Message from Director Ashworth

Continuous improvement requires systematic and unfiltered evaluation. I’m proud that the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) operates under a constant system of evaluation in order to plan, develop and implement progressive goals and strategies.

The process begins at the very moment an individual applies for services. Using case management software developed by DRS, our vocational rehabilitation counselors begin collecting information about the individuals we serve. The case management program follows each individual from application to case closure.

The DRS State Plan and Program Evaluation Unit pulls an endless amount of data from this case management program. The data is analyzed and used by DRS’ executive management team to make prudent fiscal and programmatic decisions to not only maintain an effective and efficient vocational rehabilitation program, but to grow and advance the program so we can better serve our clients.

DRS district managers use the information to identify both positive and negative trends within their service districts, which helps them to refocus goals and priorities as needed.

This systematic and ongoing evaluation system plays a role in every key decision facing this agency, from the allocation of vital fiscal resources to client services policy changes.

DRS not only self evaluates, but the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) uses some of this essential data to determine if we are complying with mandated federal evaluation standards and performance indicators. RSA recently issued an analysis comparing our performance with the other state vocational rehabilitation agencies throughout the country, using fiscal year 2012 data.
Environmental modifications team builds independence through accessibility

Most 35-year-olds don’t worry about being able to get up and take a shower every morning before going to work. However, this was something that Terry began struggling with on a daily basis due to a progressive disability. Terry had a good job in the public sector, but weakening muscles and fatigue made it nearly impossible for her to safely use the porcelain bathtub that was in her home.

Terry was overwhelmed with trying to figure out a way to bypass this daily obstacle in order to continue going to work every day and remain independent.

Being aware of the specialized assistance available from the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), Terry took the necessary steps to take advantage of this valuable resource.

DRS provides vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities to help them maintain current employment or to assist them in preparing for work. Those services can include counseling and guidance, work-related training and college assistance.

In some situations, services from DRS often include very individualized and specialized services that address unique barriers to maintaining or getting a job.

DRS has a team that specializes in environmental modifications, which is some modification or change to an individual’s environment that will make him or her more independent.

This environmental modifications team is part of the DRS Rehabilitation Technology Unit, which is composed of several specialized areas which focus on making different aspects of people’s lives more accessible and independent. The primary focus areas are job accommodations, home modifications and transportation.

Specialized service areas within the unit include environmental modifications; rehabilitation engineering; assistive technology; orientation and mobility training for individuals who are blind or losing their eyesight and transportation, which includes driver’s evaluation, education and vehicle modifications, as well as the fairly new bioptic driving program for individuals with low vision.

The environmental modifications team specializes in providing home modification services or job accommodation services that enable an individual to maintain independence and continue working.

According to Dale Castilla, Rehabilitation Technology Supervisor, the team is made up of six experienced technicians, with one being a licensed electrician.

“The majority of people we see either can’t access their home or their own bathroom,” said Castilla. “About 90 percent of the work these guys do is home modifications.”

To access environmental modification services, an individual must be a DRS client who needs this type of service in order to meet the individual’s established employment goal.

If a client’s vocational rehabilitation counselor feels that an environmental modification may be needed, a referral is then sent to the Rehabilitation Technology Unit and a rehabilitation engineer typically visits the site to do an evaluation.

After evaluating and assessing the situation, the engineer prepares a report that includes a blueprint or drawing of the proposed modification, a materials
list and a timeframe for the proposed modification. The vocational rehabilitation counselor reviews the final report to determine if the service is necessary for the client to meet his or her vocational goal and if the costs are justifiable.

Once approved, the actual work is scheduled by the Rehabilitation Technology Unit. Common work for the environmental modifications team includes building ramps, installing platform lifts, bathroom modifications and some kitchen modifications, depending on the client’s work goal.

The majority of the clients receiving environmental modification assistance are those with progressive diseases like multiple sclerosis or muscular dystrophy and those with newly acquired disabilities, such as an individual injured in a motor vehicle accident.

“We recently built a ramp for a lady who lives in Buckhannon,” said Castilla. “She had a ramp, but it was too steep for her to use independently. She had to rely on her husband anytime she wanted to go into or leave her house. The environmental modifications team built her a new ramp that she can use by herself and now she works at Walmart.”

The demand for these services is high according to Castilla. The environmental modifications technicians are housed out of Nitro and Morgantown, but they provide services throughout the state.

“Our technicians are highly skilled and can do the work that a regular contractor would do in half the time,” said Castilla. “In this type of work, we worry about the individual’s ability to use his or her environment. The services are meant to address a specific need.”

In Terry’s case, the environmental modifications team installed a roll-in shower that was easily accessed using her wheelchair, enabling her independence and ability to continue working.

Wayne Cooper (foreground) floats the just-poured concrete surface of an access ramp at a client’s home. Matt Krushansky (left) and Chuck Williams mix fresh concrete for the next section of the ramp.

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**Message from Director Ashworth**

I’m pleased to report that DRS ranks the highest among other state vocational rehabilitation agencies in three of the seven mandatory federal evaluation standards and performance indicators. Those performance measures are:

**Change in number of successful employment outcomes** – Compared to similar agencies (including the U.S. territories), DRS successfully rehabilitated more West Virginians with disabilities. This means that more people with disabilities either entered employment or maintained their current job after receiving services through DRS.

**Percentage of successful employment outcomes** – Compared to similar agencies (excluding the U.S. territories), DRS successfully rehabilitated a higher percentage of individuals with disabilities.

**Earnings ratio** – This benchmark compares the average hourly earnings of those who received vocational rehabilitation services and were successfully rehabilitated to the wages of others employed in the state, using Bureau of Labor wage data. Compared to similar agencies (excluding the U.S. territories), the average hourly wage of the individuals gainfully employed after vocational rehabilitation services compared to others employed in the state was higher in West Virginia than in other states.

I am proud to be part of this success. I know that our ongoing internal and external evaluation processes will continue to help us utilize our resources to enable and empower West Virginians with disabilities to work and live independently.
Spotlighting Preston County Workshop – A Community Rehabilitation Program

For Preston County Workshop, building a greenhouse was an opportunity to grow more than just plants.

Preston County Workshop has a longstanding history of providing services to people with disabilities. This community rehabilitation program began in 1977 as Preston County Sheltered Workshop, but has recently changed its name to reflect a more progressive approach toward providing services in this rural community surrounding Reedsville, West Virginia.

For the last several years, the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) has been actively encouraging community rehabilitation programs, including sheltered workshops, to develop and expand their services in order to better serve people with disabilities in local communities. DRS has also encouraged sheltered workshops to develop integrated training facilities and work opportunities.

Through grant funding from DRS, Preston County Workshop has planted seeds for growth and not just figuratively.

Initially, the Workshop secured grant funding to install automated filter cutting and vacuum packaging equipment. They have a contract with Superior Fibers' Reedsville Plant to cut fiberglass into air filters for heating and air-conditioning systems, as well as to pack and ship the filters for the manufacturing company.

Depending on customer orders from the manufacturer, the Workshop employs eight or nine employees during a busy workweek, producing 14,000 air filter pads a day.

With the success of this venture, Preston County Workshop’s Board of Directors was looking for additional opportunities for expansion. According to John Hyre, Executive Director, it was the board’s idea to build a greenhouse.

With a second grant from DRS, the Workshop built that greenhouse in 2012. They did the work themselves and it took about four weeks to install.

“The response from the general public has been overwhelmingly positive,” said Hyre. “We started growing plants in mid-March. By April, we had plants that were gigantic.”

They had an open house in late April, but according to Hyre, that’s the only advertising they had to do. Their customer base consists primarily of local gardeners looking for starter plants in the spring. Many customers bragged that their plants were the best they had ever seen.

After the spring growing season ended, they added a 20’ x 48’ tunnel that was donated for their use by West Virginia University Extension Services. The tunnel is open on both ends, and allowed them to start their growing season earlier this year because it protects plants from potential freezing.

With these new ventures, Preston County Workshop has grown and strengthened itself as a viable resource for serving DRS clients.

“I believe the move from a sheltered workshop model to an integrated model is one of the best ways of securing the long-term viability of Preston County Workshop,” said Doug Auten, DRS Rehabilitation Program Specialist. “This move has more than doubled the Workshop’s product output and employment opportunities over the past couple of years.”

Plants and flowers thrive in the Preston County Workshop greenhouse.

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Prior to these developments, referrals to Preston County Workshop from DRS were limited. However, the collaboration between DRS and Preston County Workshop is stronger and work-related opportunities for individuals with disabilities have grown, demonstrating the positive results of effective cultivation.

The additions offer a wider range of training opportunities for DRS clients. Work adjustment training provides clients with the opportunity to improve their work skills. Community based assessments can be provided in several different areas to allow clients to try different work situations in order to find a good fit.

Some clients may end up working permanently at Preston County Workshop, while others may use it as a stepping stone to some other job opportunity.

Debbie Riggie, Rehabilitation Counselor and liaison to Preston County Workshop, believes these improvements will benefit DRS clients, as well as the community. “I believe our relationship is always evolving,” said Riggie. “We are continuing to build a rapport and the improvements provide further opportunities for our clients, which is positive.”

“Ultimately, DRS believes these investments were sound,” said LuAnn Summers, Rehabilitation Program Manager who oversees DRS’ community rehabilitation program initiatives. “With the additions of the fiberglass operation and the greenhouse at Preston County Workshop, the seeds for continued growth have been sown and we hope further opportunities for DRS clients evolve from this relationship.”

Plants and baskets of hanging flowers bloom in the Preston County Workshop greenhouse.

Emerging practices recognized

The federal Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) recognized two West Virginia programs as emerging practices during a recent monitoring review of the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS). Emerging practices are effective operational activities or initiatives that contribute to successful employment outcomes or enhance a vocational rehabilitation agency’s performance capabilities.

These emerging practices have the potential to be replicated in other state vocational rehabilitation agencies.

**Geographic Information System (GIS)** – DRS uses GIS software to identify specific geographic areas of the state with minority populations that appear to be underserved for targeted outreach efforts. As part of these efforts, DRS shares program information with all residences in these targeted geographical areas using United States Postal Service’s bulk mail rates, which results in significant administrative cost savings for its outreach efforts.

**Student Transition to Employment Project (STEP)** – STEP trains teachers and/or teacher’s aides to provide job placement services to participating high school students with disabilities. Interested teachers register as a state vendor and become a Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) for DRS. Participating teachers and/or teacher’s aides provide job placement services to eligible graduating high school students interested in working.
The Declaration of Independence proclaims that all men are created equal and guarantees the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But, history demonstrates that pursuing those rights has been more difficult for some members of our society than for others.

Last fall, high school seniors in West Virginia had the opportunity to participate in an essay contest to showcase their knowledge of the history surrounding the disability rights movement. The essay topic was: “The significance of the disability rights movement in today’s world.”

The contest was a collaborative effort of the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services, Statewide Independent Living Council, and State Rehabilitation Council, with cooperation from the West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts.

Entries were judged by a panel based upon the individual’s knowledge and writing skills. The winners of the 2012 Disability History Essay Contest are:

**State winner**
Heidi Dennison – Nicholas County High School

**First place winners**
Patience Kasic – Capital High School
Maggie Clements – Morgantown High School
Victoria Travis – Doddridge County High School

**Second place winners**
Taylor Davisson – Doddridge County High School
Jamie Lynn Vermillion – Capital High School

The winning entries shared a recurring theme – the writers’ lives had been touched by disability in some way. For most, they had a family member with a disability. For others, it was a friend or acquaintance.

The essays also focused on the great strides that have been made to give people with disabilities equal access to things others may take for granted, including housing, education, employment, voting and polling places, transportation and the freedom to make one’s own decisions and life choices.

Heidi Dennison, state winner, focused on the contributions of Ed Roberts, commonly known as the father of independent living. Roberts had a severe disability from polio, which he contracted as a teenager, causing him to have virtually no functional movement and to depend on a respirator to breathe. He was reluctantly admitted to the University of California at Berkeley in 1962, despite being told he was too severely disabled to ever be employed.

Roberts started a movement, pushing for accessibility accommodations on-campus. Career accomplishments included serving as director of the California Department of Rehabilitation, teaching political science at Berkeley and co-founding the World Institute on Disability.

In her essay, Dennison also explained how laws like the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act have changed the lives of people with disabilities, including her Aunt Linda. When her aunt was born with a genetic deficiency in 1966, doctors recommended institutionalization. Her parents refused and Aunt Linda ultimately obtained a high school diploma and went to work at a local therapy business.

Taylor Davisson, second place winner, went into detail about the increased awareness of people with disabilities resulting from wounded soldiers returning from World War II, which led to a push for the government to provide rehabilitation and training for injured veterans so they could regain their independence.

Each of the winning essays demonstrated the writer’s understanding and empathy toward the past and present issues facing people with disabilities.

Summarizing her thoughts on the significance of the disability rights movement, Davisson wrote, “Our ultimate goal as a society should be to have a totally accepting society where everyone blends their abilities, strengths and weaknesses together.”
The Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) sponsored a West Virginia Power baseball game at Appalachian Power Park on July 20 as part of its ongoing outreach efforts. The sponsorship allowed DRS the opportunity to disseminate information about its services and to promote hiring people with disabilities.

Kayla Bland, the DRS 2012 State Ability Works winner, threw the game’s ceremonial first pitch.

Kayla’s world was turned upside down by a devastating car accident in 2006, but a kidney transplant gave her a renewed chance at life. Hard work and vocational assistance from DRS helped Kayla get her education and a job. She is an electronics assembler at Appalachian Electronic Instruments in Fairlea. Kayla is grateful for her second chance, using her experience to let others know that organ donation changes people’s lives!

NGA releases blueprint for increasing employment opportunities for people with disabilities

The National Governors Association (NGA) recently released “A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities,” which is a report or “blueprint” for states to improve employment opportunities for individuals with significant disabilities.

This yearlong initiative, chaired by Delaware Gov. Jack Markell, focuses on the role that both state governments and businesses can play in improving employment outcomes and creating more employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

The report focuses on five top discussion areas:
• Make disability employment part of the state workforce development strategy.
• Find and support businesses in their efforts to employ people with disabilities.
• Be a model employer by increasing the number of people with disabilities working in state government.
• Prepare youth with disabilities for careers that use their full potential, providing employers with a pipeline of skilled workers.
• Make the best use of limited resources to advance employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

Did you know?

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM), an annual campaign that raises awareness about disability employment issues and celebrates the many and varied contributions of America’s workers with disabilities. The 2013 theme is “Because We Are EQUAL to the Task.”

NDEAM’s roots go back to 1945, when Congress enacted a law declaring the first week in October each year “National Employ the Physically Handicapped Week.” In 1962, the word “physically” was removed to acknowledge the employment needs and contributions of individuals with all types of disabilities. In 1988, Congress expanded the week to a month and changed the name to “National Disability Employment Awareness Month.”