

Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation:  
VR Reach UP Program  
Annual Report: July 1, 2005 – June 30, 2006

## Executive Summary

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation provides vocational counseling, case management, support services and job search assistance to all welfare recipients in Vermont who possess a significant disability-related barrier to employment. The program promotes the transitional nature of TANF benefits and assists job seekers with disabilities to move from welfare to work.

The purpose of this annual report is to present progress made to 1) promote stable and substantial employment for participants with disabilities who, with assistance from VR, are capable of supporting their families; 2) promote part time employment for those who are capable of working but due to their disabilities are not able to achieve employment at a level which will allow them to fully support their family; and 3) assist individuals to achieve Supplemental Security Income (SSI) whose disability prevents them achieving any significant level of employment.

*Note: Some material in this report is broken out according to the VR program that is providing the services. The VR program serving only Reach Up participants is referred to in this report as the VR/RU Program. The general VR program serving all people with a disability-related barrier to employment which includes some Reach Up participants is referred to as the VR General Program.*

## Outcomes

### 1. Employment

- A total of 119 Reach Up participants with disabilities achieved stable employment during the past program year. This total combines closures from the VR general caseload and the specialized VR/RU caseload. *(Note: Stable employment means employed and not requiring significant services for 90 consecutive days.)*
- The mean time from enrollment in VR to stable employment for the 119 employed participants was 17.88 months. The mean time for RU participants served in the VR/RU Program was 14.79 months.
- In spite of the more “job ready” nature of participants served in the VR General Program, the intensive services available in the VR/RU Program actually result in more timely closures to employment. A total of 42.3% of the successful employment outcomes achieved by our General Program were achieved in 18 months or longer. This compares with 24.6% for employment closures in the VR/RU Program that required 18 months or longer.
- For all 504 participants whose cases were closed this past year for any reason, the mean time to closure was 22.26 months. (Reasons other than employment include achieving SSI, long term medical exemption, returned to Economic Services for sanction, or the grant closed because the individual moved, lost their children, etc.)

- For comparison purposes the time to employment closure for all 252 participants who achieved stable employment through the VR/RU Program since July 1, 2003, the average length of time to closure remains virtually unchanged in all that time.

## 2. SSI Closures

- A total of 120 Reach Up participants were permanently removed from TANF benefits between 7/01/05 and 6/30/06 with the assistance of the VR/RU Program.
- Since program inception in 2001, 412 Reach Up participants have been assisted by their VR/RU Counselor to successfully complete the SSI application and appeals process and exit Reach Up.
- About 88% of applicants are approved on average within approximately 5 months. The other 12% go to the Administrative Law Judge appeal phase, and approval averages about 18 months for these cases.

## 3. Numbers Served

- A total of 1218 Reach Up participants received employment preparation and related services from Vocational Rehabilitation, which represents 15% of the total number of families receiving TANF benefits. Of those, 488 participants were active in the VR Reach Up Program. There are 222 individuals currently applying for Social Security benefits due to the severity of their disability.
- The number of individuals waiting for services as of June 30, 2006 was 84 with an additional 75 participants waiting for services but being served by Referral Case Managers who coordinate with VR Counselors to preparing participants for more meaningful participation in activities within the VR Reach Up Program.
- After removing all SSI applicants awaiting a final decision during the appeal process, the number of RU participants still active over 24 months is reduced from 15.1% to 9.2%, meaning 39 individuals have been on our caseloads more than 24 months and are not applying for SSI benefits.

## 4. Demographics

- Participants served in the VR General Program were twice as likely to have some post-secondary education as those served by the specialized VR Reach Up Program.
- Participants served in the VR Reach Up Program were more likely not to have completed high school.
- The most prevalent primary disability is a cognitive impairment (56% in the VR General Program and 68% in the VR Reach Up Program. This includes mental illness and developmental disabilities.
- In a survey of VR Reach Up Counselors, mental illness, long term generational welfare and children with serious disabilities or behavioral issues were cited as the top three functional barriers to employment.

## Programmatic Costs

The majority of costs associated with supporting RU participants to transition off TANF benefits are secured through the ESD Matrix of Support Services. This data is available from ESD. However, Vocational Rehabilitation also contributes significantly in support of RU participants' rehabilitation. The following table shows the VR contribution by category for the past fiscal year. These figures include all RU participants served by VR.

### **Additional VR Cost to Support RU Participants**

Assessments	15,035
Diagnostics	7,213
Training	10,662
Transportation	39,664
Other Costs	36,036
TOTALS	\$108,610

## New Initiatives to Enhance Caseload Movement

Given the transitional intent of TANF and the ever-increasing urgency to assist participants to engage in work activities quicker, new and better strategies are needed for all programs engaged in assisting Reach Up participants to engage in the active pursuit of employment. The VR/Reach Up program has developed a new service model that will facilitate caseload movement and address the predominantly mental health barriers of participants on the VR caseload.

- VR/RU program participants will participate in a mental health group (or a related Dialectical Behavior Therapy or substance abuse program) run by a therapist familiar with this population that will address mental health and substance abuse issues for approximately 8 - 12 weeks.
- Upon completion of the therapy portion of the group process, participants will continue to meet at more frequent intervals to cover pre-vocational and vocational topics, led by the VR Counselor. The VABIR job developer will attend meetings to discuss work experience opportunities.
- Participants will be placed as soon as possible into job shadowing or limited work experiences and increase work participation until part time or full time employment is attained, continuing to get support and guidance from the group.
- The job developer and job coach will provide on site support and communicate with the employer to ensure success. This ensures that problems can be immediately dealt with and discussed with the participant.

This model has been piloted in St. Albans and Bellows Falls. Two additional groups are planned, again in St. Albans and also in Brattleboro. Although data is incomplete on the outcomes of these groups, initial indications are that caseload movement is enhanced and the support participants receive from their peers is valuable and motivating.

## Recommendations

This Annual Report has emphasized caseload movement as the principal indicator of program value. To that end we recommend that:

- Resources are secured to ensure adequate access to certified substance abuse counselors who will accept Medicaid.
- VR/RU clients have access to budgeting or money management classes *after* they start to work. This training should be coupled with the concept of gradual decreases in grants as participants earn increasing amounts in wages.
- Institute an empirical outcome oriented evaluation system with emphasis on numbers of people that leave the welfare system, types of outcomes such as caseload movement, employment and SSI, relying less on anecdotal measures of effectiveness. Effectiveness data should form the basis for the implementation of new program procedures.
- Improve the disability screening system to enhance the likelihood that people with disabilities won't remain under-served on ESD caseloads while their 60 months of benefits time elapses. ESD needs to ask questions that will expedite movement of appropriate participants to VR for disability specific services.