

Long-Term Care Committee

Senator Dever, Chairman

Wednesday, November 7, 2007

Chairman Dever and members of the Long-Term Care Committee, I am Nancy McKenzie, from the Department of Human Services (DHS). I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this committee. I am here to provide testimony regarding Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services provided to youth with severe emotional disturbances and related eligibility requirements.

In addition to my testimony today, I am providing you with a copy of the brochure "Taking the Next Step: The Role of ND VR Consulting & Services", which describes how we help students with disabilities transition from high school to college and/or work.

Research has shown that students with disabilities can face many challenges in accessing or participating in educational or employment support systems. VR Transition Services aim to help remove or minimize existing barriers.

Eligibility requirements include:

- A physical or mental impairment that has been documented by a professional in the field;
- The impairment results in an impediment to employment;
- The individual requires VR services to prepare for, enter into, engage in, or retain employment.

VR typically begins involvement with students at the junior or senior year of high school (age 16+); however, we might start our work with students as young as 14 if complex factors are involved. Most students have an Individual Education Plan (IEP), or 504 Plan (for physical disabilities).

We seek to have an Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) in place by high school graduation; at times, this may not be possible if we are awaiting evaluation results or if referral doesn't happen until the end of high school. Ongoing contacts with schools are in place to encourage early referral for best outcomes.

A stronger focus on transition-age services is occurring at the federal, regional, and state level of Vocational Rehabilitation. North Dakota has a State Transition Steering Council, chaired by representatives of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and VR. A Memorandum of Understanding between our agencies is in place. The Transition Council includes members from each region of the state from education, independent living, Job Service, VR, consumers, etc. In October of 2008, the Annual VR Conference will be held in conjunction with DPI and will focus strongly on transitional issues.

In the last two years, efforts have been made to establish regional interagency transition teams to identify and work on local issues. These vary in their evolution to date. Region VII (Bismarck) is one region with an active team, whose chairperson is from Bismarck High School. The program in this region contracts with Housing Industry Training (HIT), whose staff obtain referrals, do school tours, set up job shadowing and

other experiences for students. VR Counselors perform the assessment and develop the employment plans.

The VR Division has set aside \$400,000 from its biennial budget for regional transition projects. Those funds are used as described above. Based on the input the DHS receives from our stakeholder meetings, and the continued focus on developing more transitional services, I would anticipate increasing demand in this area.

In summary, VR Transition Services are addressing an important part of the needs of youth with varying disabilities in the state. Our ability to effectively intervene is clearly tied to effective partnering with educational and other systems.

That concludes my testimony; I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.