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Listening Session – P. M. Testimony  
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115 West Chicago Ave.  
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National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC)

Good afternoon, my name is Marlene Malloy and I am speaking today on behalf of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (or NCSRC). I would like to begin by providing you with an overview of the State Rehabilitation Councils (or SRCs). The Rehabilitation Act, as amended in 1992, added Section 105 which created SRCs as the mechanism to assure the citizen voice is included in all aspects of the public vocational rehabilitation (or VR) system in each state or territory. Once the SRC is established within each state or territory, a volunteer membership is appointed by the governor, which must reflect the diversity of the state's population and be composed of a majority of members with self-identified disability characteristics. The federal mandate to each SRC is to "review, analyze and advise" the VR agency about their service system, while simultaneously championing the value added to the lives of people with disabilities when they achieve their employment goals. Though the organizational structure of each SRC varies greatly across the country, typically the work of the SRC is accomplished through regular business meetings which include public comment opportunities and a committee structure designed to achieve the federal mandates. SRC goals may also be achieved through involvement with a variety of statewide organizations and partnering with the VR agency as a member of their work groups.

My involvement with SRCs began twelve years ago when I was hired as the Executive Director for the Michigan Rehabilitation Council (or MRC). I brought a rich diversity of 20 years of professional knowledge from working in the human service arena, along with personal experiences as an individual with a number of disability characteristics. In Michigan, we are quite fortunate in that the public VR general agency, Michigan Rehabilitation Services (or MRS), has embraced the opportunity to fully partner with their SRC, while supporting our full autonomy from their system. As the staff hired for the MRC, my role is to augment the success of the membership through work activities behind the scenes. As needed, I represent the MRC carrying forward the role of advocate and change agent as we partner with MRS.

At the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (or CSAVR) Fall Conference in November 2005, I was asked to join the MRS State Director in a presentation about our SRC and VR partnership. The SRC representatives in attendance spent time together sharing practices and needs. It was at that fall conference that the NCSRC "idea" was born and the rest is history. Our Mission is: On behalf of people with disabilities, our national membership coalition will advocate for and work in partnership with the national public vocational rehabilitation system's continual quest for excellence.

A Steering Committee was formed with representation from each region of the country. A Membership Resolution has been presented for individual SRC consideration to join our coalition. The work of establishing an organizational structure was accomplished with membership approval of the mission, vision, value statements and by laws. A strategic planning session was held with consensus reached for goals and work teams. To date, 32 state/territory SRCs have signed the resolution, which indicates their support of this national partnership effort. We hold bi-monthly Steering Committee teleconference meetings, as well as bi-monthly national teleconference meetings, with the Rehabilitation Services Administration (or RSA) Staff Liaison included on the agenda. We have established both a website and list serv to enhance the communication between SRCs across the country. We continue to provide a NCSRC Sunday Session just prior to the start of the CSAVR Fall and Spring Conferences, utilizing the time for training, sharing of best practices and active discussion on various topics related to the public VR system.

As we look to the future, we expect to increase our visibility and advocacy efforts on behalf of the public VR system and the people with disabilities coming through their doors for services. After involvement with the NCSRC Sunday Sessions, list serv, and website, the SRC Chair in Oregon remarked, “the NCSRC list serv is valuable as a forum for SRCs to be able to post comments and learn from other states. It is good to see how many great ideas have been posted”.

At this point in time, the NCSRC does not have a funding stream. We have been able to depend on RSA to cover the expenses related to our teleconferences, CSAVR provides the meeting space and supporting equipment for our Sunday Sessions, and individual SRCs on the Steering Committee have absorbed costs for any miscellaneous needs. We greatly appreciate this ongoing support.

Best practices, outcomes, and challenges are typically included in each SRC’s Annual Report. I would like to highlight a best practice regarding services to the American Indian population via the federal 121 Projects in two different areas of our country. An Alaska SRC member reports that the Alaska Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (or AK DVR) and Alaska Tribal VR, of which there are eleven, have a unique, positive working relationship that has benefited native Alaskans and American Indians in Alaska over the years. The AK DVR and Tribal Consortium have had a memo of understanding (or MOU) for over 15 years that outlines their working relationship and joint services to tribal members. This has really expanded the state VR services to the largest minority population in the state. It also provides a means for state VR to connect with native Alaskans living in the "bush" (remote) areas of the state as the Tribal VR programs are mostly based in those more remote areas. Although the Tribal VR programs can provide the full range of VR services, their budgets are relatively small. However, if both programs write a joint plan with an individual, AK DVR can cover the more expensive services, while the Tribal VR can bring not only the local knowledge about the community, resources, and potential job placement assistance, but they can also provide the culturally appropriate services and cultural sensitivity to the Plan.

In Oklahoma, the SRC Program Manager has indicated that their Department of Rehabilitation Services (or DRS) and the Tribal Consortium have a great working relationship, which mirrors many of the system aspects practiced in Alaska. Some of

their tribal programs have established MOUs with DRS, but there is a general understanding that the Oklahoma VR agency will share both cases and funds with their eight 121 Project Tribal Programs to assure the success of the customer. In addition, the Oklahoma SRC benefits from a membership that is rich in American Indian representation; this has led to strong relationships and great respect for the 121 Projects.

One of the ongoing barriers for this partnership is that the Tribal VR programs are only funded for a five year cycle, rather than on a permanent basis. Every five years, each Tribal program must compete with all of the other programs in the country to secure a “new” grant. This daunting process comprises staff resources that could be provided to customers; instead they are preparing the grant application. RSA continues to provide the same set number of grants for each cycle, which means that a current, successful program may not get funded if a new program receives a grant.

In Michigan, the general VR agency has demonstrated effective partnership practices with regard to the establishment of MOUs with the Michigan Department of Corrections, the Michigan Department of Human Services, and the Veterans Administration. Each of these agreements afford effective cross system service provisions leading to employment outcomes for some of our state’s most vulnerable citizens, including ex-felons re-entering their communities, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (or TANF) recipients with disabilities, and veterans seeking employment.

At the most recent NCSRC Sunday Session, the Wisconsin combined VR Agency State Director presented the “Making Work Pay” program designed to break down barriers found within federal systems, so that people can work without fear of losing services. Since that presentation, there has been ongoing dialogue among many NCSRC members about the great benefit this program would have on the lives of people with disabilities across the country.

In relation to this program, the Chair of the Wisconsin SRC has summarized one of the ongoing challenges for persons with significant disabilities as they attempt to engage with the public VR system in their state. The biggest impact we can make on employment for people with significant disabilities is the removal of the

disincentives. So many "best practices" involve winding our way around the disincentives or finding funding to help people maintain their work incentive benefits. The fact that the only sure way to retain a disability safety net is to limit how much one works (or not work at all) is such an overwhelming barrier that all best practices – for minorities, for women, for veterans – run up against it. Those with the most significant disabilities cannot benefit from best practices until their safety net can be secured. Best practices may work for those who do not have ongoing medical or ongoing support needs, but best practices for people with the most significant disabilities are practices of compromise. How much can I work and not jeopardize my attendant care funding? How much can I work and not lose my medical card that covers my medication costs that exceed my monthly income?

The best practice we need from the federal government is to remove the disincentives in each of the programs serving people with disabilities, so work effort is not "rewarded" by taking something away or putting something at risk. Disincentives take away a person's flexibility to meet their employer's needs and thus limit their options. Disincentives cause employers to view people with disabilities as rigid or uncooperative when flexibility is a critical business need. Once disincentives are removed, our councils can truly report on the best practices that focus on matching qualified candidates with employers who want employees who can meet their ever changing demands.

The NCSRC would like also like to support the belief that the VR Program should continue to work at aligning with the workforce system – but not be block granted, not integrated, nor subsumed. People with disabilities can be better served by the VR system that recognizes and understands how each system works. The VR program places emphasis on informed choice and the partnership between customers and their certified rehabilitation counselors in the creation of individual plans for employment.

On behalf of the NCSRC membership, we believe that there is great value in these listening sessions. We urge you to utilize the input you receive to re-examine how federal systems that serve persons with disabilities can be streamlined so that the public VR agencies and the citizens seeking services are not investing their efforts into breaking down barriers, but rather moving through a system in an effective and

efficient manner. As stated by the Pennsylvania SRC Chair, “The focus must be on the economic value of public VR as it is an investment not entitlement system”. For every dollar spent in this system, \$12.66 is returned to the community. The data strongly supports the value of workers with disabilities. Most importantly, citizens with disabilities who seek VR services and reach their goals with a quality employment outcome can establish an independent lifestyle that meets their dreams and desires.

Thank you for your time and attention.

**NCSRC online at:**

<http://www.ncsrc.net>