

**Statement of Beth Butler**  
**Before the**  
**Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness**  
**Hearing on Vocational Rehabilitation**  
**Thursday, July 26, 2007**

Chairman Hinojosa, Ranking Member Keller and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to be with you today on the 17th Anniversary of the signing of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) to discuss how the programs under the Rehabilitation Act continue to have a positive impact on my life.

My name is Beth Butler and it is my pleasure to be with you today to discuss a program that has assisted me immeasurably in my journey through public education, beginning in elementary school, continuing in middle school, high school, college, law school and now as a contributing member of corporate America as Vice President of Employment Compliance at Wachovia Corporation, where I work as the Disability and Accommodations Consultant.

**ABOUT WACHOVIA**

Wachovia is the fourth largest bank holding company in the United States with 3,400 Financial Centers in 21 States, including Texas, Florida and California. I am proud to be with Wachovia, which was ranked in 2007 among the Nation's "Top 10 Companies for People with Disabilities" by DiversityInc. Magazine.

Wachovia is committed to being an inclusive company where people are treated fairly, recognized for their individuality, promoted based on performance and encouraged to reach their full potential.

Wachovia also remains committed to supporting all individuals with disabilities, including our military servicemen and women as they transition back into the workforce, as well as individuals with disabilities from diverse backgrounds who come to the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program for the excellent supports and services that they receive from qualified rehabilitation counselors and other qualified staff.

As you may know, a National Memorandum of Understanding between VR and the Veterans Administration has facilitated meaningful collaboration between these two entities, benefiting both our returning veterans and their employers. Wachovia's Recruiting Division has created a recruiting strategy to specifically attract military talent and, in 2005, Wachovia received the Secretary of Defense Freedom Award -- the military's highest honor for a civilian employer -- for its support of our National Guard and Reserves. Military Spouse Magazine also recently ranked Wachovia 5th on its list of the Nation's "Top Military Spouse Friendly Employers."

**VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION IS A LIFE-LONG JOURNEY**

My life's journey began in Florida at age four when I was diagnosed with congenital Hypoplasia (underdevelopment) of the Optic Nerve. My doctor challenged my parents early on to treat me no differently than my two older sisters who were fully sighted. My parents did exactly that. As a child I remained in public school participating in various activities including softball, both slow pitch and fast pitch, in high school I marched in the band, was captain of the dance team and

played basketball. Through it all, I never once heard my parents utter the words "You can't do that because you are legally blind." Through their unfailing love, support, and encouragement a foundation was laid that would set the stage for my future successes.

As a young person with a disability, I was introduced to Florida's Division of Blind Services in third grade. I met once a week with my qualified rehabilitation specialist who taught me to touch type on a large print typewriter. This allowed me to type my papers in the classroom making them easier for me to read. In high school my textbooks were provided in large print and as my workload increased my junior year, VR introduced me to my first CCTV that would later follow me through my four years of college. I also remember taking a large print ACT and other standardized exams in the public school system.

Upon completing my Bachelor's degree in foreign language at West Virginia University, I decided to sit for the law school entrance exam and again received the exam in large print. VR support continued as I sought to fulfill the American Dream and achieved a JD from Cumberland School of Law at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, which VR helped to finance. Following completion of law school, VR remained committed to my success, ensuring that I had a computer with large print software and other assistive technology that allowed me to enter a competitive workforce with confidence.

Now fourteen years later, I am a wife, a mother and a contributing member of corporate America. While my needs have changed, VR's commitment to my success has not.

When my job began to require more travel, I contacted VR, and through their qualified staff, obtained a monocular that provides me with added confidence on business trips as I maneuver through unfamiliar airports and hotels in cities across the U.S. At Wachovia, we believe that we are at our best when employees are fully engaged with their families, their friends, and their communities. My monocular assisted me in more fully engaging with my son who began to realize that while I may have been attending his special musical programs at school, I was not able to see him waving at me from the stage. My monocular now allows me to see my son's beaming face, smiling and waving at his mommy sitting in the audience. Now when he says, "Mommy, did you see me?" I can honestly say, "Yes, buddy, I saw you."

Clearly, a relationship with VR is a lifelong journey. My relationship with VR remains strong. As an HR professional, I now collaborate with the National VR - Business Network to ensure other business leaders and people with disabilities have access to the same valued resource that can turn dreams and aspirations into reality.

As far as a return on investment, I am the ultimate return on investment and now remain committed to helping others live the American Dream in achieving a quality education, supporting a family, having a career, owning a home and living independently and inclusively in the community. I understand that the return on investment in Alabama, one of the VR programs I was served by, is \$20.69 for every dollar invested in my rehabilitation. From a banking and finance perspective, that is an excellent return and a great investment of taxpayer dollars.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO REAUTHORIZE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAMS**

On behalf of the National Rehabilitation Association (NRA), the Council for State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and myself as a consumer of the VR

program, I would like to bring before the Committee a number of important issues to consider in the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, including Title IV of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

Since I was served by the VR program, the number of individuals with disabilities seeking the excellent services and supports offered by the VR program has greatly increased. Currently, I am told that only 1 in 20 eligible individuals with disabilities is being served by the program and, in some states, there are long waiting lists for services, including as many as 9,000 individuals.

Over the past 4 years the number of seriously wounded warriors alone returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan and seeking services from both the VR program and the VA programs has overwhelmed the Veterans Administration and impacted the number of eligible individuals served by the VR program.

Like you, I have been reading the stories about how the VA is having difficulty serving the numerous returning veterans who are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a Disorder, which unattended, can and has destroyed the quality of life for so many of our veterans. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors have the expertise to assist individuals with traumatic brain injuries, spinal cord injuries, and post traumatic stress disorder, in obtaining, retaining or regaining employment, and State VR agencies in some states have been asked by the VA to assist them in serving these individuals.

Another important consideration is the issue of aging and the workforce. Many baby boomers will choose to, or in some cases must, remain in the workforce. The greatest incident in an aging workforce occurs with vision impairment, blindness, hearing loss and deafness. Many of these disabilities qualify the older worker for services provided under the VR program. Therefore, it is going to be critical that Congress and employers alike recognize that additional funds are needed not only to support the existing population, but to accommodate the thousands of individuals with disabilities who will seek VR services over the next several decades.

But the VR program over time has been stretched to its capacity. Accordingly, we respectfully request that this Committee consider additional funding for Title I of the VR program. More specifically, we ask that you consider legislative language be included in the VR reauthorization for an authorization of appropriations sufficient to serve all eligible individuals with significant disabilities, who want to work and become taxpaying citizens, including our returning veterans.

Relatedly, it is imperative to retain qualified personnel in the State VR agencies, some who are retiring and some who are leaving the VR program for better-paying jobs. Many of the qualified rehabilitation counselors in the State VR agencies hold Master's Degrees in rehabilitation counseling and related rehabilitation fields and have had years of experience in serving individuals with disabilities secure or regain a career, including those with the most significant disabilities.

One of the many hallmarks of the VR program, in addition to its individualized services and supports, is its qualified rehabilitation counselors and qualified rehabilitation personnel. We must maintain this level of expertise in the VR program. In order to do that, we respectfully request your consideration of a substantial increase in funding for Title III of the Rehabilitation Act to maintain the level of expertise that eligible individuals with disabilities have come to expect – a level of expertise that our returning veterans with disabilities deserve in recognition of the sacrifices they have made for our country.

Transition services for students with disabilities are also extremely important as they prepare to leave the educational system and enter post-secondary education, training, or employment. We fully support the Committee's recommendation that positive transition outcomes for students with disabilities should be enhanced. That said, without additional funding for this purpose, we are simply pitting deserving adults with disabilities, including veterans, against deserving students with disabilities, both of whom, if deemed eligible, the VR program serves.

As funds to support the program become limited, it is imperative that the Congress ensures that the funds dedicated to serving eligible adults and students with disabilities not be diverted to other populations. Accordingly, we respectfully request that the language addressing the responsibilities of the VR program and more specifically regarding the administration and operation of the VR program, be strengthened to assure that the supervision of staff, eligibility determinations, approval of the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), documentation of case closure, development of the budget and management of the program be the sole responsibility of the State VR director.

Another very important issue for the Committee to consider in your deliberations on the Rehabilitation Act is the importance of maintaining the discrete funding for programs which complement Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, including Projects With Industry (PWIs), Supported Employment, Migrants and Seasonal Farm Workers and Recreation. These important programs, which are accountable and successful and can be found in Titles III and VI, respectively, of the Rehabilitation Act should always maintain their discrete funding streams. Consolidating these programs into Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, which is tantamount to eliminating funding for these complementary programs, would only increase the waiting lists for VR services and further increase the unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities.

It is also important to explain why maintaining the integrity of the Office of the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in the U.S. Department of Education as a Presidential appointment confirmed by the U.S. Senate is important to individuals with disabilities.

The RSA is the principal office responsible for the programs administered under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. It has traditionally been the office that employs the greatest number of individuals with disabilities and serves as a role model for other federal and state agencies in hiring individuals with disabilities. It is also an inspiration to a person with a disability to see another individual with a disability employed at the highest levels of government.

The closing of their Regional Offices almost two years ago has already significantly diminished the RSA. With the closing came the loss of significant numbers of staff with expertise in the VR program for monitoring and for the provision of technical assistance services to State VR agencies, consumers and others. Monitoring and the provision of technical assistance are two enormously important considerations in maintaining program accountability.

Congress's continued commitment to maintaining the integrity of the Office of the Commissioner of RSA -- many times an individual with a significant disability -- sends a clear message to individuals with disabilities that it honors and supports their hard-won civil right to be educated, pursue careers and live independently in the community.

Regarding the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), in which VR is a mandatory partner, we respectfully ask you to consider authorizing a separate, fully-funded line

item to pay for infrastructure costs at one-stop centers, as opposed to having the mandatory partners pay these costs.

The VR program has always paid its full share of expenses no matter where the VR office is located. The VR program is currently paying millions of dollars each year in costs associated with being co-located at the one-stop centers. In addition, there are greater numbers of persons with disabilities served in the VR program that never visit or access a one-stop. Given that VR is already covering their costs in the one-stop centers, we would recommend again an authorization for appropriations for a line item for infrastructure funding rather than tapping partners' scarce resources to serve individuals, other than those with disabilities.

When a person with a visible disability comes to the one-stop center for services and the center is co-located with VR, that individual is sent to the VR office for services and the one-stop center, in turn, counts that individual as being served by the one-stop. Assuming the individual with a disability is deemed eligible for services by the VR agency, VR provides and pays for the individualized services and supports which include, but are not necessarily limited to, career counseling, guidance and development, vocational evaluation, job training by qualified rehabilitation counselors and career placement.

Given this situation, we respectfully request that in the reauthorization of the WIA that the Committee qualify what it means to be "served" at the one-stops.

As an individual with a significant disability, I fully appreciate the multiple barriers that individuals with disabilities face in entering or re-entering the world of work, including physical and programmatic accessibility to services, which in many instances is lacking at the one-stop centers. State VR offices, some of which I mentioned above, are co-located with the one-stop centers, and are fully accessible, both physically and programmatically, and have the qualified rehabilitation counselors and other qualified personnel in place and the experience in serving individuals with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities.

Turning to the issue of who serves on the State and local workforce boards, we strongly encourage the Committee to consider having both the State VR director of the General Agency and the State VR director of the Blind Agency, in those states that have a separate State Agency for the Blind, to serve on the local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs). We also support the State VR Directors being on the State Workforce Investment Boards (SWIBs).

Because the VR program is a mandatory partner of the one-stop centers and is paying millions of dollars to be co-located with the centers, they must be at the table when the important decisions are made regarding funding and the direction of services, to assure that the interest of individuals with disabilities are adequately represented and considered in the decision making process. To do less, would be disrespectful to the millions of individuals who have been served by the VR program over the years and to all individuals with disabilities.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, for allowing me to share my personal perspectives on the benefits of programs under the Rehabilitation Act, and for allowing me to present the views of VR organizations on reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, including Title IV of the Rehabilitation Act. More important, thank you for supporting me and all individuals with disabilities who benefit from the VR program. Without the support of Congress, the support of my parents, and the excellent services I received from the VR program, I would not be here today.