



State of Rhode Island State Rehabilitation Council

To work with ORS assuring that all Rhode Islanders with disabilities can obtain and keep meaningful and satisfying employment.

5/27/2021

Joseph Murphy, Administrator of VR
The Office of Rehabilitation Services
40 Fountain Street
Providence, RI 02903

RE: The 2021 Comprehensive Needs Assessment

Dear Mr. Murphy:

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) wants to thank the Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS) for the continued collaboration on the Comprehensive Needs Assessment for 2021. As you know, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, mandates that ORS, in partnership with the SRC, complete a Statewide CNA every three years to determine the rehabilitation needs of Rhode Islanders with disabilities. We are charged with identifying the needs of those individuals with the most significant disabilities, underserved and unserved individuals, youth, and others served by the whole of Rhode Island's workforce development. We are also required to identify the need to develop or improve Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) within the State.

The SRC shares the ORS view of the CNA as a dynamic and evolving process that incorporates diverse sources of information to address these statewide vocational rehabilitation needs across the state. In particular, throughout the past year, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRC was very proud to partner with ORS early in the process to ensure that the CNA would capture the data needed while faced with a changing landscape vocational rehabilitation and workforce system due to this unprecedented pandemic. To that end, we very early in the pandemic met over the Zoom platform to virtually discuss how our work would be different for this CNA than it had been in the past, and to together develop strategies and solutions to form and maintain our workgroup.

In particular, the SRC worked very closely with ORS to formulate five focus teams as required for Transition, Community Rehabilitation Provider, Employer, ORS Staff, and ORS Consumer sub-committees. These focus teams helped ORS obtain the needed data for this CNA. This year, the SRC provided considerable input on distribution of a survey to Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs) who are ORS vendors. The survey

asked for a variety of information from demographic and agency information to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with ORS as well as allowing for feedback on areas of improvement. The SRC was particularly pleased with data collection from this survey, as well as consumer surveys, as we had taken part in prior years to improve survey questions to obtain a better response rate.

The SRC has reviewed the conclusions and themes identified within the CNA and look forward to continuing to work with ORS to identify continued strategies to promote awareness of ORS and its scope of services, increase services to underserved populations, bridge gaps between employers and individuals, and help individuals to remove personal and other barriers they face to obtain and maintain competitive and integrated employment. We also look forward to working in the coming year with ORS on its state plan to address some of the findings of the CNA.

Thank you again for your work in advancing the employment outcomes for individuals with the most significant and significant disabilities in Rhode Island and for thoroughly collaborating with the SRC on the 2021 CNA.

Sincerely,

Catherine Sansonetti, Esquire

Vice-Chair of the SRC

Chair, Policy, State Plan and Quality Assurance Committee.



**2021
Comprehensive
Needs
Assessment**

*Vocational Rehabilitation Needs of
Rhode Islanders with Disabilities*

**State of Rhode Island
Department of Human Services
Office of Rehabilitation Services
In Collaboration with the State Rehabilitation Council**

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I. Executive Summary

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, mandates the Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS), in partnership with the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) to complete a Statewide Comprehensive Needs Assessment (CNA) at three to four-year increments. The CNA is intended to determine the rehabilitation needs of Rhode Islanders with disabilities, identify the needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, including those in need of Supported Employment, minorities with significant disabilities, underserved individuals, youth with disabilities and individuals served by other components of the workforce development network. Also, the CNA is intended to identify the need to develop or improve Community Rehabilitation Programs within the State.

The ORS views the CNA as a dynamic and evolving process that incorporates information from several diverse sources rather than from any one event or data source. During Federal Fiscal Year 2020, ORS addressed the Statewide CNA by incorporating data from several resources including:

- ❖ Environmental Scans
- ❖ CNA assessments developed & implemented by the State Rehabilitation Council and Office of Rehabilitation Services
- ❖ Ongoing Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) Practices, such as an established CQI committee which evaluates internal/external processes and performances to further benefit service delivery to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities and other staff monitoring Activities (i.e., case reviews, external CRP review, client satisfaction surveys, etc.)

The findings of the CNA are presented to the personnel of the SRC and ORS. These findings contribute to the development of the vocational rehabilitation and supported employment state plan.

The main findings of the 2021 CNA can be summarized as follows:

II. Environmental Scans

When gathering accurate data regarding the needs of individuals with disabilities, it is imperative to incorporate data from sources outside of ORS. Studying other entities that address the needs of workforce development within RI, combined with examining the broader needs of individuals with disabilities, contributes to better understanding the experience of being an individual with a disability in RI. This section of the CNA considers information from respective sources from both a local and national level.

A. Employment and Labor Information

1. Source: Respectability, Office of Disability Policy (ODEP)

Submitted: 2/14/19 by respectability.org

Respectability is a non-profit organization that works collaboratively with employers, leaders, governors, policy makers, educators, self-advocates, non-profits, faith-based organizations, philanthropists, and the media to fight stigma and advance opportunities.

As a result of the Department of Justice (DOJ) settlement agreement, RI began to close sheltered workshops where people with disabilities earned subminimum wages. By 2019, there were no sheltered workshops or anyone earning subminimum wage in RI. Over 7,000 people with disabilities entered the workforce in 2017, pushing RI from 47th to 19th in the Nation for employing people with disabilities (from 30% in 2016 to 40.6% in 2017). By 2019, 29 of the 50 states saw job gains for Americans with Disabilities.

2. Source: RI Department of Labor and Training (DLT)

Submitted: October 2019 through December 2019

The DLT provides workforce development, workforce security and workforce protection to the State's workers, employers, and citizens, offering employment services, educational services, and economic opportunity to both individuals and employers. The DLT protects the workforce by enforcing labor laws, prevailing wage rates and workforce health & safety standards. The Department also provides temporary income support to unemployed and temporarily disabled workers.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, the unemployment rate continued to drop in RI and at the National level. During that timeframe, jobs also increased both in RI and at the National level. From October 2019 through December 2019, DLT reported the following:

- As of December 2019, RI had a 3.5% unemployment rate (a decrease of .5% from November 2018).
- From September 2019 throughout November 2019, jobs in RI increased by 3,000.
- Jobs in RI increased by 10,700 from November 2018 to November 2019.
- Civilian Labor Force and Resident Employment rates rose in RI from November 2018 to November 2019.
- From November 2018 to November 2019, RI gained jobs in Retail Trade, Educational Services, Wholesale Trade, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation. A slight increase was shown in Natural Resources and Mining.
- From November 2018 to November 2019, RI lost jobs in Professional Services, Business Services, Financial Activities and Construction Sector.
- From November 2018 to November 2019, little to no change occurred in RI jobs in the fields of Government, Information, Manufacturing and Transportation and Utilities.

Throughout 2020, the unemployment rate rose in RI and at the National level due to COVID-19. From December 2019 through December 2020, DLT reported the following:

- As of December 2020, RI had an 8.1% unemployment rate (an increase of 4.6% from December 2019).
- From December 2019 throughout December 2020, jobs in RI decreased by 14,500.
- The largest decrease of jobs in RI between December 2019 and December 2020 were in the fields of Accommodation, Food Service, Health Care, Social Assistance and Professional/Business Service.
- From December 2019 throughout December 2020, little to no change occurred in RI jobs in the fields of Financial Activities, Construction, Information and Manufacturing.

B. People with Disabilities

1. Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

Submitted: 2/26/19 and 2/26/20 by
<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/disabl.pdf>;

Headquartered in Washington D.C., BLS measures labor market activity, working

conditions, price changes and productivity in the U.S. economy to support public and private decision making.

BLS Highlights of National data from 2018:

- 49% of people with disabilities (PWD's) were aged 65 or older, 3 times larger than the population with no reported disability.
- Women were slightly more likely to report having a disability than men, partly reflecting greater life expectancy.
- Prevalence of disability continued to be higher for those who identify as Caucasian and African American/Black, rather than those who identify as Hispanic and Asian.
- Employment ratios were much lower for PWD's, than those without a reported disability.
- 31% of workers with a disability were employed part-time, compared to 17% of workers without a disability.
- The unemployment rate for PWD's and those without disability lowered from 2017 to 2018. This is defined as those who did not have a job, were available for work and actively looking for a job for 4 weeks preceding the article (8% for PWD's and 3.7% for those without disability).
- PWD's were more likely to be self-employed (10%), than those without a disability (6%).
- Among ages 16 – 65, employment ratios rose for PWD's and for those without disability (30.4% for PWD's and 74% without disability).
- PWD's were more concentrated in-service occupations (19%) compared to those without disability (17%). They were more likely to work in production, transportation and material moving occupations (14%) compared to those without disability (12%). PWD's were less likely to work in management and professional occupations (34%) compared to those without disability (40%). PWD's were slightly more likely to work in Government (14%) compared to those without disability (13%).
- Persons who are neither employed nor unemployed are not counted as part of the labor force. 80% of PWD's were not in the labor force, compared to 30% of people without disability. In part, this reflects the older age profile of PWD's.
- Among PWD's and those without disability who are not in the labor force, the vast majority reported they do not want a job at this time.
- Veteran unemployment rate in Rhode Island fell from 6.5% in November 2014, to 4.9% in November 2015 (-1.6%), to 3.6% in May 2017.
(<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr0.htm>; published 3/21/19)

BLS Highlights of National data from 2019:

- 50% of PWD's were aged 65 or older.
- Prevalence of disability continued to be higher for those who identify as Caucasian and African American/Black, rather than those who identify as Hispanic or Asian.
- Employment ratios were much lower for PWD's, than those without a disability.
- 32% of workers with a disability were employed part-time, compared to 17% of workers without a disability.
- The unemployment rate for PWD's and those without disability increased from 2018 to 2019 by 0.2%. This is defined as those who did not have a job, were available for work and actively looking for a job for 4 weeks preceding the article.
- PWD's were more likely to be self-employed than those without a disability
- Among ages 16 – 65, employment ratios for PWD's was 31% and those without disability was 74.6%.
- PWD's were more concentrated in-service occupations (21%) compared to those without disability (17%). They were more likely to work in production, transportation and material moving occupations (14.5%) compared to those without disability (12%). PWD's were less likely to work in management and professional occupations (34%) compared to those without disability (41%). PWD's were just as likely to work in government, compared to those without disability (both at 13%).
- Persons who are neither employed nor unemployed are not in the labor force. 80% of PWD's were not in the labor, compared to 30% of people without disability. In part, this reflects the older age profile of PWD's.
- Among PWD's and those without disability who are not in the labor force, the vast majority reported they do not want a job at this time.
- (<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/vet.nr0.htm>; published 3/21/19)

C. Youth

Youth with disabilities are at a hiring disadvantage due to lack of work experience and soft skills. Community service providers argue that the only way to keep out-of-school youth in a program is to provide them with a paid opportunity, as they cannot afford to pursue activities without financial compensation. These providers report that job opportunities should come through internships, Summer work and specialized high school

programs, as out-of-school youth with disabilities tend to require wrap-around employment and support services to remain engaged.

1. Source: Kids Count

Submitted: October 2019/January 2020 by datacenterkidscount.org

KIDS COUNT is a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the well-being of children in the US. By providing high-quality data and trend analysis through its KIDS COUNT Data Center, the Foundation seeks to enrich local, state, and national discussions concerning ways to secure better futures for all children and to raise the visibility of children's issues through a nonpartisan, evidence-based lens. In addition to data from trusted national resources, the KIDS COUNT Data Center draws from more than 50 Kids Count State Organizations that provide state and local data, as well as providing insights into trends affecting child and family well-being. Through its National Kids Count Project, the Foundation develops and distributes reports on issues of well-being.

The following statistics are strictly in reference to RI:

In 2018, out-of-school youth and not working:

Ages 16 – 19: 2,000 youths (3% of age population)

Ages 20 – 24: 11,000 youths (11% of age population)

Ages 16 – 24: 13,000 youths (9% of age population)

In 2018, out-of-school youth and not working and no degree, higher than high school diploma or equivalency:

Ages 18 – 24: 10,000 individuals (9% of age population)

Trends - over the past nine years, the number of out-of-school youth not working has been on the decline:

Ages 16 – 19: down 5% since 2009 (in 2009, there were 5,000 youth (8% of age population))

Ages 20 – 24: no change from 2009 (remains at 11,000 youth)

Ages 16 – 24: down 3% since 2009 (in 2009, there were 16,000 youth (12% of age population))

Ages 18 – 24 (who are not in school, not employed and no degree, higher than high school diploma or equivalency: down 3% since 2009 (in 2009, there were 14,000 youths or 12% of age population) who were out of school and not working and no degree higher than a high school diploma

The following statistics are of Nationwide reference:

In 2018, out-of-school youth and not working:

Ages 16 – 19: 1.186 million (7% of age population)

Ages 20 – 24: 3.16 million (15% of age population)

Ages 16 – 24: 4.35 million (11% of age population)

Trends - over the past nine years, the number of out of school youth and are not working is on the decline (this population is also referred to as “Idle Teens” or “Disconnected Youth”:

Ages 16 – 19: down 2% since 2009

Ages 20 – 24: down 4% since 2009

Ages 16 – 24: down 3% since 2009

2. Source: US Department of Labor

Submitted: 1/30/19 by <https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/eta/eta20191216>

The US Department of Labor’s mission is to foster, promote and develop the welfare of the wage earners, job seekers and retirees of the United States. To improve working conditions, advance opportunities for profitable employment and assure work-related benefits and rights.

The U.S. Department of Labor announced \$85 million in grants will be awarded to YouthBuild programs in 32 states.

YouthBuild is an education and training program with a strong pre-apprenticeship component that helps at-risk youth complete high school or state equivalency degree programs, earn industry-recognized credentials for in-demand occupations, and undergo training to build housing for low-income or homeless individuals and families in their communities.

This set of awards mark a significant expansion of the Construction Plus model of YouthBuild, which allows grantees to offer training in locally in-demand industries beyond the required construction training, such as healthcare, information technology, hospitality and retail services, and logistics. This year's grant awards include 65 programs that applied to offer Construction Plus training.

The grants announced range from approximately \$700,000 to \$1.1 million each and will fund 81 YouthBuild programs.

The U.S. Department of Labor YouthBuild program has a network of more than 200 urban and rural YouthBuild programs in 46 states.

Youthbuild provides at-risk youth, ages 16-24, with educational and occupational skill development to obtain employment in the in-demand industries, allowing young people across the country to take the first step toward good-paying careers. Youthbuild has been in effect since 2006. Program participants learn construction skills while constructing or rehabilitating affordable housing for low-income or homeless families in their own neighborhoods, as well as other occupational skills for in-demand industries that also require real-world work experience components. Youth split their time between the occupational skills training site and the classroom, where they earn their high school diploma, or equivalency and prepare for post-secondary opportunities. There is a 5-point recruiting system:

- Outreach, intake, application & testing, interviews, mental toughness
- Young adults learn about the program through social service providers, guidance counselors, construction unions, criminal justice officials and HUD. Trade unions refer youth who are interested in a job field, but lack the credentials needed to enter an apprenticeship
- The individual grants will range from \$740,000 to \$1.5 million each

Currently, RI is not a grantee for these additional \$85 million in Youthbuild funds. This is an area of further exploration from our counterparts in other VR state agencies and an area for ORS to look at, perhaps even a resource for CRP's.

3. Social Security/Maximus Ticket to Work RI Program Manager and ORS RSA-911 Data Received: 6/30/20 and 1/20/21

The Social Security Administration (SSA) Ticket to Work (TTW) program supports career development for Social Security disability beneficiaries aged 18 through 64 who want to work. The ticket program is free and voluntary and helps PWD's progress towards financial independence. TTW is a good fit for people who want to improve their

earning potential and are committed to preparing for long-term success in the workforce. This program offers beneficiaries with disabilities access to meaningful employment with the assistance of TTW employment services providers called Employment Networks (EN).

In March 2019, there were a total of 47,737 assignable beneficiary tickets in RI. 32,149 of these tickets were in Providence County alone. Assignable tickets means the amount of Social Security beneficiaries with tickets that are not in use with ORS, not assigned to an EN, and are not currently assigned.

In January 2021, there were a total of 45,204 assignable beneficiary tickets in RI. 30,225 of these tickets were in Providence County alone.

ORS - RSA-911 data for PY20 quarter two reflected a total of 4,002 open and closed cases, (closed cases that received employment services are tracked under WIOA for 6 quarters) with the number of individuals on “monthly public support” being 1,624 at time of application and of which 1,510 indicated they were receiving Social Security Disability (SSDI) and/or Social Security Income (SSI), or some other support combination along with SSDI and/or SSI.

Of the 4,002 records data reflected 733 records had closure dates before or on 6/30/2020. Also, of the 733 records, data reflected that of the individuals receiving monthly supports at closure, 348 were on SSDI/SSI.

RI data from the TTW Program Manager and ORS RSA-911 data suggested that PWD’s in RI on SSDI and/or SSI disability benefits are potentially an underserved population. It also suggests that CRP education and program development on the benefits of becoming an EN may be advantageous towards developing the continuum of EN services for PWD’s in RI. While PWD’s may seek assistance from ENs outside of RI, there are limited EN resources within the State that PWD’s can seek to receive employment services. Currently, ORS and only one other EN is available within the State.

III. Assessment Practices Developed & Implemented by the State Rehabilitation Council and Office of Rehabilitation Services

The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) mandates adherence to the following guidelines when developing the CNA:

- (1) Provide an assessment of the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the State, particularly the VR services needs of those:

- a) with most significant disabilities, including their need for Supported Employment services.
 - b) who identify as minorities.
 - c) who have been unserved and underserved by the VR program.
 - d) who have been served through other components of the statewide workforce development system.
 - e) who are youth with disabilities and students with disabilities, including, as appropriate, their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services.
- (2) Identify the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State; and
- (3) Include an assessment of the needs of individuals with disabilities for transition career services and pre-employment transition services, and the extent to which such services are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

ORS, in collaboration with the SRC, formulated five sub-committee groups to target specific populations for the CNA focus areas, as defined by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). The teams consisted of Transition, Community Rehabilitation Provider, Employer, ORS Staff, and ORS Consumer sub-committees.

A. Transition

ORS and SRC determined that the best way to capture information about the needs of youth was to host a Focus Group with students who utilize ORS services and parents of students who utilize ORS services. The committee was particularly interested in the obstacles and potential challenges for “at-risk” or “underserved” youth. Many of these individuals may also receive Special Education services or services under a 504 plan. According to Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), RI currently has 24,548 students, between the ages of 3 and 21, with Individualized Education Plans (IEP’s). ORS currently provides services to 1,216 of those students between the ages of 14 through 21, over 300 more than in 2017. ORS is currently providing Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to 1,227 individuals, some of whom are part of the 1,216 students ages 14 through 24 already being served by ORS.

According to RIDE, RI currently has 5,651 students with 504 plans. Utilizing our MIS system, ORS is currently providing services to 41 of them. It is important to note that ORS can only track the number of consumers with a 504 when they are in status 02, or above. ORS cannot track the number of consumers with a 504 when they are in status 00. Due to the limited nature of tracking in the MIS, the number of individuals with a 504 plan receiving services from ORS is likely to be significantly higher than 41. Based upon the 12/1/20 special education census from RIDE, there are 1,810 students between the ages of 14-22 who are identified with a primary disability of ‘Other Health Impaired’, which can include, but not limited to, behavioral health.

Additionally, RIDE data shows all students with an IEP beginning at the age of 14 engage in the initial steps of transition services (i.e., transition assessments, career counseling, career exploration, etc.) regardless of type of disability. Many RI students with behavioral health concerns are often fully integrated in their classes and may have minimal services under an IEP or 504 Plan, and they often receive individualized counseling outside of school. Also, they may be participating fully in the activities offered to all students, such as Curriculum and Technical Education (CTE) programming, which often is supported by general education teachers.

The focus group was held on November 17, 2020, consisting of students who utilize ORS services, former students who utilize ORS services, and parents of students who utilize ORS services. The parents in attendance were not the parents of the students who attended the focus group. Demographically, the students and parents resided in and received services from the ORS Northern Region, East Bay Region and Central RI Region.

IEP meetings and/or their respective school special education department was how students and parents heard about ORS and how they were referred to ORS.

Both students and parents reported that ORS written materials, both paperwork and online, were easy to understand. Between the 2017 and 2021 CNA's, ORS worked diligently to make written materials easier for consumers and their guardians to understand, as the 2017 CNA found that individuals and families reported that ORS written materials were not user friendly or easily understood.

When asked how students stay in communication with their ORS counselor and schedule meetings with their counselor, answers were evenly spread out. Their answers ranged from the students directly communicating/coordinating with their ORS counselor, to relying on their parents and/or special education teachers to handle those aspects of their ORS cases. When parents were asked this about their children, their answers were split between staying in direct communication with the ORS counselors and with the special education teachers. All parents stated that one of their goals was for their children to reach a level of independence to directly communicate/coordinate with their ORS counselors. All focus group participants reported they are communicating with the ORS counselor via email, phone call and/or text. All stated their ORS counselor returns communication within 0-2 days and that the ORS counselors reach out to students on or about a monthly basis if they have not heard from the student/parent(s). Participants also reported that all meetings are currently taking place through virtual platform conferences due to COVID-19.

Students and parents expressed that they did not always have a clear understanding of the scope of services that ORS could provide. The group also reported that occasionally it can be a challenge for parents to understand the services. Students also mentioned how they were unclear as to what ORS may or may not fund (i.e. work clothes, driving

lessons, worksite accommodations, etc.). Both students and parents stated that they receive clear answers and options from the ORS counselor when availability of services and next steps in the case are presented to them. Students and parents reported feeling informed by the ORS counselor during meetings.

Focus group participants reported that the more they maintained communication with ORS counselors and asked questions, the more informed they felt and were more confident in the decision-making process. Parents suggested it would be helpful to receive an email from the ORS counselor well in advance of an upcoming meeting, to give parents potential options of choosing where the case can progress, upon the conclusion of that meeting. Parents also suggested it would be helpful at the start of every meeting to be reminded of what and where the previous steps were and where the next available steps potentially lie.

Participants were asked what keeps them engaged with ORS services. Students answers centered on participating in services, whereas parents provided more relationship-based responses. For instance, students reported that activities such as participating in work experience services, job trainings, internships and frequent contact with the vendors are what keeps them engaged with ORS. In contrast, parents reported building a good relationship with the ORS counselor, proactive outreach from the ORS counselor, and the students receiving care and support from the ORS counselor to be the most critical aspects of remaining engaged with ORS. Also, parents stated that some of the ORS counselors will randomly check-in with students/parents and ask if there is any way in which they can help. The group stated this had a strong impact on them in terms of staying engaged with ORS services.

Participants were asked what areas they feel the most and least supported by their counselor. Students stated they receive great support overall and that their needs are met. The group reported that their greatest concern was being able to receive what they needed in the immediate moment. Parents responded that the students are consistently provided services when needed; however, they stated they feel the least supported when communication is not regularly occurring and/or there is no wrap-around effort between the student, parent, ORS counselor, special education teacher, or vendor. regarding working collaboratively. Parents offered that it is difficult to have a continuous awareness of the services and resources provided by ORS; therefore, they would feel more supported if they had a constant reminder of what can be offered by ORS prior to each meeting. In summary, parents reported that regular communication, collaborative effort and constant awareness of services is key to a supportive relationship with ORS.

Future steps beyond school, goals, and how participants wanted to continue with ORS was also discussed. Students pointed out what would make them continue to work with ORS once they are no longer in school, as some of them were no longer attending high school. Students in the group overwhelmingly reported that they were hopeful ORS could assist them to either achieve their “dream job”, or to continue providing them with more opportunities to explore various job settings until a good employment fit is found. Parents

in the group reported that finding a consistent part-time job, conducive to their children's abilities are their goals and what will keep them engaged with ORS once school is concluded. Parents advised that long-term supports such as job coaching was a critical need, along with consistent "check-ins" between the students and the ORS counselors, even long after students are successfully employed in a job setting.

B. Community Rehabilitation Providers

ORS and the SRC distributed a survey via email to sixty-two Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRP's) who are approved vendors of ORS. Twenty-three CRP's responded, for a response rate of 37.1%. CRP's were asked questions that ranged from demographic information, satisfaction with ORS services, suggested areas of improvement and how to strengthen collaboration to better serve PWD's. Demographic information collected in the survey included the geographic region where services were provided, type of services, primary population and ethnic population served, and whether their organization provided services for emerging populations with barriers to employment.

When asked which geographic region best reflects their service area, 36% indicated the Metro/Providence area, 26% indicated West Bay, 17% indicated Northern RI, 17% indicated East Bay and 10% indicated South County. Many of these respondents indicated they service PWD's statewide, or in more than one region.

When asked about the affiliation that best represents them, respondents indicated Supported Employment (65%), Transition Youth (17%), General Services (9%) and Other (9%). Those in the Other category indicated a behavioral health agency, an Individual Placement and Support grant-funded program, or training provider. All respondents indicated they provide employment-related services.

When asked what the primary disabilities were of PWD's that they service, 80% indicated behavioral health, 74% indicated cognitive impairments, 39% indicated communicative disorders. The Data showed that individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, had orthopedic/mobility issues, or had blindness or visual impairments were served by 26% of respondents. Additionally, 4% of respondents indicated they served individuals with respiratory disorders. Respondents overwhelmingly indicated they provided services to individuals of all races and ethnicities. Outside of English, respondents indicated the primary language of their consumers was Creole, Portuguese, American Sign Language (ASL) and Spanish.

All respondents provide services to underserved and/or emerging populations with barriers to employment. They identified the largest amount of underserved and/or emerging populations who receive services are individuals from the following groups:

- 70% - Out of School Transition Youth

- 70% - Developmental Disabilities
- 70% - Behavioral Health Disabilities
- 35% - In-School Transition Youth
- 35% - Homeless
- 17% - Veterans
- 9% - Formerly incarcerated (juvenile and adult prisons)
- 9% - RIWORKS participants

Regarding Supported Employment Services (SE), 95% indicated they, or part of their staff have completed a SE training, while 87% indicated they received State endorsed certificates of completion for SE training. All respondents indicated their organization has the time and resources to provide SE services, including but not limited to obtaining and maintaining employment. Additionally, 95% indicated they can help people access SE employment related programs and services.

Respondents were asked about the challenges preventing individuals they serve from becoming employed. Of the 17 items listed for response in this question, six were specific to the individual consumer. The top areas selected were the individual's social skills (99%), personal home/life issues (86%), individual's job skills/match (86%), individual's expectations (84%), family expectations (81%), and insufficient job search preparation (63%).

Systemic barriers identified as barriers to employment included job availability (88%), transportation (86%), availability of job development (62%), availability of retention supports (60%) and cost of job accommodations (54%).

Financial barriers to employment included the fear of losing benefits and other associated financial supports. The areas selected frequently or occasionally was the fear of losing SSI or SSDI (91%), losing subsidies (i.e. housing, food stamps, etc.) (77%) and fear of losing medical benefits (78%).

Items rated as rarely or never in terms of employment barriers included staff skills and knowledge (63%), staff expectations (63%), availability of job accommodations (45%) and availability of job development (38%).

Respondents were asked about the challenges preventing individuals they serve from maintaining employment. Responses were nearly identical to the responses regarding the challenges preventing individuals from becoming employed.

Individuals with behavioral health, deaf/hard of hearing, communication disorders and respiratory disabilities were indicated as the least served by the workforce development system (WDS).

Individuals with developmental disabilities, blind/visual impairments and mental/behavioral health disabilities were viewed as the most underserved disability populations in RI. CRP's suggested the need for stronger partnership with BHDDH,

community outreach programs, employment collaboratives and interpreting services as ways to best connect and support these populations.

Respondents were asked how different racial/ethnic populations are served by the WDS. Individuals who were least served by the WDS identified as Cape Verdean, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian and Asian.

Providers offered feedback as to what would help their agencies meet the needs of consumers. Increased awareness of resources through ORS/WDS, increased awareness of employer resources, increased access to/better communication with ORS counselors and increased communication regarding changes/additions to policies.

Other suggestions for improvement consisted of streamlining/reducing the amount of ORS paperwork, ORS' continuance to offer training opportunities to providers and strengthening liaison relationships between providers and ORS.

C. Employers

Surveys were distributed to various employers throughout the local business community. The survey was designed to gain information on how ORS could strengthen the connection between the business community and individuals with disabilities. The survey was completed by thirteen employers. Every respondent identified their job to be at a minimum of supervisory level and/or directly related with the hiring process of their respective agencies/business.

ORS created the Business Engagement Specialist Team (BEST), an ORS in-house committee which works with businesses to help recruit and retain qualified individuals with disabilities. BEST operates as a workforce resource and solution to RI businesses who need employees. The pool of employers who participated in the survey were identified by members of the ORS BEST committee, who reached out to various employers in the community for their participation.

Over two-thirds of respondents indicated their place of business employs between ten and fifty people, while one-quarter indicated their business employs over 100 people. Additionally, 62% of the respondents were already aware of ORS.

Of the thirteen respondents, five indicated their business currently employs individuals with disabilities, six indicated they do not currently employ people with disabilities and two indicated they are unaware whether they do or not.

Respondents commonly indicated that good candidates with qualifications would be the primary motivators in hiring people with disabilities.

Diversity, work ethic and performing the job duties were indicated as the largest reward/benefit in hiring people with disabilities.

Needing time off, dependability to come to work, getting hurt and potential lawsuits were indicated as major concerns when deciding whether to hire an individual with a disability. Accommodations, safety and having the skills to do the job were indicated as the principal challenges to hiring an individual with a disability.

Information about skill set, job experience, capabilities and knowledge of strengths, abilities and limitations were indicated as what would be most needed in recruiting individuals with disabilities.

Proper job training for individuals, interview skills, advocacy and communicating the individual's capabilities to the potential employer were indicated as the most important benefits ORS could provide to employers. Four of the thirteen respondents (31%) indicated they were either unsure or did not know what to suggest as a benefit ORS could provide to employers.

Employers were also asked what ORS needs to do to be viewed as a viable workforce resource similar to JobsinRI, or DLT. Responses overwhelmingly centered around marketing, specifically, through public announcements, commercials, signs, larger online presence, or website directory for potential job candidates that employers can access. Five of the 13 respondents (38%) indicated they did not know or could not offer a suggestion.

D. ORS Staff

ORS conducted two staff surveys in 2019 and 2020, to obtain information on how to improve service delivery, while remaining up to date with the evolving field of vocational rehabilitation. The first survey pertained to Best business practices as a state agency. The second survey pertained to all descriptions directly related to the WIOA-CNA focus areas.

In late 2019, ORS staff participated in a survey of how ORS can improve business practices, based on the needs of individuals with disabilities. Respondents indicated the following:

- 66% of staff indicated we should conduct business differently to provide “in-house” services such as: job development, vocational evaluations, job clubs, resume development, etc. These responses indicate an interest in ORS directly providing some traditional services to our consumers, rather than reliance on vendors for service delivery.
- Over half of the respondents (56%) indicated they were satisfied with the services provided by our vendor community.
- Respondents indicated the areas in which ORS can assist vendors to meet service delivery needs. Responses consisted of training vendors, strengthening communication with vendors, and assisting vendors with report writing.

In 2020, ORS disseminated a survey to 52 staff members, in which 42 participated (81%). Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors comprised the largest percentage of participants (67%), followed by agency Administrators (19%) and agency Supervisors (14%).

Of the total respondents, 67% were employed with the agency over 10 years, 17% between 6-10 years, 14% between 1-5 years and 2% less than one year, with the largest number of respondents providing services statewide. These respondents indicated the following:

- 55% of respondents indicated the availability of VR services for Rhode Islanders was “very good”, 30% indicated “good”, 12% indicated “fair” and 3% indicated “excellent”.
- Respondents indicated that ORS can better collaborate with WIOA partners and the WDS through communication, information sharing, meetings, and training.
- When asked what populations staff see as underserved and/or emerging populations, respondents indicated individuals with mental health issues (20%), autism (20%), minorities (18%), youth (11%) and anxiety concerns (5%).
- When asked about the availability for emerging populations in regions where staff members service, respondents indicated that ORS is readily available (45%), ORS needs more vendors (14%), mental health centers are not adequately equipped for providing VR services (11%), and that the availability of transportation is inadequate (7%).

Respondents indicated that individuals with mental health issues (36%), physical disabilities (18%), autism (11%), ESL (11%), those with transportation challenges (7%) and those who require long-term supports (7%) are the populations of individuals not adequately serviced by ORS. Additionally, respondents equally indicated that individuals with mental health disabilities, I/DD, significant disabilities, and physical disabilities are populations of individuals not adequately served by the WDS.

Counseling/guidance, job development services (internal and external), interagency collaboration, vendors, vocational training, involvement with employers and business have been the most successful efforts in helping individuals with disabilities become employed.

When assessing services for youth with disabilities, staff overwhelmingly responded that services were positive: very good (56%), excellent (22%), good (19%), fair (3%). No respondents indicated services for youth with disabilities were poor. Responses were nearly identical when asked to specifically assess Pre-Employment Transition Services.

Respondents suggested that CRPs should consider increasing CRP staff, paying CRP staff a higher wage, providing more trainings to CRP staff. Also, they stated that increasing communication and engagement between CRP’s, ORS, employers and consumers would all be ways to help vendors improve the quality of employment outcomes.

E. ORS Consumers

Beginning in April 2019, ORS and the SRC updated and revised the standards and practices for conducting monthly consumer satisfaction surveys. Rather than mailing surveys to individuals who recently had their ORS case closed, ORS focused on the individuals with open ORS cases, post-employment plan (status 18 and 22). This enabled ORS to increase the number of individuals who received the surveys, providing ORS with more quantified data. Also, it provided the opportunity to reach out to individuals who may have had less frequent communication with ORS, thus creating another attempt to outreach to the individuals and encourage re-engagement, to prevent cases from being closed. Survey questions were also updated to reflect modern WIOA data-driven best practices for service provision.

The practice involves mailing out monthly surveys based on the first letter of the individuals last names (i.e., April = letters “A” and “B”), thus ensuring no consumer receives a survey more than once per year. ORS is now in its second year of this practice with monthly consumer satisfaction surveys. Response rate is roughly 6% higher than with the previous practice and the survey is mailed to hundreds of more consumers per year, increasing the pool of data outreach.

Between April 2019 and March 2020, the ORS monthly consumer satisfaction survey was mailed to 1,662 ORS consumers. The pool of consumers consisted of individuals who were either working through the help of ORS, were receiving some type of training funded by ORS, or were in post-employment plan development. Additionally, 132 surveys were returned “undeliverable” to ORS, while 251 individuals responded to the survey. A response rate of 16.4% was achieved. The data showed the following:

- 72% of respondents indicated ORS matched their stated goals and 64% indicated ORS matched their stated interests.
- Supported employment, job placement, job coaching, and job development were the services that respondents indicated as the most important to them.
- 72% of respondents indicated they feel better prepared to enter employment since working with ORS.
- 75% of respondents indicated their ORS counselor typically responds to their outreach attempts within 2 days (47% within one day and 28% within 1 – 2 days)
- 77% of respondents indicated they received services in a timely manner.
- Of the respondents who indicated they received SSI/SSDI, 69% indicated that benefits counseling services were available to them.
- 74% of respondents indicated they would recommend ORS services to a relative or friend.

Supported employment was identified as the most important service to consumers. Other services directly related to employment were of great importance, followed respectively by the provision of education and training.

Respondents were asked what ORS can do to improve services. The top responses were respectively: nothing – respondents were satisfied with ORS services; communication (particularly responsiveness); obtaining employment; timeliness; follow through; providing a wider array of services and increases to what ORS can fund for consumers.

When asked how ORS has changed their life, the top responses were respectively: obtaining employment; obtaining funding for education; and providing employment-related skills and information.

The 14 – 24 age group were the largest number of respondents at 40%. They were also the largest number of respondents in the 2017 CNA. Individuals aged 25 – 34 consisted of the second largest number of respondents at 20%.

Respectively, respondents with mental health, developmental and cognitive disabilities were the most respondents.

Since the 2017 CNA, response rates rose among individuals who identify as minorities. Data showed that 70% identified as White/Caucasian, 15% identified as Black/African American, 9% identified as Hispanic/Latino, 3% identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 2% identified as Asian.

IV. ORS Quality Employment Data

A. Wage and Employment Data

Title: Rhode Island Department of Human Services/Office of Rehabilitation Services and the State Rehabilitation Council **2018** Annual Report;

Survey or data from: **2018** Annual Report;

Source: ORS, SRC, DHS;

During Federal Fiscal Year 2018, 538 individuals with disabilities obtained and maintained employment and were successfully closed through the help of ORS.

Percentages and hourly wages of this group were the following:

- 87% earning up to \$15/hour
- 8% earning between \$15 - \$20/hour
- 4% earning between \$20 - \$30/hour
- 1% earning between \$30 - \$50/hour

Primary occupations of this group was:

- Office and Administrative Support – 139
- Food Preparation and Serving Related – 83
- Sales and Related – 47
- Healthcare and Support – 45
- Building/Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance – 40
- Transportation and Material Moving – 33
- Personal Care and Services – 24
- Production – 20
- Community and Social Service – 20
- Educational Instruction and Library – 16
- Construction and Extraction – 15
- Installation, Maintenance and Repair – 15
- Computer and Mathematical - 8
- Protective and Service – 7
- Healthcare Practitioners and Technical – 6
- Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media – 6
- Business and Financial Operations – 4
- Management – 4
- Business Enterprise Program – 2
- Architecture and Engineer – 2
- Legal – 1
- Life, Physical and Social Science - 1

Title: Rhode Island Department of Human Services/Office of Rehabilitation Services and the State Rehabilitation Council **2019** Annual Report;

Survey or data from: **2019** Annual Report;

Source: ORS, SRC, DHS;

During Federal Fiscal Year 2019, Pre-ETS services were provided to 1,500 youth with disabilities. Of this group, 425 individuals with disabilities obtained and maintained employment and were successfully closed through the help of the ORS.

Percentages and hourly wages of those 425 individuals were the following:

- 84% earning up to \$15/hour
- 8% earning between \$15 - \$20/hour
- 5% earning between \$20 - \$30/hour
- 3% earning between \$30 - \$50/hour

Primary Occupation of the 425 individuals were the following:

- Office and Administrative Support - 98
- Food Preparation and Serving Related - 77
- Sales and Related - 35
- Healthcare and Support - 30
- Building/Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance - 27
- Personal Care and Service – 25
- Transportation and Moving – 25
- Production – 20
- Community and Social Service – 19
- Installation and Repair – 19
- Educational Instruction and Library – 11
- Protective Service – 9
- Healthcare Practitioners and Technical – 9
- Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media – 6
- Management – 4
- Computer and Mathematical – 4
- Business and Financial Operations – 3
- Construction and Extraction – 2
- Architecture and Engineering – 1
- Legal – 1

Title: Rhode Island Department of Human Services/Office of Rehabilitation Services and the State Rehabilitation Council **2020** Annual Report;

Survey or data from: **2020** Annual Report;

Source: ORS, SRC, DHS;

During Federal Fiscal Year 2020, Pre-ETS services were provided to 1,228 youth with disabilities. 233 individuals with disabilities obtained and maintained employment and were successfully closed through the help of the ORS.

Percentages and hourly wages of this group were the following:

- 88% earning up to \$15/hour
- 7% earning between \$15 - \$20/hour
- 4% earning between \$20 - \$30/hour
- 1% earning between \$30 - \$50/hour

Primary Occupation of this group were the following:

- Office and Administrative Support – 53
- Food Preparation and Serving Related – 49
- Sales and Related – 22
- Building/Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance – 15
- Personal Care and Service – 13
- Community and Social Service – 13
- Transportation and Material Moving – 12
- Healthcare Support – 9
- Educational Instruction and Library – 9
- Management – 7
- Production – 6
- Installation, Maintenance and Repair – 6
- Healthcare Practitioners and Technical – 4
- Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media – 3
- Business and Financial – 3
- Computer and Mathematical – 3
- Protective Service – 3
- Construction and Extraction – 2
- Business Enterprise - 1

V. Conclusions

A. TRANSITION:

Based on the findings of the Transition focus group, the following possible strategies will be explored:

- Continue to foster, promote, and encourage students with disabilities to have direct involvement with their ORS counselor and ORS case, as this method ensures the need for consistent engagement between ORS and consumers
- Continue to grow opportunities for youth with disabilities to access ORS information outside of school (mental health centers, youth centers, higher education, etc.) to capture more youth with disabilities in need of ORS services
- Continue expanding outreach to other programs, such as youth centers, family resource centers, and career and technical education programs to help youth with disabilities receive the counseling guidance and services they need

- Assist schools in increasing communication and coordination for “at-risk” youth with disabilities
- ORS to continue an increased involvement with out of school youth through career education programs. Additionally, 70% of CRP’s surveyed in this CNA reported that they are providing services to out of school youth with disabilities (with only 17% of those CRP’s also identifying themselves as an agency specifically providing transition services).
- Develop a clear understanding of the breadth of services that ORS can provide to students with disabilities. This would provide more informed choice and further promote independent, confident decision-making ability from those students and their parents/guardians
- Increase outreach to work with those who are SSI/SSDI beneficiaries with an assignable TTW
- Remind students with disabilities and parents of the options they have while working with ORS, increasing the level of independent involvement throughout their case
- Continue building frequent communication and check-ins between the ORS counselor and students with disabilities/parents.
- Continue group effort involvement in services for transition-aged youth with disabilities (i.e. student with disability, parent, special education teacher, vendor, ORS counselor, etc.)

B. COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDERS:

Respondents indicated they and their organizations have the necessary skills to continue working successfully with individuals with disabilities. Common themes across respondents were:

- Individuals with disabilities who are out of school transition youth, those with developmental disabilities, and those with behavioral health needs are the three populations being provided the most services
- Personal barriers of individuals with disabilities they serve contribute to not being able to obtain employment. These barriers consist of underdeveloped social skills, personal home/life issues, individual’s job skills/match, individual’s expectations, family expectations and insufficient job search preparation
- Job availability, transportation, availability of job development, availability of retention supports, and cost and availability of job accommodations were identified as systemic barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities
- Increased awareness of resources through ORS/WDS, increased awareness of employer resources, increased access to/better communication with ORS counselors and increased communication regarding changes/additions to policies could help CRP agencies better meet the needs of individuals

- Continuing to offer training opportunities to agencies and furthering the liaison relationships between ORS and CRP's could offer a more streamlined process for the individual needs being served to VR consumers

C. EMPLOYERS:

Based on the responses from the Employer survey, the following points were indicated as to why employers are hiring individuals with disabilities:

- Greater diversity.
- Work ethic.
- Ability to perform the essential job duties.

The following points were indicated as to why employers have apprehension over potentially hiring individuals with disabilities:

- Time off.
- Dependability.
- Individual getting hurt.
- Potential lawsuits.

The following points were indicated as to what would be the largest benefits ORS could provide to employers needs when it comes to hiring individuals with disabilities:

- Proper job training.
- Interview skills.
- Advocacy.
- Communicating the individual's capabilities to a potential employer.

D. ORS STAFF:

The following themes emerged from ORS staff:

- Employment trends/labor market are the most needed areas of training for ORS staff

- Two-thirds indicated they want ORS staff to directly provide many services to VR consumers, subsequently reducing agency dependence on CRP's
- Training, strengthening communication and assistance with report writing was indicated as the best ways to help CRP's improve service delivery to VR consumers
- Individuals with mental health disabilities, autism, minorities, youth and individuals with anxiety were identified as underserved and emerging populations. Roughly half of respondents indicated their ORS region is readily available to serve underserved and emerging populations
- Individuals with mental health disabilities, physical disabilities, autism, ESL needs, transportation challenges and individuals who require long-term supports were indicated as the populations not adequately serviced by ORS
- Individuals with mental health disabilities, I/DD, significant disabilities and physical disabilities were equally indicated as individuals not adequately serviced by the WDS
- ORS can better collaborate with WIOA partners and the WDS through communication, information sharing, meetings and training
- Staff overwhelmingly indicated their confidence in how ORS serves all youth with disabilities

E. ORS CONSUMERS:

ORS consumers reported the following common themes and findings:

- 40% of respondents indicated they are youth between the ages of 16-24; this continues to be the most responsive age bracket
- Response rates rose among individuals who identify as minorities
- Overall, consumers reported being satisfied with ORS services. 74% indicated they would recommend ORS services to family/friends and 72% indicated they feel better prepared to enter employment since working with ORS
- Supported employment, along with other services directly related to employment, were indicated as the most important services to consumers
- Communication, obtaining employment, and offering a wider array of services are areas where ORS can make improvements to better meet the needs of consumers

VI. Recommended Actions:

The SRC and ORS met to review the 2021 CNA and discuss further conclusions.

Subsequently, areas that could yield a high rate of success for all entities involved in the vocational rehabilitation process were identified. Those areas were:

- Assist the public to develop a better understanding of the ORS process and the scope of services provided by ORS
- Work in conjunction with CRP's to assist individuals with disabilities in overcoming personal barriers towards obtaining and maintaining employment
- Increase the amount and frequency of services provided to underserved and emerging populations
- Market and alleviate the stigmas of disabilities in the workplace to bridge the gap between employers and individuals with disabilities.
- Ensure benefits counseling is provided to those on SSI/SSDI at key points in the employment path
- Explore Youth Build Grants
- Data indicates that PWD's who are beneficiaries of Social Security may be an underserved population who could benefit from connecting with ORS

VII. Acknowledgements

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Jessica Palumbo

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Glenn Lanoue

Jennifer Pires

Natalia Montoya

Kayleigh McCarthy

Questions related to this Comprehensive Needs Assessment may be directed to:

John Valentine, Strategic Planning Supervisor

Office of Rehabilitation Services

40 Fountain St, Providence, RI 02903

Telephone: (401) 258-2406

Email: john.valentine@ors.ri.gov