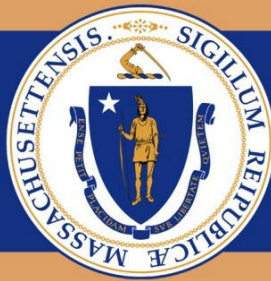


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**Massachusetts Rehabilitation
Commission**

**Chapter 171 Report and Annual
Individual and Family Support Plan**

Fiscal Year 2023

November 2022



**Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Annual Family Support Plan
Fiscal Year 2023 (FY23)**

Overview

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) is organized pursuant to M.G.L. Ch. 6 sections 74-84 and operates programs authorized by State Law, the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and by the Social Security Act. The MRC provides a comprehensive array of services intended to break down barriers and make a better state possible for people with disabilities, one that is truly equitable, accessible, and inclusive.

MRC submits the Annual Family Support Plan for Fiscal Year 2022 as required by Chapter 171 of the Acts of 2002, “an Act Providing Support to Individuals with Disabilities and Their Families.” MRC’s diverse array of services touch all disability groups, promoting equity and inclusion, and prioritizing rights and equal access to build a future where everyone is fully present and counted in the world. MRC assists individuals in the disability community regardless of age, nature of disability or functional ability, to live life on their own terms. Across all programs, is a consumer-focused and consumer-directed planning and service delivery process that respects, and is driven by, informed decisions of empowered consumers.

As MRC continues to expand its services for students 14 to 22 with disabilities during the transition to adulthood, it is critical to expand our reach with families to assist consumers with obtaining accessible and affordable housing, building independent living and employment skills, and identifying and connecting with needed services and supports, to achieve social and economic sustainability within the community. Community independence can be achieved with support from a variety of MRC programs such as Home Modifications, Assistive Technology, and MRC’s expanded programming for Youth. MRC contracts with Partners for Youth With Disabilities to implement the annual Youth Leadership Forum, a conference style program spanning two weeks at the end of June, as well as the Young Leaders Rising Program, an eight-week leadership development series. These programs focus on bringing youth from across the Commonwealth together to create an atmosphere of learning and exploration with a lens on the various additional barriers the COVID 19 pandemic has brought upon the disability community. The Transition to Adulthood Programs, operated by Independent Living Centers, continue to pivot towards the needs of Youth by emphasizing topics such as navigating public transportation, obtaining a learner’s permit, budgeting, advocacy, independent living skills, the Young Adult Supported Living Program (T22) and brain injury services.

MRC is the state agency designated to operate the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) non-Residential and Moving Forward Plan (MFP) Waivers, assisting eligible young adults graduating from the Massachusetts Hospital School, and adults in other nursing facilities, to transition into community settings, with a range of services at their fingertips. Additionally, an individual’s (and thus their family’s) economic status can be supported through MRC’s Disability Determination Services, which determines eligibility for SSA benefits. With the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act, amendment to Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, MRC has expanded its breadth of Vocational Rehabilitation services to better serve students 14+, partnering with the family to provide quality pre-employment, education/ training and employment services transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary school to careers. MRC’s pre-employment

transition services (Pre-ETS) assist students with disabilities in the early stages of career exploration, work-based learning experiences, counseling on opportunities for post-secondary education, work readiness training accompanies with self-advocacy and mentoring opportunities. MRC works with the family and students with complex disabilities to promote possibility and opportunity through delivery of services necessary to achieve an employment outcome in competitive integrated employment.

I. Family Empowerment

Disability voice and leadership long been an essential aspect of MRC programs and services and is integrated into service delivery, program development, and day to day operations of the agency. This begins with involvement of those who receive our services, and when appropriate, their family allies in all aspects of development and implementation of individual services and supports.

Disability expertise and input is solicited through a variety of means, informing agency decision-making, program evaluation, planning and development. Avenues for involvement have included consumer focus groups, formal and informal advisory committees, surveys, needs assessments. In the past year, MRC has elevated disability engagement through the development of the Office of Individual and Family Engagement. This office focuses on co-creation with the disability community through support, promotion and facilitation of authentic and productive dialogue with people served and their families.

Fiscal Year 2022 Family and Service Recipient Leadership Activities:

- **Developed the Quarterly Listening and Learning forum**, which is a virtual space bringing together families and individuals with disabilities across the Commonwealth to learn about MRC services and supports, ask questions, and provide feedback about current services and future needs. Four forums were hosted in FY22, focused on Employment Services, Transportation Resources, Brain Injury Supports, and lessons learned from family and disability focus groups. Several hundred disability community members and family allies were present.
- **Implemented a quarterly disability community newsletter**, aimed at educating over 15,000 new and existing MRC service recipients and their families about what MRC can offer them, with stories written directly by and for the disability community.
- **Commenced a planning committee for the MRC 2022 Explore Possibility Summit**, an in person full-day event focused on bringing together family allies and consumers to learn about MRC services. The Summit will feature keynote speakers, exhibitors, topical workshops on independent living and employment, a lived experience panel, professional speed networking, and a first of it's kind family track, dedicated to engaging family voice and leadership
- **Hosted in-person and zoom meetings led by disability and family focused advisory committees**, including the State Rehabilitation Council, Statewide Independent Living Council, MassMATCH Assistive Technology Council, and the Brain Injury Council.
 - Statewide Rehabilitation Council: Implemented a request for response (RFR) to promote Diversity Equity and Inclusion training and strategic planning within the State Rehabilitation Council, a body of consumers and stakeholders reviewing and advising Vocational Rehabilitation services and needs.
 - Brain Injury Council: Worked to develop the first draft of a state plan to advise MRC and sister Agencies on best practices to support brain injury community

- **Contracted with consumer-directed Independent Living Centers** to provide information and referral, peer support, skills training to empower people to live independently, individual and systems advocacy on a broad range of issues that impact the lives of individuals with disabilities, and their families. MRC maintains a system of regular communication with these Centers regarding issues to improve programs, share concerns of the community, discuss types of services delivered and best practices, and determine types of supports most needed. Topics of interest included nursing home transitions, youth services, as well as how to pivot services since the beginning of the pandemic and the impact it has had on the disability community. The Independent Living Centers successfully advocated for 100 Alternative Housing Choice Vouchers to assist transitioning people in nursing homes back into the community.
- **Developed the Services Experience Survey**, a comprehensive first of its kind cross-agency survey soliciting iterative feedback from consumers receiving Community Living and Vocational Rehabilitation services throughout their service journey with MRC.
- **On-going communication and partnership opportunities** commenced with disability awareness and advocacy organizations including partnering in the Explore Possibility Summit with the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, developing multi-lingual focus groups with the Federation for Children with Special Needs, and continued outreach to the Spinal Cord Injury Association, the Multiple Sclerosis Society, United Cerebral Palsy, and the Asperger Autism Network to obtain regular feedback regarding the needs of their constituents and the effectiveness of MRC's programs and services in addressing those needs.
- **Funded the FY2022 Youth Leadership Network and Mentorship Program** in conjunction with Easter Seals and Partners for Youth with Disabilities.
- **Through the ABI and MFP Community Waivers**, MRC provided a range of services to individuals transitioning from nursing homes to community settings, providing support and services to individuals and family members who are part of the individual's support network. The MFP Waiver includes "Family Support" as a paid service to provide training and instruction about the treatment regimes, behavior plans, and the use of specialized equipment that supports the waiver participant to participate in the community. Community/Residential Family Training may also include training in family leadership, support of self-advocacy and independence of the family member. MRC continues to work with UMass and MassHealth to identify and support new individuals and organizations that may be qualified to provide this Family Support Training to waiver participants and their families.

Collaboration

MRC continues to collaborate with partner agencies and organizations to develop new resources, supports and services, or to adapt existing resources to meet the needs of those with disabilities and their families. Additionally, this entails ensuring that consumers have the knowledge of and access to these resources. MRC continues to work with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), MassHealth and UMass to maintain the ABI and MFP Waivers. These waivers make available such services as Respite Care, Individual Supports, Family Training Supports, Home and Vehicle Modifications, among others. Among those served through these waivers are individuals who choose to return to a family home, youth who have graduated from the Mass. Hospital School, and others in nursing homes who choose to live in their own homes or apartments in the community.

MRC partnerships with other state agencies have led to initiatives aimed at expanding services, maximizing resources, and ensuring that individuals receive services in a timely manner. MRC has partnered with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) on the Empowering to Employ (ETE) initiative, assisting persons with disabilities who receive DTA benefits with rapid employment and other Vocational Rehabilitation services, including training and education. MRC has also partnered with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) in providing employment services for individuals with disabilities who receive services through the ACCS program at DMH. Many individuals from initiatives identify themselves as heads of household. MRC's collaborations with DTA and DMH have led to programs that enable individuals with disabilities to experience a more efficient and streamlined approach to receiving vocational guidance and support.

II. Accessing Services and Support

In FY22, substantial progress was made with MRC Connect, the new integrated eligibility process aligning MRC program eligibility requirements, modernizing processes and automated systems, and strengthening a consumer centered culture resulting in a more seamless experience for the consumer and family. A phased implementation approach was developed that saw an increase in applications processed as more field offices were added to the integrated eligibility process. The new field offices utilizing MRC Connect include Boston (Roxbury), Framingham, Southbridge, and Braintree. Additionally, the Vocational Rehabilitation program implemented an expedited enrollment approach for applicants. This process relies on applicant interviews and professional judgement by eligibility screeners to determine eligibility and has led to less document collection and quicker eligibility determination.

MRC continues to support various methods of outreach and education about available resources and supports. This includes:

- In tandem with Elder Affairs, MRC supports and provides information to the Independent Living Centers, Aging and Disability Resource Consortia (ADRCs), and the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts to enable them to provide extensive information and referral services to consumers, including Long Term Care Options Counseling. During FY22, extensive training was done with the ADRC and ILC network on new initiatives.
- Providing oversight and rebranding for current assistive technology informational websites, including GetATStuff.org, MassMatch and REquipment. Additionally, MRC has contracted with Assistive Technology Demonstration and Loan Centers that provide information and access to assistive technology devices.
- Supporting the MyMassHomes and Housing Navigator partnership, a free website that serves as a one-stop portal with connections to all the resources homebuyers with low, moderate, and fixed incomes in Massachusetts need. These include a new search tool for affordable and accessible homes for sale, down payment assistance resources, first-time homebuyer education courses, and state-sponsored products.

III. Culturally Competent Outreach and Support

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission is committed to facilitating access to services for those with disabilities from all communities and emphasizes promotion of practices that emphasize diversity, equity and inclusion every step of the way. In addition to ensuring a diverse and culturally competent staff, MRC contracts with providers to facilitate connections to services. Some highlights of culturally competent outreach and support in FY22 include:

- Employ Bilingual Counselors and Counselors for the Deaf/hard of hearing (fluent in American Sign Language).
- Developed a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility council, consisting of staff across the Agency, disability representatives, council members and other stakeholders committed to providing advisory capacity and training regarding DEI principles.
- Expand the availability of outreach materials in multiple languages representative of Massachusetts communities. For example, MRC released a new signature marketing piece, describing MRC services in over 13 different languages.
- Contracting with ASL interpreters and CART reporters for individual and group meetings, including remote access to ensure that meetings are accessible to all.

Strengthening Infrastructure

In FY21, MRC developed and implemented a new, more robust internal infrastructure for ensuring the voices and needs of families of those living with disabilities are heard and integrated into how we design and execute service delivery across the Commonwealth. The Office of Individual and Family Engagement has embarked on a set of activities that are strengthening MRC's capacity to be responsive with our services. These activities include, but are not limited to:

- Development of Disability Inclusion Leader positions, individuals with disabilities and family allies who engage in part-time contracted positions at MRC and are embedded in agency initiatives (e.g., Roadmap Priorities) and practices (e.g., hiring panels, policy committees) to have a direct impact on systems change at cross-agency level.
- Implementing a request for response (RFR) to bring in a vendor who will provide training and consultation on accessibility of written material, virtual meeting spaces, policies, services systems and other needs for all employees and staff to ensure MRC is addressing accessibility at a systems level.
- Participating in Charting the Life Course Training: Office of Individual and Family Engagement staff and leadership participated in the Federation for Children with Special Needs Ambassadors training series for Charting the Life Course which provides interactive training on tools designed to support families maximize their capacity, strengths, and diversity to support their loved ones.

IV. Interagency Collaboration

As evidenced throughout this report, MRC values interagency collaboration as a means of assuring that the best possible array of services is made available to people with disabilities and their families across the lifespan. To that end, MRC actively participates in cross-agency work groups and committees that address the needs of persons with disabilities and their families.

Fiscal Year 2021 interagency activities have included:

- MRC participates on the steering committee and workgroup lead for the statewide transition initiative called the Massachusetts Partnership for Transition to Employment (MPTE). The focus is on systems change for young adults with ID/DD to achieve better employment outcomes and includes a strong focus on parent engagement and training.
- MRC participates on and is a member of the Executive Committee for the Learn to Earn Initiative, a cross Secretariat and Agency initiative to identify barriers to employment and strategies to address these barriers.

Goals for Fiscal Year 2023

In addition to the programs and activities already outlined, other activities for FY23 include:

- Partnering with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and other state organizations to help reach young adults in underserved/under resourced communities that left secondary education during the pandemic. This includes students that graduated or turned 22 from 2020-present. The goal is to help connect these young people and families to adult services, which may not have happened when districts were not offering in person activities.
- Implementation of *NextGen*, a five-year grant through the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to implement and evaluate an innovative practice approach that will transform standard Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) for young adults with disabilities. *NextGen* will help young adults develop their Career Gratification Pathway by focusing on four areas of self-development: self-capacity, self-advocacy, self-realization, and self-sufficiency (Self CARES). Services will be delivered using a multi-disciplinary Integrated Resource Team (IRT) that will aid young adults in developing essential skills that promote independence throughout their careers.
- Development of a new agency-wide technology platform – *One MRC* – to better improve MRC organizational effectiveness and service delivery in the accomplishment of the Agency’s mission and goals.
- Facilitating a new Employee Resource Group focused on engaging the lived expertise of staff who are individuals with disabilities or family allies in systems and services change throughout MRC.
- Finalizing an inter-agency and consumer portal and data sharing system using Tableau Software to facilitate the understanding of gaps and overlapping Key Performance Indicators specific to individuals served, as well as build dashboards for internal and external audiences.