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Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

Chapter 171 Report and Annual Individual and Family Support Plan

Fiscal Year 2021

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Executive Office of Health and Human Services



Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

Annual Family Support Plan Fiscal Year 2021 (FY21)

Background

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) is organized pursuant to M.G.L. Ch. 6 sections 74-84 and operates programs authorized by State Law, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and by the Social Security Act. The MRC provides a comprehensive array of services to individuals with significant disabilities, intended to promote equality, empowerment and independence and to “create opportunities for independent living and work.”

MRC submits the Annual Family Support Plan for Fiscal Year 2021 as required by Chapter 171 of the Acts of 2002, “an Act Providing Support to Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families.” The MRC serves individuals with all types of disabilities as its constituency. While each MRC program has a unique focus and eligibility criteria, the Commission’s overall mandate and purpose are to assist individuals with disabilities, regardless of age, nature of disability or functional ability, to thrive in their community. Across all programs, is a consumer-focused and consumer-directed planning and service delivery process that respects, and is driven by, informed decisions of empowered consumers.

As MRC continues to expand its services for students 14 to 22 supporting youth with disabilities to transition to adulthood, it is critical to expand our reach with families to assist the consumer to access accessible affordable housing, build independent living and employment skills, and identify and connect with needed services and supports, to achieve social and economic sustainability within the community. Community independence can be achieved through support from such programs as Home Modifications, Assistive Technology, Mass Access Housing Registry, Transition to Adulthood Programs (operated by Independent Living Centers), Turning 22 Supported Living, and Brain Injury Services. MRC is the state agency designated to operate the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) non-Residential and Moving Forward Plan (MFP) Community Supports Waivers, assisting eligible young adults graduating from the Massachusetts Hospital School, and adults in other nursing facilities to transition into community and family settings, with a range of waiver services. Additionally, an individual’s (and thus their family’s) economic status can be supported through MRC’s Disability Determination Services, which determines eligibility for SSA benefits.

With the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act, amendment to Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, MRC has expanded its breath of Vocational Rehabilitation services to better serve students 14+, partnering with the family to provide quality pre-employment, education/ training and employment services transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary school to careers. MRC’s pre-employment transition services assists students with disabilities in the early stages of career exploration, work-based learning experiences, counseling on opportunities for post-secondary education, work readiness training accompanies with self-advocacy and mentoring opportunities. MRC works with the family and the student with the most significant disabilities to be given every opportunity and support to receive the services necessary to achieve an employment outcome in competitive integrated employment.

Family Empowerment and Substantial Consultation

Consumer involvement has long been an essential aspect of MRC programs and services and is integrated into service delivery, program development, and day to day operations of the agency. This begins with involvement of the consumer and, when appropriate, their legal guardian, in all aspects of development and implementation of the individual service/employment plan.

Consumer input is solicited through a variety of means; informing agency decision-making, program evaluation, planning and development. Avenues for consumer involvement have included focus groups, formal and informal advisory committees, surveys, needs assessments and MRC has expanded its reach through the Office of Individual and Family Engagement. This office within the agency focuses on enhancing the consumer and family voice and strengthen our ability to co-create future services and supports. The mission of MRC's Office of Individual and Family Engagement is to support, promote and facilitate authentic and productive dialogue with people served and their families to co-develop new initiatives and to consistently improve services provided by MRC.

Fiscal Year 2020 Family Leadership Activities:

- Increased membership of the State Rehabilitation Council, a body of consumers and stakeholders reviewing and advising Vocational Rehabilitation services and needs
- In-person and zoom meetings hosted by topic-specific advisory committees, including the State Rehabilitation Council, Statewide Independent Living Council, Assistive Technology Council, and the Home Care Assistance Advisory Committee
- Commissioner attended monthly Brain Injury Commission meetings to reflect on new service needs for brain injury survivors and their families.
- Commissioner and staff attended five listening sessions across the Commonwealth listening to families and brain injury survivors regarding unmet service needs.
- Commissioner co-chairs the Autism Commission's sub-committee on employment and education, which is comprised of family members, individuals with autism, representatives of Department of Secondary Education and providers to forecast service needs for those on the Autism spectrum.
- MRC contracts with consumer-directed Independent Living Centers to provide peer support, skills training in self-advocacy and independent living, and systems advocacy on a broad range of issues that impact the lives of individuals with disabilities, and their families. MRC maintains a system of regular communication with these Centers regarding issues of concern to the community, types of services delivered, and types of supports most needed.
- Conducted a Consumer Survey focused to gain feedback on their experience as MRC services are now remote in response to COVID-19.
- On-going communication with disability awareness and advocacy organizations including the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, the Federation for Children with Special Needs, the Spinal Cord Injury Association, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, United Cerebral Palsy, and the Asperger Autism Network to obtain regular feedback regarding the needs of their constituents and the effectiveness of MRC's programs and services in addressing those needs.
- Contracting with the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN), VR staff dedicated to youth are supporting families and students as part of a demonstration grant in the cities of Springfield, Roxbury, and Lawrence to gain best practices where families are core partners in the provision of services.

- Funded the Youth Leadership Network and Mentorship Program in conjunction with Easter Seals and Partners for Youth with Disabilities.
- Through the ABI and MFP Community Waivers, MRC provided a range of services to individuals transitioning from nursing homes to community settings, providing support and services to individuals and family members who are part of the individual's support network. The MFP Waiver includes "Family Support" as a paid service to provide training and instruction about the treatment regimes, behavior plans, and the use of specialized equipment that supports the waiver participant to participate in the community. Community/Residential Family Training may also include training in family leadership, support of self-advocacy and independence of the family member. MRC continues to work with UMass and MassHealth to identify and support new individuals and organizations that may be qualified to provide this Family Support Training to waiver participants and their families.

Collaboration

MRC continues to collaborate with partner agencies and organizations to develop new resources, supports and services, or to adapt existing resources to meet the needs of those with disabilities and their families. Additionally, this entails ensuring that consumers have the knowledge of and access to these resources.

MRC continues to work with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), MassHealth and UMass, and other state disability agencies to maintain the ABI and MFP Waivers. These waivers make available such services as Respite Care, Individual Supports, Family Training Supports, Home and Vehicle Modifications, among others. Among those served through these waivers are individuals who choose to return to a family home, youth who have graduated from the Mass. Hospital School, and others in nursing homes who choose to live in their own homes or apartments in the community.

MRC partnerships with other state agencies have led to initiatives aimed at expanding services, maximizing resources, and ensuring that individuals receive services in a timely manner. MRC has partnered with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and Department of Mental Health (DMH) in providing employment services for individuals with disabilities, many of who identify themselves as heads of household. MRC's collaborations with DTA and DMH have led to programs that enable individuals with disabilities to experience a more efficient and streamlined approach to receiving vocational guidance and support.

Accessing Services and Support

To expand and improve upon methods of increasing awareness of service availability to its consumers, MRC continues to support various methods of outreach and education about available resources and supports. This includes:

- Actively partnering with UMass and other state agencies to operate MassOptions, ensuring that staff have been properly trained to handle calls for people seeking services from MRC.
- Providing information and resources to support the Independent Living Centers, Aging and Disability Resource Consortia (ADRCs), and the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts

to enable them provide extensive information and referral services to consumers, including Long Term Care Options Counseling.

- Supporting assistive technology informational websites, including GetATStuff.org, MassMatch and REquipment.
- Contracting with Assistive Technology Demonstration and Loan Centers that provide information and access to assistive technology devices.
- Supporting the MassAccess Housing Registry, a website that allows individuals with disabilities and their families to search for available housing that meet their geographic, accessibility and financial needs.
- Designing a new information and Referral Service within MRC, accompanied with an Integrated Eligibility process for all interested individuals accessing MRC once, rather than each program maintaining their own eligibility process resulting in duplication of efforts for the family.

Culturally Competent Outreach and Support

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission is committed to facilitating access to services for those with disabilities from all communities. MRC employs Bilingual Counselors and Counselors for the Deaf/hard of hearing (fluent in American Sign Language). In addition to ensuring a diverse and culturally competent staff, MRC contracts with providers to facilitate connections to services. For example:

- Outreach materials are available in multiple languages representative of Massachusetts communities.
- In addition to having Counselors for the Deaf/hard of hearing at area offices, MRC contracts for ASL interpreters and CART reporters for individual and group meetings, including remote access to ensure that meetings are accessible to all.
- As one of its core services, the Statewide Head Injury Program has a Cultural Facilitators contracted to assist consumers in connecting to services, programs and activities within their communities.
- MRC contracts with many multicultural service providers across the state and ensures providers can address the diverse needs of the communities they serve.

Interagency Collaboration

As evidenced throughout this report, MRC values interagency collaboration as a means of assuring that the best possible array of services is made available to people with disabilities and their families across the lifespan. To that end, MRC actively participates in cross-agency work groups and committees that address the needs of persons with disabilities and their families.

Fiscal Year 2020 interagency activities have included:

- MRC participates on both the Brain Injury and the Autism Commissions as multiple agencies work to improve services for individuals with these disabilities. In addition, MRC's Commissioner co-chairs the Employment Subcommittee of the Autism Commission.

- MRC continues to have representation and participation on many interagency task forces, workgroups and partnerships including the Statewide Hoarding Taskforce, the Health and Disability Partnership, Building Partnerships for the Protection of Persons with Disabilities, the Massachusetts Developmental Disabilities Council, and multiple transition-related regional workgroups.
- MRC participates on the steering committee and workgroup lead for the statewide transition initiative called the Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment (MPTE). The focus is on systems change for young adults with ID/DD to achieve better employment outcomes and includes a strong focus on parent engagement and training.
- MRC participates on and is a member of the Executive Committee for the Learn to Earn Initiative, a cross Secretariat and Agency initiative to identify barriers to employment and strategies to address these barriers.

Goals for Fiscal Year 2021

In addition to continuing the many programs and activities already described, MRC has three large scale business improvement processes to streamline and assess services for individuals with disabilities and their families. These include:

- Implementation of an Integrated Eligibility process aligning MRC program eligibility requirements, modernizing processes and automated systems, and strengthening a consumer centered culture resulting in a more seamless experience for the consumer and family.
- Procurement of the development of a new agency-wide technology platform – *One MRC* – to better improve MRC organizational effectiveness in the accomplishment of the Agency’s mission and goals.
- Concentration of its efforts on a new research measurement, reporting and needs assessment process. The goals are to: (1) enhance services for consumers; (2) increase collaboration with service providers, families and employers; and (3) empower stakeholders to derive positive change. MRC is partnering with the University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS) to support the development of these pillars for FY21. This project will be conducted in two components; 1) Understanding Current Consumer and Family Needs and 2) Modernizing Data and Reporting Approaches. This project specifically will:
 - Engage stakeholders by conducting semi-structured focus groups and interviews to identify how consumer and family service needs are being met as well as gaps and barriers in accessing and using services.
 - Develop practice guides for conducting focus groups for agency implementation.
 - Create performance/outcome measures which will facilitate the understanding of gaps and overlapping Key Performance Indicators.
 - Build dashboards for internal and external audiences.
 - Provide data and evidence-based recommendations for MRC for future constituent services and engagement activities.