment, earnings, independence and quality of life.

The Research Triangle Institute (RTI), to which the Department of Education awarded the contract for conducting the Longitudinal Study in 1992, produced the **Third Interim Report** on consumer outcomes in 1998, and will produce a **Fourth Interim Report** on transitioning youth and a special sub-study on **Supported Employment** in 2000. RTI will issue a **Final Report** in 2002.

Longitudinal Study Highlights

According to the Third Interim Report of the Longitudinal Study:

- 42 percent of individuals who received VR services thought services were excellent
- 33 percent rated VR services as good
- 78 percent work in professional, managerial, technical, clerical, sales or service jobs
- 84 percent were still working one year after leaving the public VR program
- 78 percent were still working three years later
- 67 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs
- 67 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the opportunity for advancement with their jobs
- 61 percent of graduates were satisfied with fringe benefits provided through their jobs

Other highlights of that report include:

- Increase in weekly earnings of consumers achieving employment outcomes over the time of the study
- Increase in percentage of consumers who cited earnings from their job as their primary source of support

Relying on Performance Measurement Data To Make Decisions

RSA has continued to collect program data and use that data to hold state VR agencies and other grantees accountable for their performance. During the two-year reporting period covered by this report, RSA developed preliminary Title I program evaluation standards and performance indicators to measure state VR agency performance. The Title I standards and indicators are considered a crucial part of a comprehensive, integrated system of accountability for the State VR Services Program. They focus on employment outcomes and equal access to services and are designed to drive program consistency, focus and accountability at the state and local level.

The 1998 Amendments require state VR agencies to use the standards and indicators as a basis for developing goals and priorities. RSA monitoring will measure state VR agency performance to determine whether a state is complying with the standards and indicators. Results will be presented in future issues of this report.

In developing the standards and indicators, RSA consulted with the rehabilitation community, published a Notice of Intent to Regulate, held a public meeting and published a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking inviting public comments. The standards and indicators were published for comment in the Federal Register in June of 1999.

RSA's effort to develop and implement standards and indicators was further prompted by the passage of GPRA. While the standards and indicators measure performance at the state VR agency level, GPRA indicators measure the aggregate performance of all state VR agencies.

The various programs administered by RSA under the Act are at different stages of implementation of GPRA. Some programs are still gathering preliminary information by which to establish program goals and measures - other programs have already developed standards and indicators to be used in assessing program outcomes and results. Still other programs are using outside contractors to assist in the effort to develop appropriate measures and better monitor what is happening in the field.

Improving Program Outcomes

During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, VR programs under the Act achieved higher quality employment outcomes and increased overall SSA reimbursement to states. Highlights of program outcomes in these two important areas demonstrate the success of the VR system in placing individuals with disabilities, including individuals with significant disabilities, into productive jobs that provide both economic and personal independence. Today more individuals with disabilities are in the workplace earning competitive wages than ever before.

Higher Quality Employment Outcomes

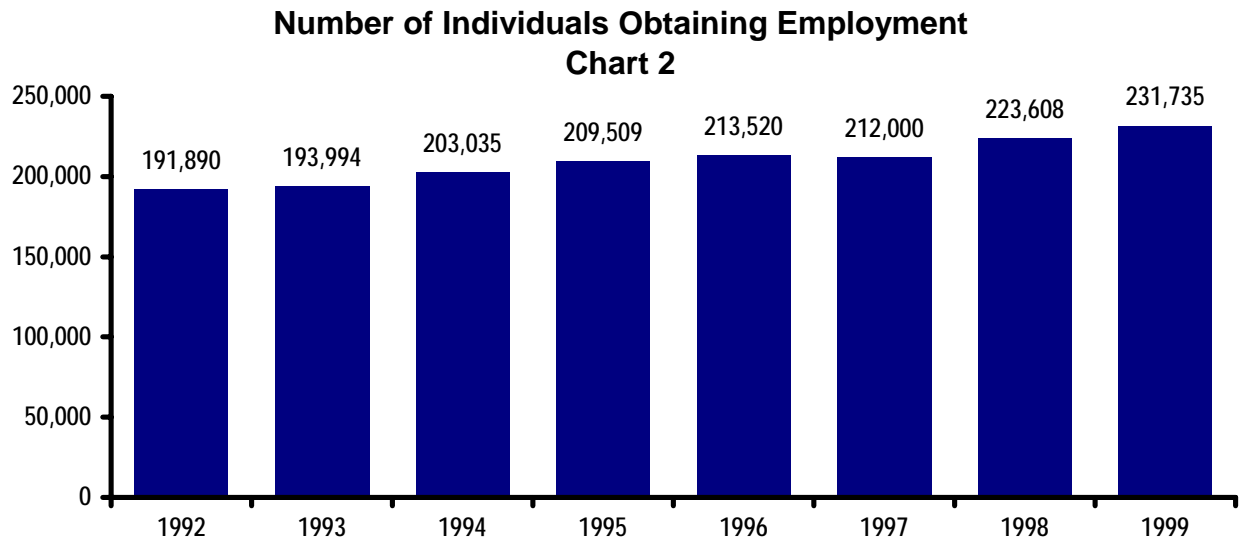
The VR program is ultimately about employment. But the program is not only about getting jobs. It is about helping individuals with disabilities get jobs they find satisfying—jobs that anyone in society would be glad to have. The 1998 Amendments describe this concept in terms of employment outcomes consistent with an individual's strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests and informed choice—in other words, jobs that individuals with disabilities want, value and can carry out.

The VR programs carried out under the Act are committed to assisting each consumer to achieve the best outcome possible. To that end, RSA has continued to emphasize high-quality employment outcomes and increased services to individuals with significant disabilities. Through guidance and regulation, RSA provides leadership and focus for state VR programs in these two important areas. Efforts have already begun to pay off.

Success in the rehabilitation of individuals with significant disabilities is reflected in data from the Quarterly Cumulative Caseload Report (RSA 113 Report) provided in Table 1 on the following page. The number of individuals with significant disabilities who gained employment after receiving at least one VR service and leaving the State VR Services Program increased each year since 1995. In that year, individuals with significant disabilities who got jobs represented 76 percent of all individuals with disabilities who got jobs after receiving VR services. By 1999, nearly 85 percent of individuals who got jobs after receiving VR services were individuals with significant disabilities.

Individuals Obtaining Employment After Exiting VR Table Table 1			
Fiscal Year	Individuals With Significant Disabilities	Individuals Without Significant Disabilities	Percent with Significant Disabilities
1995	159,138	50,371	76.0
1996	165,686	47,834	77.6
1997	168,422	43,093	79.6
1998	184,651	38,957	82.6
1999	196,832	34,903	84.9

Using data collected in the RSA 113 Report, Chart 2 below shows the number of individuals who achieved employment through the State VR Services Program from 1992 to 1999. As the data indicate, the number of individuals with disabilities placed in jobs rose each year from 191,890 in 1992 to 231,735 in fiscal year 1999.



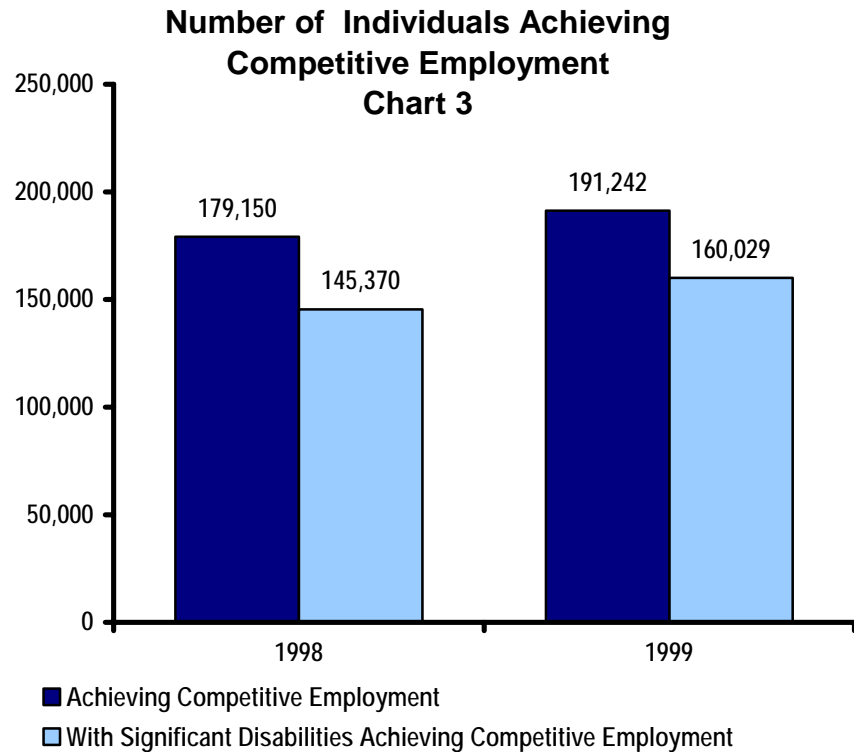
In addition, since 1992, the State VR Services Program realized an increase in competitive employment outcomes. Through regulation issued by the agency, competitive employment is defined as employment in the competitive labor market that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis in an integrated setting. In a competitive employment environment, an individual with a disability is compensated at or above the minimum wage, but not less than the customary wage and level of benefits paid by the employer for the same or similar work performed by individuals who are not disabled.

As Chart 3 shows, data obtained from the Case Service Report (RSA 911 Report) indicates that competitive employment outcomes increased from 1998 to 1999, including competitive employment outcomes of those individuals with significant disabilities.

To accomplish those and other outcomes, during fiscal years 1998 and 1999, VR programs under the Act made significant investments in the vocational rehabilitation of individuals with disabilities.

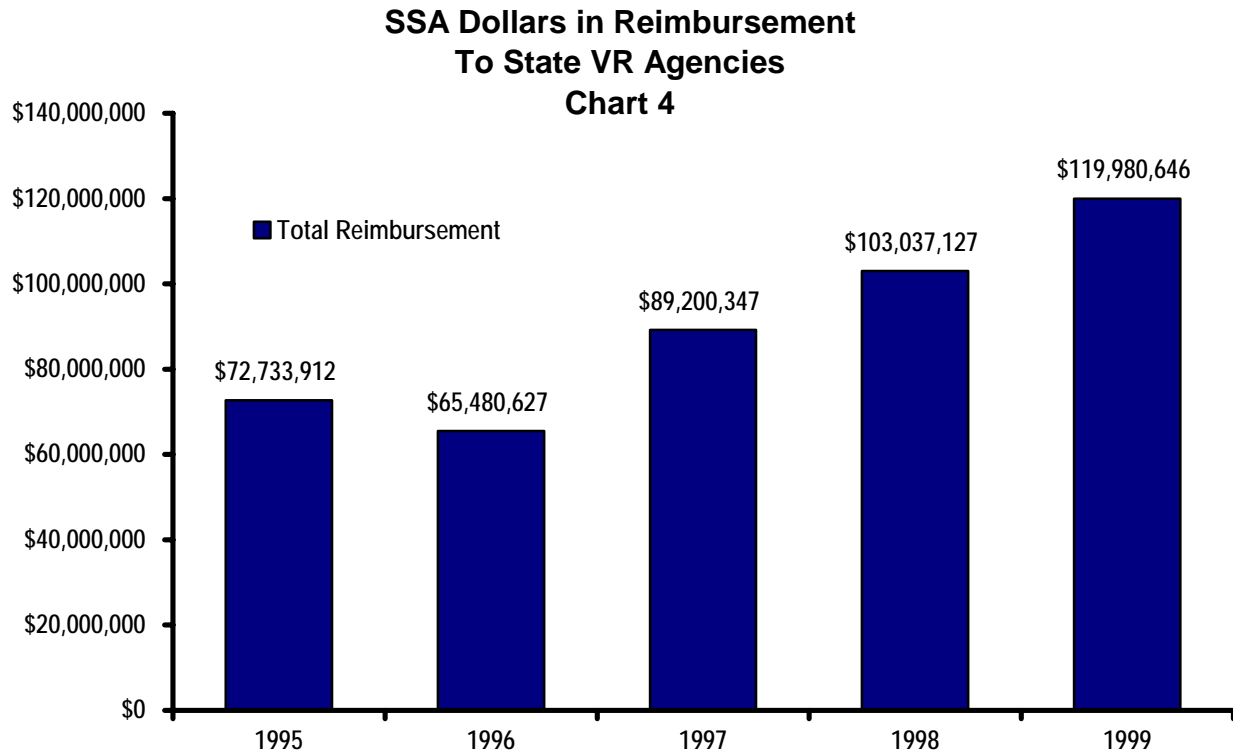
State and federal expenditures for administration combined totaled \$324,106,009 in fiscal year 1998. Another \$186,762,453 was spent on eligibility needs assessment; \$986,266,713 in counseling and guidance; and \$1,609,743,802 in purchased services. In fiscal year 1999, administration totaled \$330,828,212. Another \$183,708,089 was spent on eligibility needs assessment; \$998,251,133 in counseling and guidance; and \$1,663,620,218 in purchased services.

A more detailed, state-by-state breakdown of VR costs for fiscal years 1998 and 1999 is available by calling the Basic State Grants Branch at (202) 245-7488, or through the RSA website at: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/RSA>.



Increase in Reimbursement from SSA

As is indicated in Chart 4, reimbursement dollars paid by SSA for providing services to a growing number of SSDI beneficiaries and SSI recipients increased significantly during fiscal years 1998 and 1999, a trend that began in 1997.



The source of the information in Chart 4 is SSA's Vocational Rehabilitation Reimbursement Management System (VRRMS). The VRRMS is an automated claims control, cost reimbursement payment and management information system. The system controls and processes all claims for cost reimbursement submitted by state vocational rehabilitation agencies and private service providers for their costs incurred in providing services to SSA beneficiaries with disabilities that have enabled those individuals to return to gainful employment.

Funds reimbursed to state VR agencies represent program income, which can be used to enhance programs and services. These funds now represent almost five percent of the total case service dollars available.

Celebrating Innovation in The VR Program

During fiscal years 1998 and 1999, RSA sponsored or was directly involved in a wide variety of projects and activities designed to foster collaboration, partnering and innovation through the dissemination of effective practices, the use of technology and the introduction of methods for measuring performance in the VR program. A number of those projects and activities are highlighted in more detail below.

Sharing Information and Practices

In fiscal year 1998, RSA held, in conjunction with the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), its biannual National Employment Conference. The three-day event, titled "Building Effective Relationships With Employers," took place in Washington, DC and brought together over 800 rehabilitation professionals from across the country.

Workshop planners designed sessions for presentation through a nomination process which led to the selection of five theme areas: labor market trends; effective working relationships; marketing strategies and sales training for VR; technology and employment; and self-employment opportunities. Conference sessions produced a variety of strategies for delivering services to different consumer populations from the community of people with disabilities. The conference also provided an excellent forum for networking and sharing ideas on effective practices. On conference evaluation feedback forms, a majority of participants characterized the conference as relevant, timely and an excellent source of practical information.

A Collaborative Approach to Employer Outreach

RSA is funding a two-year employer outreach project through the National VR Technical Assistance Center to foster collaboration and partnership building among twelve state VR agencies in Region IV. The regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program at the University of Tennessee, the Region IV Employment Partner's Team and the Program for Rehabilitation Leadership at Georgia State University also participate in the effort.

Products of the effort include: a regional outreach plan to assist in building effective employer relationships, a guide on how to approach business, audio and video-tapes to help build partnerships, training materials on forging business relationships and a website of other pertinent information.

The target date for the completion of the project is the spring of 2002.

Measuring Performance at a State VR Agency

Also funded through the National VR Technical Assistance Center is a three-year project with the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The project is designed to foster program improvement through the introduction of innovative approaches to strategic planning, annual program planning, performance measurement and evaluation and the use of technology.

Now nearing its final year of completion, the state VR agency has successfully institutionalized a tiered planning process and developed planning documents in three critical areas: a five-year Strategic Plan, Annual Program Performance Plans in each primary program area and Unit Operating Plans that allow for differences in labor market and population. Two complete cycles of quarterly meetings have been conducted to report on progress at each of the three levels and to make decisions regarding priorities and the best use of resources.

The project utilizes RSA guidance and regulation, Title I standards and indicators, and feedback from RSA monitoring site visits as the foundation for its VR planning activities. The state agency actively engages in reviewing practices in place in other state VR programs to identify best practices and improve operations.

Improving Employment Outcomes Through the Use of Technology

Also funded through the National Vocational Technical Assistance Center are projects in several states to implement integrated case management and client tracking systems in the State VR Services Program. Currently, many state VR agencies operate mainframe systems which are outdated, expensive to maintain and difficult to use. To provide more effective, efficient and timely service to customers, several state VR agencies have embarked upon a modernization effort. These agencies are upgrading their computer architecture to establish a wide area network to better handle increased network traffic and enhance communication and the use of available technology to serve customers.

Disseminating Innovative Solutions Throughout the VR Community

During its 52 years of operation, the Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI) has been an important resource for developing and disseminating products of great value to VR professionals. The IRI represents a unique partnership between the federal government, state VR agencies and the RSA Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Programs (RRCEPs), and persons served by the state VR agencies. RSA funds the IRI by supplementing the grants to two of the RRCEPs. Over the years, several different RRCEPs have participated as coordinators for the IRI study groups. Currently, the RRCEPs responsible for this task are The George Washington University and the University of Arkansas.

The IRI's primary purposes are to identify and discuss current issues of importance to stakeholders of VR programs; develop materials which can be used by state VR agencies and others concerned about staff development and rehabilitation; and publish and disseminate the materials widely to professionals who provide rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities. The IRI publications are also provided to rehabilitation counselor training programs, disability advocacy groups and other key stakeholders.

The IRI provides an effective forum for addressing concerns raised by VR professionals. The IRI can rapidly form workgroups to address issues and develop solutions. Innovative solutions are then documented in IRI publications and disseminated by the Institute to the rehabilitation community in hard copy documents and through the Internet.

The IRI holds the National IRI Forum each May in Washington, D.C., at which time the two draft IRI documents are discussed by Forum participants with expertise in the subject areas. At this time, the IRI scholars who actually wrote the IRI publications are recognized for their achievements.

Publications Disseminated

In 1998

- Field Service Managers and Supervisors: Strategic Leaders in Achieving Employment Outcomes
- Achieving Successful Employment Outcomes with the Use of Technology
- Developing Self-employment and Small Business Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

In 1999

- Improving Employment Outcomes Through VR Counselors who Meet the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development Requirements
- Improving Rehabilitation Services and Employment Outcomes for Individuals who are Deaf and Low Functioning
- Meeting Future Workforce Needs