

Statement by

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**On RSA's Leadership in Improving Employment Outcomes for Students with Intellectual Disabilities
Transitioning to Careers**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to appear before the Committee today. Mr. Chairman, your decades of leadership in and commitment to inclusion of individuals with disabilities as full partners in every facet of our society has resulted in significant gains. I applaud you for continuing to seek greater understanding of the barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from being full partners in our society and for your tenacity in seeking solutions. Senator Enzi, I want to also thank you for your leadership in this area and for your continued commitment to skills training and employment of people with disabilities.

I am pleased to discuss the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) State Grants program administered by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services under the U.S. Department of Education. It is an honor to serve as the Commissioner of RSA and to provide national leadership for the public VR and independent living programs. Before accepting my Presidential appointment 14 months ago, I served as the Director of the Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation from 2005 – 2009 and bring more than 30 years of experience to the work that I do. My national and State level experiences give me a unique perspective on the challenges and barriers that young people with intellectual disabilities face and on the possibilities available for more successful transition outcomes.

Today, I will discuss some of the Department's programs and efforts related to youth with disabilities. However, my attention is primarily given to youth with intellectual disabilities and how state VR agencies serve in a leadership role to support youth with intellectual disabilities to develop and maintain careers. Work is an important marker of full inclusion and participation in the American economy and society.

The VR State Grants program, authorized under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, is a federal/state program that assists individuals with disabilities to obtain, regain and maintain employment. Nationally, there are about 1 million individuals with disabilities in various phases of the vocational rehabilitation process within the VR system, about 93 percent of whom are individuals with significant disabilities. State VR agencies may provide a variety of individualized services, including community-based

assessments and functional evaluations, vocational training, career guidance, job placement, on-the job supports, and other services that are necessary to achieve an employment outcome. Services are provided under an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) based on the individual's strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice.

The VR program has yielded measurable results for decades. In FY 2009, State VR agencies assisted approximately 180,000 individuals to achieve employment, 93 percent of whom were individuals with significant disabilities. Of the individuals who achieved employment, 95 percent obtained competitive employment. In the VR program, competitive employment means that the employment is in an integrated setting with earnings at or above the minimum wage.

My vision for youth with intellectual disabilities begins with establishing high expectations. It is incumbent upon all of us -- educators, service providers, parents, students, and employers-- to expect more from and for our country's youth with intellectual disabilities. We need to expect that youth with intellectual disabilities can engage in a broad range of work occupations, not just a few "traditional" occupations, such as janitorial, food service and office occupations. We should expect that youth with intellectual disabilities can earn wages that can lead to self-sufficiency. Some youth with intellectual disabilities are currently finding employment outside the "traditional" occupations in healthcare, banking, and the Federal government, and are earning good wages. But we need to do more and we can do more.

To help more youth with intellectual disabilities reach higher goals, we are:

- assessing where we are now to establish performance goals for our programs that reflect high expectations;
- identifying current promising practices in order to evaluate results and identify successful models for replication;
- targeting research and demonstration activities to develop additional effective models; and
- making investments to support the implementation of current and new practices.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Data

We know that both schools and VR agencies play major roles in preparing and placing youth with intellectual disabilities into employment. Current IDEA trend data from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) show that graduation rates for students with disabilities are improving, but less dramatically for students with intellectual disabilities. The percentage of students with disabilities who left school by graduating with a regular high school diploma increased from 46% in school year 1998-1999 to 60.0% in school year 2008-2009. For students with intellectual disabilities, the percentage who left school by graduating with a regular high school diploma increased from 36.8% to 38.7% in the same

period. Dropout rates show better improvement than graduation rates for students with intellectual disabilities. The percentage of all students with disabilities who left school by dropping out decreased from 42.6% in school year 1998-1999 to 22.4% in school year 2008-09. For students with intellectual disabilities, the percentage dropping out decreased from 36.0% to 19.8% during that decade. These positive trends suggest that OSEP and RSA's focus on improving transition services are resulting in greater success and that there are pockets of excellence in our special education and VR systems that we can build on.

VR Program Data on Youth with Disabilities

In FY 2009, there were approximately 330,000 individuals whose service records were closed after receiving services under an IPE. Of these individuals, about 107,400 (33 percent) were youth with disabilities aged 14-24 at time of application for VR services. Of these transition age youth with disabilities, 17,198 (16 percent) were youth with intellectual disabilities.

RSA data also show that fewer youth with intellectual disabilities who apply for VR services drop out of the VR program after only applying for services as compared to the larger group of all youth with disabilities. Only 3.8% of youth with intellectual disabilities exited the VR services program from applicant status, while 13.6% of all youth with disabilities exited the VR services program from applicant status. We believe that local partnerships and increased collaborative efforts to assist youth with intellectual disabilities may be having a positive impact on the VR dropout rate for this population.

Services

The VR services most commonly provided to youth with intellectual disabilities include job readiness training (26.7%), job search assistance (31%), job placement services (44.8%) and on-the-job supports (39.8%). Supportive services such as transportation (23.8%) and maintenance (11.5%) are also provided as needed. Of the 17,198 youth with intellectual disabilities whose service records were closed after receiving VR services in FY 2009, 1,266 (7.4%) received postsecondary occupational or vocational training, and an additional 528 (3.1%) received college or university training. New initiatives promoting postsecondary programs for youth with intellectual disabilities and recent changes in the Higher Education Opportunity Act and regulations making student financial aid available for youth with intellectual disabilities should improve these numbers.

Employment Outcomes

FY 2009 VR data show that transition age youth with intellectual disabilities achieve employment outcomes at about the same rate as other transition age youth with disabilities (52.3% vs. 53.7%). In addition, of the approximately 55,650 transition age youth with disabilities who obtained competitive employment outcomes in that year, a total of 8,339 (14.4%) were youth with intellectual disabilities. However, youth with intellectual disabilities were about three times more likely to achieve competitive employment with supports (supported employment) than other transition age youth participating in the VR program.

Broad Occupational Areas

There are indications that VR consumers are being employed in a broad range of occupational areas. In FY 2009, VR employment outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities occurred in 25 occupational areas. However, the employment outcomes were still concentrated in food preparation and service (24.1% of employment outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities), cleaning and maintenance occupations (16.4%), and office and administrative support occupations (11.4%). Youth with intellectual disabilities also achieved employment outcomes in production occupations (8.9%); personal care and service occupations (7.7%); sales and related occupations (7%); installation, maintenance and repair occupations (4.1%); healthcare support occupations (2.2%); and constructive and extraction occupations (1.4%).

Earnings and Hours Worked

To help individuals with intellectual disabilities reach earnings that lead to self-sufficiency, State VR agencies and their partners are looking at ways to maximize their participation in the workforce, increasing both hours worked per week and hourly wages, consistent with the informed choice of the individual. RSA 2009 data show that youth with intellectual disabilities who achieved competitive employment worked on average 24.4 hours per week and earned on average \$7.70 per hour. By comparison, all youth with disabilities achieving competitive employment worked on average 30.4 hours per week and earned \$9.51 per hour on average. Transition age youth with intellectual disabilities achieve full time employment (defined as 35 or more hours per week) only about half as often as all transition age youth.

Some VR agencies are doing better in assisting youth with intellectual disabilities to achieve full time employment outcomes with good wages. For example, RSA data shows that West Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Delaware, and Nebraska have found full time jobs for more than 40% of transition age youth with intellectual disabilities participating in their VR services programs. Other states, including Connecticut, Vermont, Washington, Wyoming and Arizona, have demonstrated success in placing eligible VR youth with intellectual disabilities in jobs with wages higher than \$9.00 per hour.

Youth with intellectual disabilities may work less than full time as a result of individual circumstances, but there also are other factors such as system barriers, the lack of available supports, as well as the effect of low expectations that affect their level of participation and earnings in the workforce. For example, lower hourly wages may also be a result of low expectations and/or employment in traditional occupations. Approaches that will lead to employment in a broader range of occupations may also result in commensurately higher hourly wages.

CURRENT POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE, PROMISING PRACTICES AND INITIATIVES

Now, I will highlight some promising and innovative practices that are showing positive results. In many of these practices, a key factor is creative collaboration among providers and stakeholders. RSA is working closely with the Department's Office of Special Education Programs and the Office for Postsecondary Education to coordinate transition efforts for youth with intellectual disabilities. In addition, RSA is working with the Department of Labor and other Federal partners to identify solutions to some of the existing system barriers, but we can do more.

Although we have ongoing collaborative activities and data sharing agreements with the Social Security Administration (SSA), more work with SSA and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is needed to identify system barriers and solutions. For example, the Affordable Care Act created new options and additional flexibilities for the provision of home and community-based services in Medicaid. The findings and information obtained from this interagency information exchange will be disseminated through our 2012 Institute on Rehabilitation Issues paper on the implications of the Affordable Care Act for improving VR outcomes.

At the State and Federal level, a number of collaborative program models are exhibiting encouraging results. In Iowa, the State VR agencies have had success working with the Veterans Administration (VA) to place students with intellectual disabilities in high paying, full-time Federal employment with benefits. The VA shared position descriptions with the VR agency. For example, the VR agency has conducted job analyses for a variety of jobs using position descriptions shared by the VA. The VR agency then pre-screened candidates to refer job-ready individuals for direct hire through the Federal Government's schedule A appointing authority. In addition, the VR agency implemented customized training programs to develop a pool of job-ready candidates for future workforce needs.

In Ohio, Project Search, a nationally recognized transition program, began in a hospital setting and has been widely replicated in private industry and government, including within the Federal government at the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services and Labor. Project Search exemplifies interagency collaboration among school systems, VR agencies and business communities to provide paid work experiences and internships for youth with intellectual disabilities prior to exiting school. Project Search offers job readiness training and experiential learning for high school seniors with intellectual disabilities through total immersion at the employer work site. This program is a model for exposing youth with intellectual disabilities to a variety of nontraditional work settings while changing employers' attitudes about the capabilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

In Utah, a coalition of the State VR agency (DVR), the State Department of Services to Persons with Disabilities (DD), and advocacy groups planned and proposed a braided funding program of supports designed for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The coalition presented a proposal to its State legislature indicating the compelling need for additional funds to support training and employment opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Utah State legislature funded the Utah Partnership Plus initiative to serve eligible individuals waiting for DD

services. The Utah DVR agency provided the upfront job placement services and the initial on-the job supports, and State appropriated funds were used to provide interim support until funds from Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work program became available for continued support.

During the first two years, at an estimated cost of \$245,000 per year, the Utah program provided services that resulted in employment for approximately 200 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities per year. Even in the current constrained fiscal environment, Utah State legislators have provided continued support for Utah Partnership Plus. With this continued funding, 44 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities were placed into employment in the first quarter of this fiscal year. This effort shows how collaboration among agencies and advocates can leverage funding and develop systems of support for youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities beyond the availability of VR services.

The Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS), in conjunction with public schools and TransCen, Inc., a research, training and development non-profit organization, has established relationships with employers in the Washington, DC, area to place individuals with intellectual disabilities in competitive employment. Working with the Maryland DORS, TransCen uses an internship approach that in many cases results in employment. TransCen also provides a job development function in assisting DORS, schools, and employers deliver employment experiences for youth with intellectual disabilities. Youth with intellectual disabilities have obtained employment in law firms, hotels and the Federal government. These efforts show how the use of worksite based internship approaches can result in employment in a broad range of occupations.

My last example is from the State of Washington. Washington leaders who shared a commitment for improving employment outcomes for individuals with intellectual disabilities worked in collaboration with community colleges to create an employment specialist certificate program. These professionals provide employment support to individuals with intellectual disabilities and play an integral role in assisting people to become contributing members of their community. The program offers high quality training taught by skilled professionals, builds on the skills of the participants, provides opportunities for networking, and builds future leaders in supported employment.

These models are examples of just some of the promising partnerships and practices we can cultivate, disseminate, and replicate to improve outcomes, not just in isolated areas, but all across the country.

RESEARCH AND DEMONSTRATION ACTIVITIES TO DEVELOP ADDITIONAL MODELS OR PRACTICES

The Department has invested in many research projects over the last few years to continue to identify and tackle the challenges faced by youth with intellectual disabilities, many of them housed at the Institute for Community Inclusion. You will hear from Bill Kiernan, the Institute director, today.

Examples of projects funded by the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) include the following:

The Rehabilitation and Research Training Center for Vocational Rehabilitation Research (VR RRTC) conducts a project that identifies and evaluates best practices in VR employment services for individuals with developmental disabilities. The VR RRTC disseminates products and new knowledge throughout the VR and workforce systems, and to a number of disability and advocacy organizations.

The University of Minnesota is developing a multi-state database on predictors of individual outcomes for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The purpose of the study is to merge and analyze the records of more than 10,000 randomly sampled adults from 15 purposely selected, nationally distributed states to examine the interactions among individual characteristics, service delivery models and settings, and individual outcomes and experiences. The project will evaluate the methods that support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities at work and in their communities.

Syracuse University (SU) is building and evaluating the Peer-to-Peer Project, a peer support network for students with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities in higher education. This project operates a network of undergraduates to provide peer supports to students with significant disabilities who are taking classes at SU. SU has a dual enrollment program for students up to age 21 in high school, and an access program for students over age 21 who have finished high school. Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities audit courses to meet personal, academic, and vocational goals. The Peer-to-Peer Project operates from an innovative, universally designed, and person-centered framework that uses peer support in flexible, individualized ways, as needed by students with intellectual disabilities to fulfill goals and maximize inclusion.

The Center on Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities conducts research and disseminates information on promising practices that facilitate and support individuals with intellectual disabilities access to inclusive postsecondary education resulting in improved long-term independent living and employment outcomes. This Center conducts research to address the gaps in knowledge about participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities aged 13-26 participating in postsecondary education programs.

In addition to NIDRR's research projects, the Department awarded \$10.9 million in 2010 to support grants under the Model Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities into Higher Education (TPSID) program. The TPSID program, authorized in 2008 by the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (HEOA), supports model postsecondary programs and demonstrations that promote the successful transition of students with intellectual disabilities into higher education. TPSID grants were awarded to 27 postsecondary institutions and consortia of institutions to enable them to create or expand high quality, inclusive model comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs for students with intellectual disabilities to attend college. Funds were also awarded to support a Coordinating Center at the Institute for Community Inclusion to establish performance measures and to compile data on program participants and their outcomes.

NEW INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The President's FY 2012 budget proposes strategic investments that will fuel the continued innovation and collaboration necessary to achieve outcomes that will lead to individual self-sufficiency and justify keeping expectations high for young people with intellectual disabilities.

Future success must start with a strong and inclusive education foundation. The President and Secretary believe that students with disabilities are general education students first, so the President's 2012 budget prioritizes investment in programs that will encourage innovation, support State- and district-led reform, and help improve outcomes for students with disabilities in the context of the regular education environment.

In addition, proposed increased investments in IDEA programs signal the President's steadfast commitment to the need for individualized services and supports for young people with disabilities. With a proposed increase of \$200 million for IDEA Part B Grants to states, the Department hopes to improve the quality of the education that students with disabilities receive so they can participate in the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible and are prepared for college and a career.

The 2012 budget request also includes an increase of \$50 million in Part C for grants to States for early intervention services for young children with disabilities and their families, to encourage States to implement a seamless system of services for children with disabilities from birth through age 5. To support a holistic approach to the transition of young people on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits, the President has requested \$40 million for PROMISE: Promoting Readiness of Minors in SSI, a pilot program which would be jointly administered with the Social Security Administration, the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Labor to improve health, education, and post-school outcomes of children who receive SSI.

The Department has requested funding in FY 2011 and FY 2012 for continuation awards to the current 27 TPSID grantees and the coordinating Center as part of the request for the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE).

The President's FY 2012 budget request would provide approximately \$3.1 billion for the VR State Grants program to assist individuals with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment. The Administration also believes that additional targeted investments in Rehabilitation Act programs are needed to help spur new and innovative approaches to improving post-secondary results for students with disabilities. To capitalize on the potential of technology to benefit individuals with disabilities, including youth with disabilities, \$10 million has been proposed for Access through Cloud Computing, a new initiative that would seek to improve Internet and technology access for individuals with disabilities

through research and development activities to provide on-demand accommodations that are stored remotely. This new initiative would be administered by NIDRR in consultation with the National Science Foundation, the Access Board, the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and other White House offices. Access through Cloud Computing will benefit students and employees with disabilities who, as a result of this innovative research, will be able to bring their accessibility accommodations with them to any platform at schools, libraries and work locations.

Finally, the President's 2012 budget request includes almost \$380 million for the Workforce Innovation Fund (Fund) to encourage innovation and support projects to identify and validate effective strategies for improving the delivery of services and outcomes for beneficiaries under the Rehabilitation Act and other programs authorized by the Workforce Investment Act. Jointly administered by the Department of Education and Department of Labor, the Fund would support competitive grants for projects that strengthen collaboration across program and agency lines, and identify the most promising approaches for improving services and achieving better outcomes. Some approaches we might explore include innovative models that provide youth with significant disabilities, including those with intellectual disabilities, opportunities for career exploration and work experience; leverage strategic partnerships among State VR agencies, community colleges, employers, and other nontraditional partners; and engage employers in creating full-time career opportunities with benefits for individuals with significant disabilities.

Planned 2011 Activities

These 2012 investments will build upon the Department's strategies already underway. The VR program is an integral partner in achieving the goals set forth in the President's Executive Order 13548 that directs the Federal government to be a model employer for hiring people with disabilities. State VR agencies that have proven success with Federal partnerships around the country will step up their technical assistance to assist in recruiting and hiring practices so that all Federal agencies and hiring officials will benefit.

RSA has begun work on developing performance measures that reward States for reaching milestones that lead to better employment outcomes and self-sufficiency for youth with disabilities, especially those of transition age youth who may require longer services and more supports.

We will use what we have learned from RSA monitoring activities and knowledge translation research to accelerate the dissemination of information obtained from projects that support successful outcomes, provide technical assistance, as necessary include important partners, and to evaluate results of these projects. To that end, RSA, along with the other components of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, will host a national conference that will inform participants about research findings and practices that have demonstrated improved educational and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Our President's leadership is translated through our programs and passion. We share your commitment to and interest in seeing America's youth with intellectual disabilities have lives and careers that meet high expectations and enable them to live as independently as they desire. Our young people with intellectual disabilities deserve our best effort. We are excited about the potential demonstrated by our current projects, partnerships, and proposed investments. We look forward to working with you to accomplish what we know we can achieve together.

Thank you and I am happy to take your questions.