This conference is the fifth in a series that began in 1996. It will take place on **August 16-18, 2004**, at the J.W. Marriott Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC. Joining Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in co-sponsoring this year’s event are the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the National Organization of Rehabilitation Partners (NORP) and the George Washington University Regional Rehabilitation Continuing Education Program (GWU/RRCEP).

The 2004 national event represents a significant departure from previous conferences. It will target the infrastructure of the State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency, especially the leadership and professional staff responsible for creating and maintaining employer development, business relations and large-scale job placement.

A blue-ribbon panel appointed by the RSA Commissioner has crafted and articulated the conference purpose as follows: “Employment and DisAbility 2004: The VR – Business Partnership” will bring businesses together with public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) leaders and specialists in the areas of employer development, business relations and job placement. Through interactive training and focused planning sessions with employers, conferees will develop strategies to enhance high quality employment and career opportunities for individuals with disabilities by engaging employers to draw upon this largely untapped resource to meet their employment needs. The conference will focus on the strategic development of VR’s national network that provides qualified job candidates and employment services to businesses.

At this time, we can provide sufficient preliminary details about the conference program that will facilitate your commitment to attend and to actively participate. General sessions will fall into two broad categories. Some sessions will follow the classic information-sharing format that this conference has highlighted since 1996. Such sessions will allow conferees to learn from employers who have productive relationships with VR agencies. Other general sessions will have an interactive format to allow participants to develop a strategic direction for the expansion of VR’s nationwide efforts at employer development. These sessions will require the presence and

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2004 National Employment Conference (continued from front cover)

participation of those within the State VR agencies empowered to provide background on current practice and to make commitments for their agency regarding new directions in strategic planning.

RSA plans to provide one training scholarship per State VR agency, which will fund travel, lodging, and the registration fee for a participant. For all other conference participants, a registration fee of $195 has been established.

Watch your mail for this year’s call for presenters. We look forward to hearing from those agencies that have effective working relationships with employers.

I hope that you will reserve the dates of August 16-18, 2004 on your calendar. Your active participation, along with that of your employer development specialist, is crucial to the continued success of initiatives that assure high-quality employment for eligible individuals with disabilities.

If you have comments that you want to share with us, or need additional information about the 2004 conference at this time, please contact Jenn Rigger on my staff at (202) 260-2179 or jenn.rigger@ed.gov.

Joanne Wilson
RSA Commissioner
Summer Employment at CBVH

"Working with interns has been a most gratifying experience for me."

This is how a New York State Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped (CBVH) counselor describes a role that has been added to her day-to-day job of assisting individuals who are blind to obtain the skills and education needed to find employment.

Summer employment is as desirable for young adults who are blind as it is for any young adult hoping to develop a resume and earn some money. As one intern noted, the internship will be a good addition to her resume and she now has a resource for recommendations when applying to colleges or looking for employment.

CBVH counselors and contract agency job placement specialists spend time during the year developing relationships with employers and trying to find matches for young adults who want summer employment. Once the right employer has been found, the employer provides training to their new summer employee and CBVH can assist with any accommodations that need to be made. In exchange, employers have the benefit of a motivated employee to carry some of the workload.

CBVH considers itself among the employers that can benefit from hiring summer interns. During the summer of 2003, nine individuals who are blind worked in CBVH offices. Each intern assisted CBVH with special projects and with general clerical work such as word processing, photocopying, faxing, handling mail and organizing files. Special projects included updating a listing of private service providers, sending mailings to CBVH consumers, and offering peer mentoring to a group of high school and college students. Many of the interns reported that their typing, computer, telephone and work related social etiquette skills improved as a result of the internship.

CBVH counselors were able to share some of their work with the interns, leaving them more time to focus on working with consumers, service delivery and case management activities.

This has proven to be a success for both the interns and the CBVH offices that have provided summer internships.

Sharon Flom
Sr. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, CBVH

The statewide coordinator of CAP (Client Assistance Program) Michael Peluso also discussed his program.

An Impartial Hearing Officer (IHO) Training was held in conjunction with VESID and THE General RRCEP II at the Albany Law School on December 9th and 10th 2003. There were 20 IHOs who attended. During the first afternoon, VESID representatives gave an overview of the Rehab Act and VESID regulation and policy.

Day two included discussion of conducting an impartial hearing by Hon. James Horan and Hon. Larry Storch. This was followed by an interactive afternoon discussion regarding effective decision writing.
MATSUE, Shimane Pref. (Kyodo) A company that builds welfare service equipment has developed a tactile computer display for people with no or severely impaired vision.

Uniplan Ltd.’s horizontal display creates images and characters by raising or lowering 3,000 plastic pins on its surface, which vision-impaired people can recognize by touch.

The computer controlling the display discerns images and characters input or drawn with a keyboard, mouse or scanner. The display arranges the corresponding pin formations within 18 seconds, the company said. The pins are raised and lowered 1 mm, and the space between pins is 2.5 mm.

Uniplan President Masaaki Takahashi said the company will further improve the flat display “so that the blind, including children who we hope will utilize it as a sort of dictionary, can use it daily.”

The firm said it will start selling the display, which measures 16 cm × 12 cm, by March 31, 2005, on a worldwide basis.

“We hope to price the display at approximately 300,000 yen (approximately $2,840 USD) and, if possible, we would like to give it an even lower price,” Takahashi said.

Uniplan said it has received a proposal to take part in the project from a U.S. organization that aids the blind.

An official at the Shimane Industrial Promotion Foundation, an entity affiliated with the Shimane Prefectural Government, said, “The display may become a global standard as a widely used item of equipment for the blind.”

The company said it wants to keep developing the display so it can eventually project images and text from Internet sites.

A Busy Day

Agency Day 2003 arrived on a wet and windy day but the spirit of agency staff radiated sunshine. The October 29th program, held at the NJ State Museum’s Auditorium, was presented in its entirety. From the acapella rendition of the national anthem by MIS Technician Sharon Burnett, through the guest speakers, the awards presentations, and the presentations by the chiefs, it was a day to learn, socialize, laugh and be proud.

The array of guest speakers included: Commissioner of the NJ Department of Labor, Albert Kroll; RSA Regional Commissioner, Allen Kropp; NJ’s Deputy Commissioner, Kevin McCabe; Assistant Commissioner, Virginia Pasqualini; and key note speaker Carl Suter, Executive Director of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR). Also in attendance were RSA’s regional representative, Anthony Spinelli; State Rehab Council Chair, Alice Hunnicutt, and ACCSES New Jersey Executive Director, Nils Richardson.

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Allen Kropp, Rehabilitation Services Administration Regional Commissioner
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f course, NJDVRS administration was well represented: Director, Tom Jennings; Assistant Director, Al Kirk; Facilities Unit Chief, Dan Will; Field Unit Chiefs, Steve Fusco, Becky Shulman and Bill Wilson; Program Unit Chief, Brian Fitzgibbons. Assistant Director, Janice Pointer was in Washington DC attending a Project Access grant conference.

The morning was devoted to presentations by the invited speakers and by Director Jennings. After lunch, the program included PowerPoint displays by the Field and Program Units, a description of the Facilities Unit’s activities, and the presentation of numerous Service and Special Recognition Awards.

Previous Agency Days were held in 1998, 1996, and 1991. Photo collages of these meetings served as mementos, as well as documentation of the “graying” of the agency! This year’s pictures, taken by Jim Howard and several participants, will highlight new faces at DVRS, to add to the record of this special event.

SPEAKERS

Albert Kroll, NJ Commissioner of Labor

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s Director Tom Jennings noted in his introduction, Commissioner Kroll will be presiding over the consolidation of training programs from New Jersey Departments of Education, Human Services, and Labor. The consolidation will lead to a name change for NJDOL; it will be called the Department of Labor and Workforce Development. Tom observed that NJDVRs receives considerable support from both the department and the Commissioner.

In his speech, Commissioner Kroll revealed that his father had a disability, so he has a personal understanding of the impact of disabilities on people’s lives. He believes these experiences have influenced his leadership style, which he describes as marked by “passion and compassion”. Recognition of these same traits in Assistant Commissioner Virginia Pasqualini prompted him to change her assigned duties, so that she assumed oversight of DVRS.

The Commissioner said that, despite a challenging fiscal situation in New Jersey, he is proud that the division did not receive any cuts. Mr. Kroll also noted New Jersey is “reaching the point where people with disabilities are becoming fully integrated into the One-Stop system.”

After congratulating counselors for their personal commitment to helping people with disabilities participate fully in society, the Commissioner concluded his remarks by saying “Thank you, for sharing my vision.”

Allen Kropp, Regional Commissioner Rehabilitation Services Administration

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n his opening comments, Mr. Kropp described Director Jennings as the “epitome of a VR leader” and recognized Anthony Spinelli, saying he very much valued Anthony’s efforts as RSA’s Regional Representative. There are two certainties with the public VR program, the Commissioner said: (1) it will continue to be one of the most successful programs in the country and (2) this is due to the dedication of its staff.

Mr. Kropp touched on a number of topics in his speech.

(1) One-Stops – In New Jersey the One-Stop system is “ahead of the curve;” in fact, other states have tried to model their systems after New Jersey’s. He also noted that Vocational Rehabilitation’s role in the One-Stop makes it a comprehensive system and that VR in NJ is meeting its mandate to provide qualified counselors.

(2) Transition – New Jersey has been involved in this activity for years, and he described the School Transition Counselors as “incredible people.”

(3) CSPD – New Jersey has “gone above and beyond” in this endeavor by creating a Masters program where none had existed previously.

(4) Performance Indicators – while nationally the percentage of clients entering competitive employment is 70%, in New Jersey that percentage is 90%. Of those individuals going into competitive employment, 62% would be expected to have significant disabilities; in New Jersey, that percentage has been 87%.

In closing, Commissioner Kropp said that Joanne Wilson, the Commissioner of RSA, is looking for three things from VR counselors: high quality employment for clients, high expectations of client capabilities, and client empowerment.

Virginia Pasqualini, Assistant Commissioner of Labor Disability Services

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rs. Pasqualini opened her remarks with this statement “It’s a great day for VR and the Department of Labor”. While not a VR expert, she said she is learning from the DVRS administrators and is impressed by the staff’s “passion and compassion”, echoing Commissioner Kroll’s theme.

After 31 years with NJDOL, the Assistant Commissioner described Labor as a “department of opportunity” and said that public service “is a great career.”

She ended her speech by noting that a Disability Mentoring Day would be held in 2004 and by sharing some personal advice, prompted by the loss of her long-time secretary: take care of your health - reduce stress, use humor, and look out for each other.

Kevin McCabe, Deputy Commissioner of Labor

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s the person responsible for the day to day operation of NJDOL, he is involved with the Workforce Development consolidation, as well as with the effort to upgrade enforcement of wage and hour laws.
Despite this focus, he said, “we at the department did not lose sight of what you do out in the vineyards.” He added that Assistant Commissioner Pasqualini and Director Jennings fight daily for the tools VR needs to attain its mission, including being involved in all plans concerning the consolidation; “we want a true One-Stop partnership.”

Noting that all of DOL lost experienced personnel with the early retirement package, he gave credit to DVRS’ accomplishments during the past year. “It’s a co-operative effort between the Assistant Commissioner, your director, and you, the staff.”

Regarding the upcoming consolidation, Mr. McCabe explained the Administration had consulted with John Heldrich (from the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University), Henry Plotkin (Director of the State Employment and Training Commission) and Joann Hamill (Assistant Commissioner for Workforce Programs). The plan will place 26 funding sources for training programs “under one roof”, with DVRS as a key partner for people with disabilities. This consolidation is the largest transfer of state programs in New Jersey’s history.

The Deputy Commissioner presented Assistant Commissioner Virginia Pasqualini and Director Jennings with a Proclamation from Governor McGreevey. It acknowledged DVRS’ 84 years of service to New Jersey, as well as October’s designation as Disability Awareness Month.

**Thomas Jennings, NJDVRS Director**

Mr. Jennings opened his remarks by noting that DVRS has sufficient funding and enjoys DOL support but, most importantly, the agency has its staff – “our most valuable resource.” In welcoming the new employees, he observed that the public VR system has existed for 84 years in the United States and its possessions, so “we are part of a huge global effort to help people with disabilities; you all play a significant part in helping consumers embark on their career ventures.” He described the public VR system as characterized by consistency and growth.

In discussing the high rate of customer satisfaction that the agency enjoys, he read two consumer letters of appreciation, adding that similar letters frequently arrive at DVRS. In the 2002-2003 fiscal year, NJDVRS rehabilitated 3,689 individuals, quite an accomplishment considering the statewide reduction of staff which occurred due to the June 2002 “early out.”

Other accomplishments:

1) Clarification and simplification of the Ticket To Work program; currently, DVRS holds 311 tickets, has established six Memos of Understanding with Employment Networks, and has received $677,000 in Social Security reimbursements.

2) Expansion of Transitioning From School to Work services, including provision of Lead Transition Counselors in each office and assignment of liaisons to every high school. Since August, statistics include: 10,135 technical consults, 1,635 IEPs attended, 2,016 presentations to students, parents, or school personnel.

3) Continuation of the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD); this effort includes development of the Masters program at UMDNJ and changes in hiring regulations requiring a Masters Degree for new counselors. Breakdown: 35 new hires with Masters, 22 graduates from the UMDNJ program and 26 counselors still attending, state-wide total of 24 administrators and 96 counselors with advanced degrees, 41 counselors who are CRCs, and 32 counselors who have been promoted since obtaining a masters.

4) Receipt of $2.3 million in state funding for long term follow-along services; currently there are 84 providers of Supported Employment services.

These are the agency’s in-process activities. Mr. Jennings also discussed new initiatives of the 2004 fiscal year. These include:

1) Medicaid waiver for Extended Employment and long term follow-along services for Supported Employment (which would free-up SE funding and reduce the risk of vendors not accepting new referrals because of funding caps);

2) Developing a strategic plan for DVRS programs involving deaf, hard of hearing and late-deafened consumers (consultant Pat Tomlinson has already prepared a detailed needs assessment report);

3) Leading implementation of the Project Access Grant, to improve accessibility to One-Stop programs (some consumers don’t need DVRS for vocational activities and all consumers should have choices);

In the 10 years that he has been Director, Mr. Jennings’ vision has been to see NJDVRS recognized as the most efficient and effective system in the state for providing vocational rehabilitation services, enabling individuals with disabilities to achieve an employment outcome.

**There are 50 million Americans with disabilities. Of that group who are aged 18 to 64, 68% are NOT working.**
consistent with their strengths, needs, interests, abilities and capabilities.

Keynote speaker: Carl Suter, CSAVR Executive Director

Mr. Suter opened his remarks by describing his initial foray into the job market, when some prospective employers "saw my wheelchair, not me". One interviewer, however, had a specific need and "saw past the chair" to give Carl "an opportunity – which is what people with disabilities want."

After some exposure to his wife's experiences as a rehabilitation professional (RSA Commissioner), Carl returned to school to make a career change. In the late 1980's, he was led to make the bold prediction that, due to new disability laws such as the ADA, society might not need a public VR system by the millennium. He had to admit he was wrong. "We still need specialized services by skilled, trained counselors." While Workforce is a good program for most people desiring employment, "Expertise is needed."

Mr. Suter reviewed some of his experiences in D.C., working with legislators on both sides of the aisle to design and pass laws helpful to people with disabilities. He noted that, in his opinion, the Senate has taken a more cautious approach to WIA and the disability issues related to it. In particular, the Senate Health Committee's focus has been "to preserve the integrity of VR".

Mr. Suter noted that there are 50 million Americans with disabilities. Of that group who are aged 18 to 64, 68% are NOT working. "Nationally, fifteen million people could benefit from the public VR system, but we are serving only one million", he said.

In the case of WIA, Congress is not funding the program; the partners themselves are expected to contribute a portion of their funds to maintaining the program's infrastructure. This arrangement has a negative effect on DVRS programming "since we are already desperately under funded". CSAVR's plan: a fixed cap charge – not a percentage of funding – billed to each partner.

Related to VR program funding, another important issue for CSAVR is Transition from School to Work. Initially, the plan was to have dedicated funding for these activities. Due to other federal fiscal priorities, this plan has changed. Now the goal is to use the IDEA amendments to arrange funding of Transition services. "So far, Congress has not come up with a single dollar to help Transition occur". Of the current funding options, Mr. Suter's preference is to make VR responsible for certain Transitioning responsibilities after the program receives 100 million dollars beyond the FY '04 appropriations. In other words, the degree of transitioning activities would be tied to level of funding – perhaps thereby encouraging increased Congressional financial support. As of now, Transition remains an unfunded mandate.

As Commissioner Kropp had done, Mr. Suter expressed a concern about expectations of people with disabilities. In his situation, he was encouraged to believe he could achieve whatever he chose; that was not the situation he observed with many clients, when he was Director of Illinois OVR. "I was struck by the low expectations of people with disabilities – to accept a lot less in life. Our responsibility as VR professionals is to help clients raise their expectations and realize their capabilities."

AFTER LUNCH

The afternoon of Agency Day 2003 was devoted to acquainting field employees with Central Office Staff and to presenting over three dozen awards to workers throughout the agency.

Field Chiefs Steve Fusco, Becky Shulman and Bill Wilson presented an often humorous PowerPoint Program about field office activities. Important 2003 Statistics: 12,859 applications; 10,728 eligibilities made; 7,057 Initial Plans written; 3,689 rehabilitations achieved. Program Chief, Brian Fitzgibbons and PPDD I, Donna Brown also used PowerPoint to review the Program Unit staff and their responsibilities. Facilities Chief, Dan Will, described the activities of his unit, including discussion of the upcoming CRP list, the current cap on follow-along funds, and the impact of HIPPA and the Medicaid Waiver on DVRS programs/procedures. PPDS I, Paul Ginty filled in for Chief, Jack Kelliher in acknowledging members of the Administrative Unit.

At the awards presentations, Service Awards given to 10 individuals acknowledged their years with DVRS; four of them had reached the 30 years mark! Training Awards were presented to eight graduates of the 2003 Masters Program and two recent grads of the Support Specialist Program. Excellence Awards honored seven Central Office Staff, 28 field staff, and a surprised Assistant Commissioner Pasqualini.
A View of Region II is published twice a year by RRCEP II located at the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York.

If you have an article you would like to submit for publication in this newsletter, e-mail Daniel Yeo at dkyeo@buffalo.edu.

We cannot guarantee publication of articles submitted, but all will be considered.

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