



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

55 Utley Drive, Camp Hill, PA 17011

Voice: (717) 975-2004 or (888) 250-5175 TTY: (888) 559-2658 Fax: (888) 524-9282

Email: parc@parehabilitationcouncil.org Website: parehabilitationcouncil.org

Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) 2023 - 2024 Federal Position Paper

The Council is mandated by statute with informing and advising the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), the State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Legislature, and the Governor in PA on the diverse issues affecting employment of people with disabilities. OVR's total participants served was 38,670 for Program Year 2022-2023. According to the most recent Act 26 Report, during the second quarter of the SFY 2023-2024, which reports data from 10/01/2023 to 12/31/2023, a total of 7,704 students with disabilities received Pre-ETS-related services. There are over 168,158 students with disabilities age 14-22 eligible for transition services in PA, with 4,438 customers aged 16 to 18, and 84 customers under the age of 16. This document summarizes the Council's position on key federal laws and policy issues.

The Rehabilitation Act, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) provides for programs that help people with disabilities achieve employment and independence, such as vocational rehabilitation (VR). In order to access federal funding for these programs, states must appropriate State funding to match Federal dollars at a 21.3% to 78.7% rate. This investment is good for taxpayers, for example, VR customers in PA who found competitive employment in state fiscal year 2021-2022 generated \$38,970,000 in savings¹, both from taxes paid and fewer benefits used.

WIOA, Title IV, can be strengthened if you support certain policy positions:

- Keep VR a mandatory program with State funding to match Federal dollars at a 21.3% to 78.7% rate.
- Increase funding substantially for providing VR services to veterans with disabilities returning to civilian life as well as continuing to screen injured veterans for traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- **SUPPORT:** [H.R.1263](#) and [S.533](#) *Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act*, [H.R.2708](#) and [S.1193](#) *Latonya Reeves Freedom Act of 2023*, [S.100](#) and [H.R.547](#) *Better Care Better Jobs Act*, [H.R.1616](#) and [S.801](#) *CARE for Long COVID Act*, [H.R.2840](#) and [S.1270](#) *AID Youth Employment Act*, [H.R.2941](#) and [S.1332](#) *Recognizing the Role of Direct Support Professionals Act*, [H.R.4889](#) and [S.2488](#) *Raise the Wage Act of 2023*, [H.R.5102](#) and [S.2522](#) *ABLE MATCH (Making Able a Tool to Combat Hardship) Act*, [H.R.5408](#) and [S.2767](#) *SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act*, [S.3076](#) *Disability Employment Incentive Act*, [H.R.6296](#) and [S.3118](#) *HCBS Relief Act of 2023*

- Require all commercial health insurance providers to cover brain injury rehabilitation.
- Promote career development and job advancement by expanding the definition of post-employment services to include training and other services necessary for career advancement.
- The number of adults reporting vision loss will continue to increase especially as the nearly 75 million Americans who make up the Baby Boomer generation reach retirement age and beyond. The PaRC recommends an increase in funds for the Older Blind Program of 300% over the next 5 years to better service the growing aging, blind population.
- Implement changes to the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) to allow for the creation of a bachelor's level VRC position due to staffing shortages. Maintain the master's level position and recruit new staff using all available options to maintain highest quality service. Adjust CSPD requirements through the State Plan to include bachelor's level option as an entry point while retaining a master's level position, both of which would be considered VRC following designated training period. The PaRC recommends OVR focus on supporting staff through offering scholarships and specific funding to increase skills and credentials over time.

Transportation

Accessible, affordable, and safe public transportation is critical for ensuring that people with disabilities can participate in the workforce. Unfortunately, many communities (especially rural ones) lack disability-friendly and accessible public transportation options, even when states are required by law to provide them. Consequently, we encourage you to support changes to the public transportation system that promote and enforce equal access for people with disabilities. PaRC recommends an increase of 10% in public transportation funding and increased accessible public transportation including high speed, inter-city, commuter/regional, and rapid transit rail.

The Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act provides for the creation of savings accounts for those who experience a significant disability before age 26. Money in these accounts can pay for disability related expenses and are not subject to taxes or considered for means-tested benefits. We encourage you to support an amendment to the Able Act that would allow all people with significant disabilities (regardless of onset age) to have such accounts.

Insights Gained Regarding Mental Health and Accessibility

The lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with the Great Resignation have resulted in significant changes to our economy, employment, and workforce. The PaRC recommends an increase of 15% in funding for mental health services to continue to support employees impacted by severe isolation during the pandemic so that they may return to work. We encourage Legislators to provide increased awareness of the

many benefits of providing remote work opportunities for people with disabilities and educating employers about workplace accessibility.

Full Funding of OVR will allow for the expansion of programs to maximize opportunity to support our businesses and meet workforce needs through the successful employment of people with disabilities. Furthermore, we have learned that flexibility in relation to the location of a workplace is possible for all Pennsylvanians, especially those with a disability, with so many opportunities to work remotely.

¹ PENNSYLVANIA OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION. "PROGRAM YEAR 2021 VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION HIGHLIGHTS". parehabilitationcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2022-OVR-Annual-Report.pdf