

Massachusetts Statewide Rehabilitation Council

2021 ANNUAL REPORT





CONTENTS 2021

2

A Letter from
the Chair

6

Fiscal Year at
a Glance

8

Celebrating SRC’s
Dawn Clark

10

Committee
Reports

2 SRC Mission and
Structure

3 Appointed Members

15 Office of Individual
& Family Engagement

16 Recommendations

18 Gaining
Independence
through Vocational
Rehabilitation

A Letter from the Chair



Toward
Inclusive
Excellence

Today, I sit in a seat that my ancestors never even had the opportunity to approach. Do I refuse this position because workplaces are looking

for people through whom they can put their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion on display? No. As a Black and Indigenous Person of Color chosen for leadership, it is important for me to acknowledge this tension, and not allow it to overshadow the competence and diligence that I bring to my responsibilities. I made a deliberate choice to accept this opportunity, hoping to tear down walls and build up individuals.

As Chair, I lead the work, but I cannot work alone. While I am grateful for the trust that the SRC membership and the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission executive team has in my abilities, these talents are only as effective as their capacity to bring out the best in each of you, who are change agents in your own spaces. The contribution of your talent to this Council's work has the potential to transform lives by advancing vocational rehabilitation in ways that will help individuals with disabilities find meaningful employment. Let's improve vocational rehabilitation service delivery to give every individual with a disability the opportunity to use their talents and express

their unique interests through careers they love.

I want to thank our outgoing Chair, Dawn Clark, whose many years of leadership laid a foundation for the work the SRC is accomplishes today. Dawn selected Committee Chairs who bring passion and leadership to the tasks the Council undertakes. I appreciate the SRC and its Committees for all the hard work and energy which we only capture through snapshots in the annual report. I encourage you to review this report, particularly the FY21 Committee highlights, to learn more about the SRC Committees and their accomplishments this past year. Most of these tasks are ongoing; I hope the report inspires you to consider where you might be uniquely suited to assist as we forge ahead.

Together, let's broaden the perspective of what's possible. Let us build with the mindset of Billie Holiday who said, "The difficult I'll do right now. The impossible will take a little while."

Inez S. Canada, Esq.
Chair, Statewide Rehabilitation Council



DO YOU BELIEVE IN AN
INCLUSIVE WORKFORCE?

JOIN OUR COUNCIL



The Massachusetts Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) ensures that individuals of all abilities are provided with an equal opportunity to receive the programs, services, and supports they need to gain competitive employment. We are seeking members to fill the seats for Parent Training and Information Center, Underserved, and Disability Rep 8.

To learn more about the SRC, and how you can become involved, contact mrc.staterehabcouncil@mass.gov.

MISSION & VISION

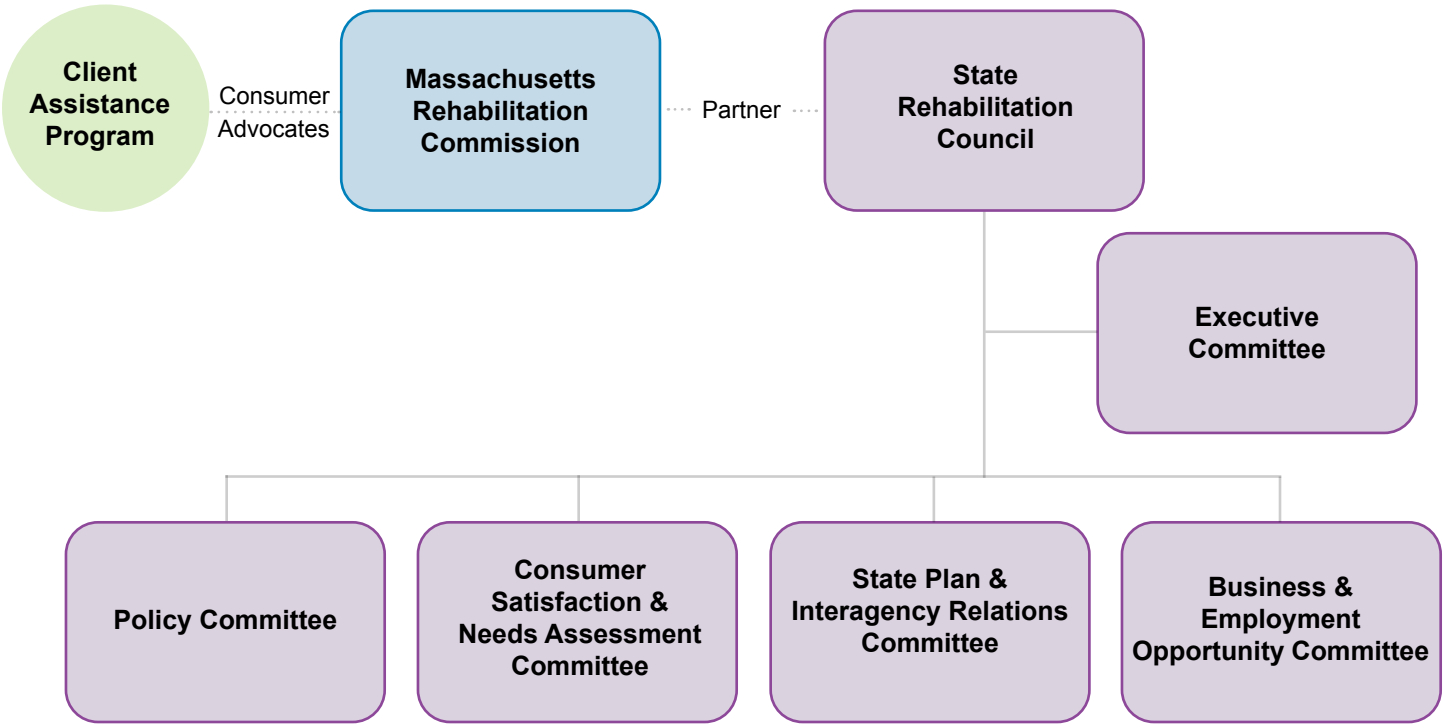
MISSION

The primary goal of the SRC is to partner with MRC to ensure that people with disabilities are provided with an equal opportunity to receive the programs, services and supports needed to gain competitive integrated employment. The SRC provides a forum for consumer input resulting in recommendations and advice to the agency. We aim to provide a path to high quality, value-based, vocational rehabilitation services that lead to meaningful, sustainable, and competitive employment for consumers with disabilities, guided by the principles of diversity, equity and inclusion.

VISION

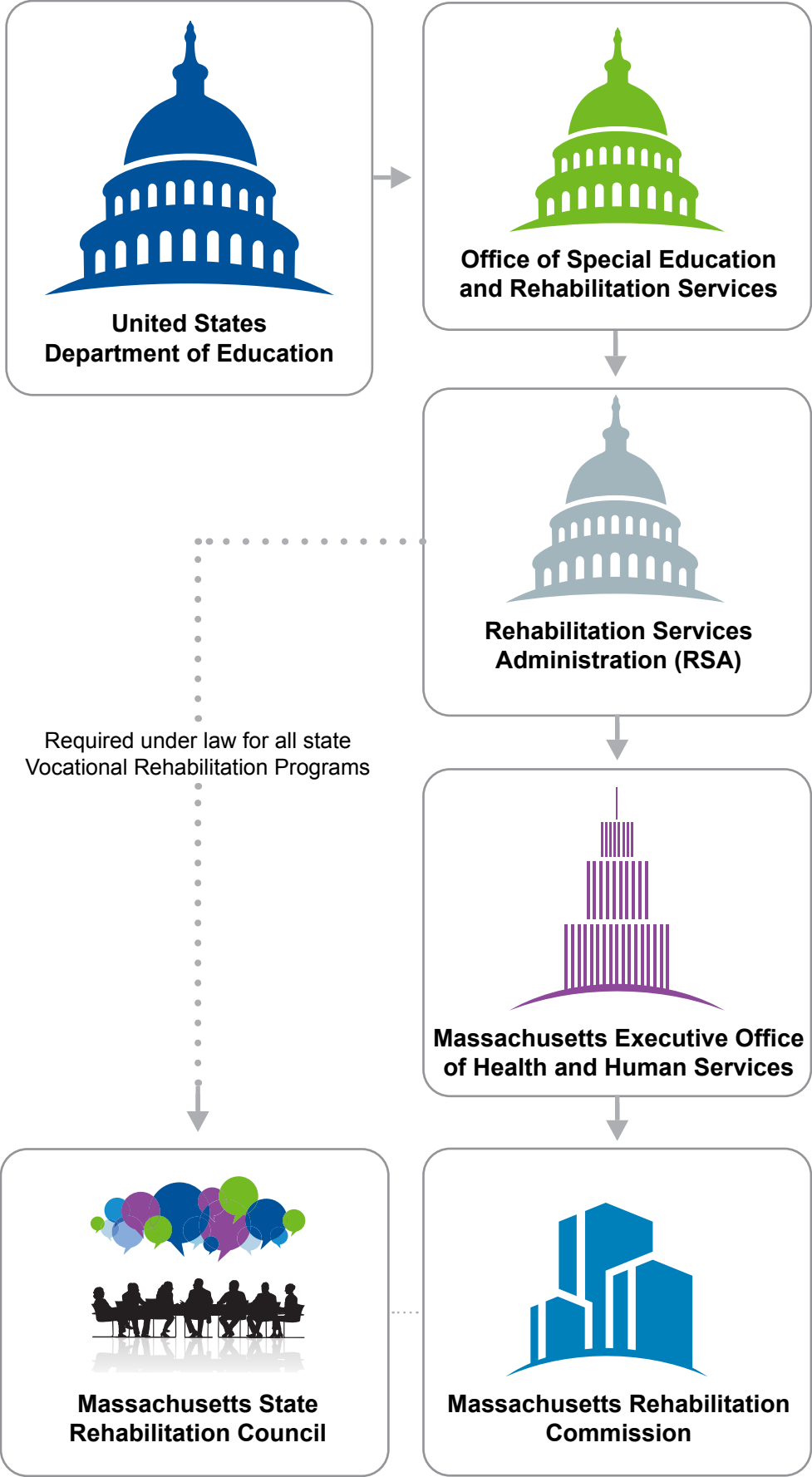
Our vision is to break the historic bonds of poverty by providing a dynamic pathway to economic self-sufficiency for people with disabilities eligible for vocational rehabilitation services.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

For funding and oversight



Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council FY21 MEMBERS

Matthew Bander
Disabilities Rep. 4

Youcef J. Bellil ("Joe")
Disabilities Rep. 2

Deputy Commissioner Kate Biebel
MRC Ex-Officio

Inez Canada*
Disabilities Rep. 7

James Carnazza
MRC VR Rep. Ex-Officio

Lisa Chiango
Disabilities Rep. 1

Barbara Cipriani
Business/Labor/Industries 3

Dawn E. Clark
Disabilities Rep. 5

Richard Colantonio
Disabilities Rep. 3

Paula Euber
MRC VR Rep. Ex-Officio

Naomi Goldberg
Client Assistance Program Rep.

Steve LaMaster
Community Rehab Services Provider Rep.

Lusa Lo
Higher Education Rep.

Catherine D. O'Neil
Business/Labor/Industries 4

Katherine R. Queally
Un-served/Underserved Rep. 2

Cheryl Scott
Workforce Investment Board

Ellie Starr
Business/Labor/Industries 2

Olympia Stroud
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Heather Wood
Disabilities Rep. 6

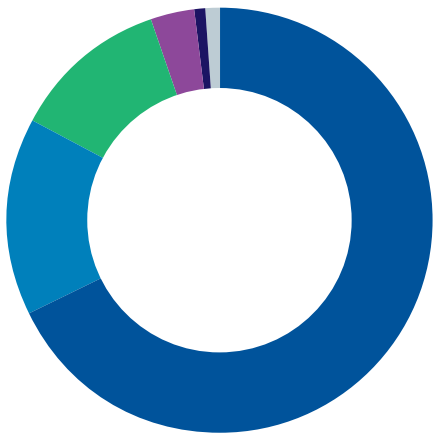
Rosanna Woodmansee
Business/Labor/Industries 1



FISCAL YEAR 2021 AT A GLANCE

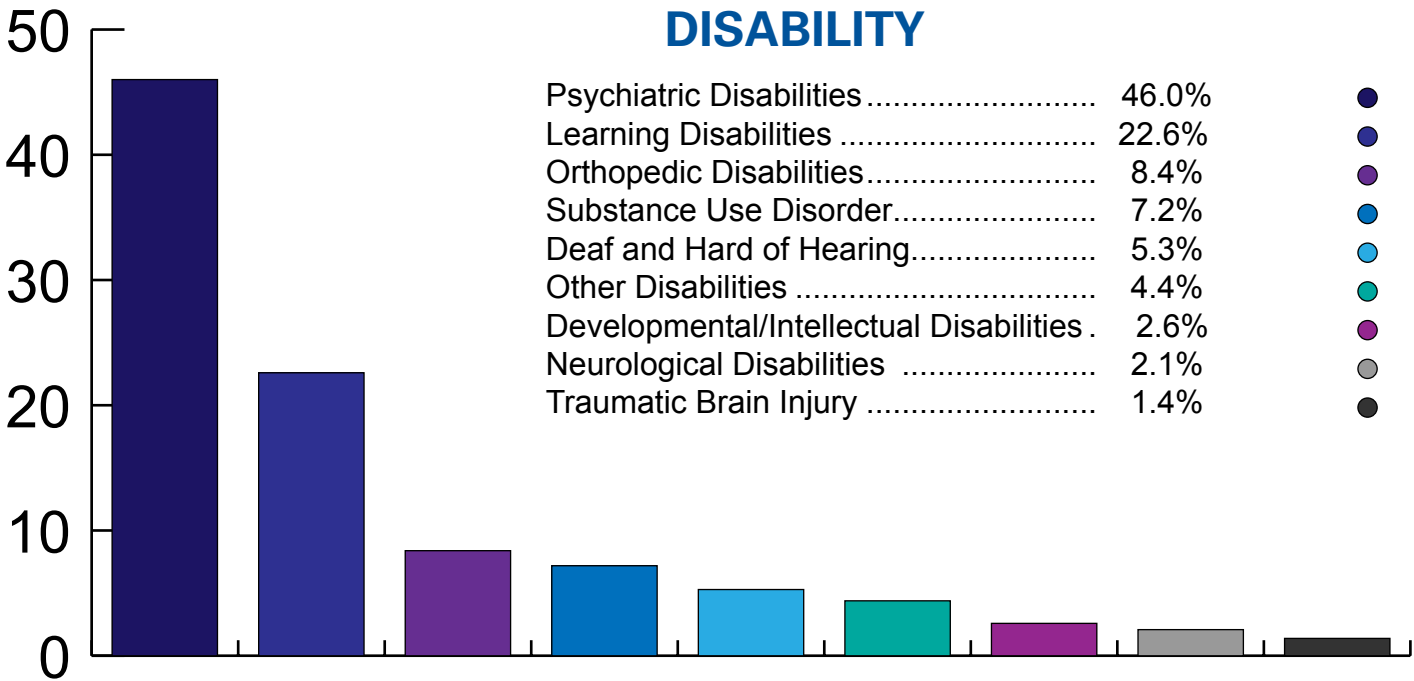
CONSUMER RACE

| | | |
|------------------------------|-------|---|
| White | 78.7% | ● |
| Black/African American..... | 17.7% | ● |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 13.7% | ● |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 3.8% | ● |
| Native American | 1.1% | ● |
| Chose not to identify | 1.0% | ● |

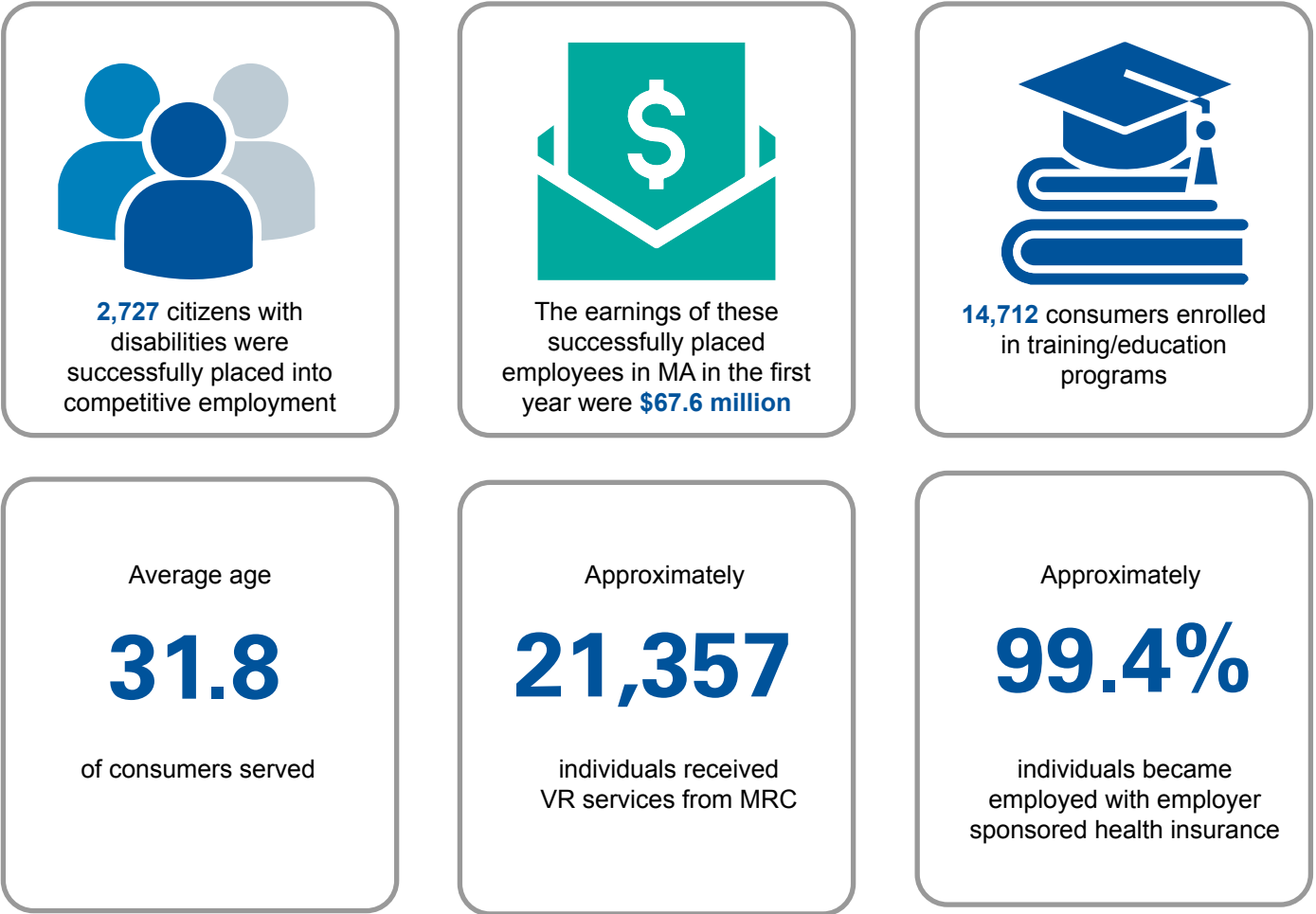


CONSUMER GENDER

| | | |
|----------------------------|-------|---|
| Male..... | 55.0% | ● |
| Female..... | 44.7% | ● |
| Chose not to identify..... | 0.3% | ● |



FISCAL YEAR 2021 FAST FACTS



CELEBRATING SRC'S *Dawn Clark*

By: Nick Pizzolato



For more than a decade, Reverend Dr. Dawn Clark has used her voice as a life-long advocate for people experiencing disabilities as the chair of the Massachusetts State Rehabilitation Council (SRC). The council partners with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) to help ensure that people with disabilities are provided with an equal opportunity to receive the programs, services and supports needed to gain competitive integrated employment. Clark isn't going that far, she will continue to advise the SRC in her role as Disability Representative, as Inez Canada has transitioned into the role of Committee Chair.

"I want to thank Dawn Clark, whose many years of leadership laid a foundation for the work the SRC is accomplishing today." Canada said recently. "Dawn selected Committee Chairs who bring passion and leadership to the tasks the Council undertakes."

Ten years ago, Clark, who was born with cerebral palsy, was asked to fill out a nomination form to join the SRC. Soon after she received word that Governor Deval Patrick had appointed her to the council.

This appointment made sense because Clark believes she's one of the first people MRC helped in the mid-1960s. New work as a member of the SRC was going to be trying, but she had no qualms about working hard because that's how her mother raised her.

"She was the one who did exercises with me every day for 18 years," Clark remembered. "I went to camp. I was a girl scout. I was involved with church youth groups and took dance lessons." She remembered that it was her physical therapist who recommended MRC to her.

Dawn didn't let anything slow her down, earning her BA in history from Ricker College, a ME, Master of Divinity with an emphasis in pastoral care from Boston University, and her Doctorate in Ministry from Bangor Theological Seminary.

For the last decade she has worked in the City of Worcester's Accessibility Office, assisting the Director with the Accessibility Advisory Commission, coordinating tours of city hall to people who experience disabilities and their allies, and working with volunteers presenting Disability Etiquette Training Workshops for city staff and community groups.

During her time with SRC, she's seen MRC take steps moving forward to break free of the title "best-kept secret." "To say that," commenting on the phrase, "is tough. But things have been changing for the better, and the work continues."

She added that recently MRC has been hiring talented

people, which has helped the positive growth. "There was a time that change was slow, and it was frustrating because it was challenging to get people excited about the SRC."

But she's excited about the relationship now between the Council and the Commission. "Commissioner Wolf gives clear updates on programs and initiatives, and we have a better sense of what's going on. We have a single mission and vision in mind. And even though we came from different perspectives – our goal is to get these people jobs."

For the future, Dr. Clark wants to see the stigma around hidden disabilities disappear and focus on reaching constituents most in need of services in underserved areas.

"More people are being diagnosed with mental health and learning disabilities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. But it's not easy for people to disclose these types of disabilities. I hope that the MRC/SRC partnership continues to find new ways to help these people break into the workforce. People like me need to feel comfortable and live independently."



COMMITTEE REPORTS

Executive Committee

Chairperson: Inez Canada

The SRC Executive Committee has a talented team of Committee Chairs and pending appointees who have dedicated significant time and efforts to the management of SRC operations outside of the four quarterly meetings.

In FY20, the Council mourned with communities of color torn apart by hate-fueled violence and by healthcare inequities exposed through a global pandemic. We pledged to become racial justice allies. So, FY21 started with the SRC putting those words into action. The greatest test of whether we mean what we say is the business we go about when the conversation is over. In FY21, the focus of the SRC was tearing down walls so that we could build up individuals. For individuals with disabilities seeking and receiving vocational rehabilitation services, the most impactful ways are:

- Engaging Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) consultants
 - to assess, train, and equip the Council to change the way the SRC thinks about diversity, equity, and inclusion
 - to learn how to apply DEI principles in the work of the SRC
 - to provide leadership skills,

tools, and resources to tear down systemic barriers based on race

- Collaborating with MRC and its consultants to redesign of the needs and satisfaction surveys to better capture the experience of individuals receiving vocational rehabilitation services. Feedback has included:
 - ideas for reaching individuals eligible for and receiving vocational rehabilitation services
 - at which service delivery points to send surveys, and
 - how to draft culturally sensitive questions that capture individual feedback as accurately as possible
- Learn more from the Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment report on pages 11 & 12.
- Working with the MRC Director of Communication to rebrand our public facing communications and messaging about the purpose of the SRC and our partnership MRC, and the potential impact our work could have on vocational rehabilitation service delivery, starting with the 2021 Annual report.

Recruitment

The SRC is a public body seeking individuals with diverse disabilities, backgrounds, and experiences who are interested in employment services for individuals with disabilities. This civic service opportunity is an unpaid but rewarding in other ways. Anyone can participate as a member of the public. Individuals who choose to serve as a voting member can apply through the SRC for appointment by the Governor.

We are looking to recruit members who will be open to learning and growing in an action oriented environment. Generally, individuals should be:

- Willing to learn the basics about vocational rehabilitation
- Willing to embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Humble enough to admit what they don't know; confident enough to speak up about what they do
- Active listeners who take in information and ask the questions
- Able to see problems and think through solutions
- Able to communicate ideas and concerns

Review the highlights of the FY21 SRC work in this report to see if any fits your interests!



Business & Employment Opportunity Committee

Chairperson: Steve LaMaster

The SRC Business and Employment Opportunity Committee is responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and providing guidance to the MRC on methods and best practices for employment and employment services.

Past Fiscal Year Activities involved:

- Supporting increased employment of individuals with disabilities in the Commonwealth. The committee identified MRC's participation in a cross-agency working group designed to meet state diversity targets for individuals with disabilities, and received information from this interagency working group, the Disability Employment Action Committee (DEAC), on the Commonwealth's current performance on meeting diversity targets. Data showed that workforce numbers for individuals with disabilities in the Commonwealth remain below parity. The committee oriented members of the Commonwealth Human Resources Division (HRD) about its

recommendation to MRC to increase efforts across State agencies to meet targets for diversity hiring. Bill Allen, the MRC liaison for the BEOC, has agreed to share additional information about the efforts of the DEAC as it becomes available. Also, by invitation from the Committee, the Massachusetts Office on Disability's Executive Director, Mary Mahon McCauley, joined us for a discussion about this recommendation and shared her years of experience to help us develop action items for this effort.

- The BEOC recommended that MRC increase availability and accessibility of SRC materials online and develop a robust communications, marketing, and branding strategy for MRC. In the last year, MRC began a rebranding effort with consultant Think Argus, who partnered with MRC to ensure coordinated accessibility of materials, resources, and processes. MRC hired a Communications Director with whom the BEOC will work in the coming year to review and update SRC materials to ensure DEI and Racial Equity best practices are reflected.

- Finally, the BEOC recommended that MRC update and make more user-friendly all self-employment resource materials. In FY22, MRC will join the BEOC's work and help us develop a baseline understanding of self-employment, including but not limited to assessing needs (consumer and counselor), data trends (state and national), and identified best-practices and partners, to inform a strategy for MRC consumers with self-employment vocational goals

Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee

Chairperson: Olympia Stroud

The Statewide Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee ensures individual perspectives are included in the process of evaluating MRC VR services.

The Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee has numerous accomplishments this past fiscal year.

Lifting Individuals voices: to ensure Synergy Consulting Partners best



COMMITTEE REPORTS

captured the needs of individuals with disabilities served by MRC, the committee invited Synergy working group to a Committee meeting to listen to consumers as they lifted their voices and shared their concerns and issues.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion work:

DEI work was an important goal to SRC Executive Committee this year, which transitioned well into the Consumers Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee. Our committee is dedicated to DEI work and wearing the lens of equity to truly mean “all means all” from cultural to geographical representation with services and VR Counselors, making the right fit for every individual with disabilities.

Recruitment: A constant goal of the Committee is recruiting individual with disabilities; uplifting consumers’ voices in our committee, and so we will keep scouting. As Chair, I’m so proud of the Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee members who have come with their idea, concerns and voices to make change for all individuals with disabilities so that they know they matter, belong, and their story/voice is heard, because “ALL MEANS ALL.”

Needs Assessment Survey Tool: As we enter FY22, one of our goals this year was to revamp the MRC annual consumer needs assessment survey to make the survey more accessible, user friendly, and ask questions that help the Committee, along with MRC, to understand the gaps between the underserved, unrepresented and unserved individuals with disabilities. Synergy Consulting Partners partnered to develop a new and improved assessment survey tool. The partnership connected the MRC Analytics and Quality Assurance Team, SRC members, the MRC Employee

Resource Groups (Black Managers Committee, Bilingual Committee, LGBTQ+ Allies Committee, etc.), MRC Counselors and consumers. A portion of this team is working on a Request for Response (RFR) to contract with a vendor to develop this consumer experience survey.

Policy Committee

Chairperson: Naomi Goldberg

The SRC Policy Committee reviews and analyzes Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) policies and procedures to ensure service delivery aligns with federal and state VR regulations and policy guidance. The Committee recommends revisions to and the development of policies that help consumers better understand the VR process and what is necessary to attain competitive integrated employment. Also, it recommends changes to policies to fix systemic matters as appropriate. Finally, the Committee periodically reviews and recommends updates to the Council Bylaws.

During FY21, the SRC Policy Committee focused its work on the two FY21 State Plan recommendations to which it was assigned: develop standardized VR workforce strategies to prepare and support students entering post-secondary educational settings and increase the SRC’s understanding and knowledge of MRC procurement and contracting processes. Both recommendations are aimed at improving vocational rehabilitation services and outcomes for consumers.

When assigned recommendations, the committee must always determine what impactful steps and actions it can take to truly support the recommendations considering the SRC’s advisory role. Additionally, part

of developing an approach to work on these recommendations must include consideration of diversity, equity, and inclusion. As the committee seeks to improve services and outcomes for consumers it must consider the unique needs of all its consumers and ensure that policies and practices do not inadvertently exclude consumers of color.

FY21 Recommendations work Developing standardized VR workforce strategies to prepare and support students entering post-secondary educational settings is work that has been a carried over from FY20. Originally, the recommendation sought to create designated positions for vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) who serve college-bound students. The intent of the recommendation was to pair college-bound consumers with VRCs who had specific expertise in college related matters and resources to facilitate a positive experience. Upon learning that it was not possible to create such positions, the recommendation was revised to focus on developing a set



of materials that VRCs could use to enhance the experience of their college-bound consumers.

During FY21, the committee determined that it would develop a packet of information that would serve to provide college bound students with disabilities with important information and resources. To determine what information should be included in the packet, the committee consulted with two VRCs about best practices and resources that they use to support their college-bound consumers, as well as sought input from members of the committee about what information college bound students need to know from their VRCs.

Ultimately, the committee created some resource documents and gathered others from existing publications. The core of the packet included a comprehensive checklist developed by the committee that college students could fill out individually or with a VRC. They can use to identify and record important contacts and other relevant information for school. It lists the contact information for the VRC, the financial aid office, disability services office, academic supports etc. It also has space for a consumer to list

important dates at the school as well as community supports, groups, and clubs that may meet their individual needs. Other information in the packet included a financial aid resource sheet, an FAQ on the basic rights of college students with disabilities, a fact sheet on obtaining reasonable accommodations in school, and a fact sheet to support online learning strategies for students with disabilities. The committee submitted this packet of information to MRC and requested that they consider using the resources with their college bound consumers. The submission of the packet marked the completion of the committee’s work on this recommendation. Increase the SRC’s understanding and knowledge of MRC procurement and contracting processes was a carryover recommendation from the previous two years.

During FY21, the Policy Committee continued to expand its knowledge of procurement and contracting. As originally written, the recommendation sought to ensure that sufficient services such as tutors were procured so that they would be available to consumers and to prevent delays in service. As the committee worked on the recommendation, it became clear that we did not know enough

about the subject to offer meaningful feedback to MRC. Consequently, the committee refocused its activities on learning about procurement so that it eventually could provide concrete recommendations. When working on this issue in FY20, the Committee committed to ensuring that that it evaluates whether vendors with whom MRC contracts adequately represent the diverse communities that MRC serves.

Throughout FY21, the Committee met with various MRC staff to learn about procurement and contracting processes and the various barriers that exist to purchasing services when there is no contract. With this baseline knowledge, the Committee began discussing how it could take actions on the recommendation. A plan was not conceived during FY21; however, the committee has identified areas of interest.

Among these were ensuring that CIES vendors represent the linguistic and cultural needs of consumers; that an alternative process be available when a consumer needs a service and there is no vendor on contract; and that MRC continues to pursue additional vendors to increase choices. The recommendation is ongoing and in

COMMITTEE REPORTS

FY22, the committee plans to focus on determining action steps to ensure that there are sufficient vendors to meet the wide range of services needed by consumers, taking into consideration the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse populations.

State Plan & Interagency Relations Committee

Chairperson: Joe Bellil

The State Plan and Interagency Relations Committee ensures the SRC meets its obligations regarding input from consumers in the development of both the MRC public VR(vocational rehabilitation) State Plan and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan.

During the FY 2021 State Plan Committee meetings, committee members reviewed and responded to MRC's responses to the 2021 SRC Recommendations. The committees, in partnership with MRC, worked on their assigned recommendations throughout the year.

In February 2021, the Committee had a presentation by Janet LaBreck, the principal and co-founder of Synergy Consulting. Ms. LaBreck was the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) within the United States Department of Education in 2013. She drew on that experience to discuss how SRC work fits into the Commonwealth's goals and priorities of VR and about our role in assisting with the preparation of the VR services goals and priorities for the Combined State Plan.

Janet LaBreck was the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) within the United States Department of Education in 2013. Currently, she is the principal and co-founder of Synergy Consulting.

The committee discussed the focus for the 2022 Recommendations. The members strongly encouraged each SRC committee to have their recommendations have a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) lens on it. Each committee reviewed the recommendations that they were working on currently and discussed what FY22 recommendations should be in light of FY21 accomplishments and expected FY22 consumer-related needs.

FY22 Recommendations Timeline

JUNE 18

SRC forwarded the approved FY22 SRC Recommendations to MRC for MRC's response

JUNE 17

The FY22 SRC Recommendations and Timeline were presented to the SRC members. The SRC members voted to approve the FY22 SRC Recommendations

JUNE 3

SRC Executive Committee reviewed this document and approved the FY22 SRC Recommendations to be voted on at the June Full SRC Quarterly Meeting

MAY

All the committee recommendations were forwarded to the State Plan Committee to create a draft FY22 SRC Recommendations document

Getting to know the OFFICE OF INDIVIDUAL & FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

As part of MRC Commissioner Wolf's commitment to elevating the voices and leadership of the disability community within all decision-making spaces at MRC, the Office of Individual and Family Engagement was brought to life in 2020. Led by Amanda Costa (Director) and Manel Desvallons (Family Partnership Coordinator) the office was charged with developing a plan for the agency to work with MRC consumers and their families to solicit input on new initiatives and operational issues and provide opportunities for ongoing dialogue.

Priorities for the coming year
In recent months, The Office of Individual and Family Engagement has developed multiple platforms to listen and learn from MRC Consumers. In October 2021, MRC hosted it's second Listening and Learning Forum, a two-hour virtual space to bring together disability community members, families, and professional stakeholders to learn about MRC Services directly from other consumers, provide feedback on upcoming MRC initiatives, and engage in community peer support. Over 130 citizens across the Commonwealth were in attendance. Additionally, MRC will disseminate it's first consumer and family newsletter in November, focused on providing success stories, event highlights, and ongoing resources for consumers and their supporters.

Collaboration with SRC
Amanda and Manel have provided support and consultation with ongoing advisory councils across the agency, including partnering with the Statewide Rehabilitation Council to engage the voices and feedback of MRC consumers. Olympia Stroud, SRC Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee Chair has collaborated with the Office to build a new and innovative approach to understanding consumer service experiences. Using cutting edge software, MRC will outreach to those receiving employment services at targeted timepoints throughout their engagement, to better understand



what barriers they are facing, and areas for improving service delivery. Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment Committee members, including MRC consumers, were instrumental in providing ongoing feedback in the development of this model, which is set to launch in 2022.

Office of Individual & Family Engagement Vision
Our vision is based on the philosophy that individuals with disabilities have the same basic rights as people without disabilities. We aspire to become the model service delivery agency in Massachusetts and beyond. We will do this by breaking down barriers and ensuring individuals with disabilities have full and equitable access to the services and supports they want and need to live self-sufficient and engaging lives in the communities of their choice.

FY22 RECOMMENDATIONS



The SRC seeks MRC’s support in developing a strategic vision, goals, and leadership competencies for the SRC that integrates and infuses Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Racial Equity principles and values. The work of the SRC specific to DEI/RE would inform and advise how best to reach, serve, and support unserved/underserved consumers and potential consumers.

The SRC will evaluate its own work and review what MRC is doing for DEI work. The SRC requests that MRC provide the SRC with updated reports and other related DEI information on a quarterly basis. This information will be used by the SRC for:

- a. Refining the Council’s definitions and vision/mission, including a focus on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.
- b. Recruiting diverse voting Statewide Rehabilitation Council members.
- c. Developing structured processes for governing all activities of the SRC, ensuring a DEI lens.
- d. Training on how to recognize disparate impact within organizational structures (e.g., policies and procedures) on Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC)

LEAD: BUSINESS & EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

Support employment of individuals with disabilities in the Commonwealth through developing a baseline understanding of current data and trends, which can inform a high-level strategy to increase the numbers of state employees with disabilities. Include the principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion lens in this work, and work with MRC to ensure the robustness of this effort.

LEAD: BUSINESS & EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

Increase availability and accessibility of SRC materials online and develop a robust communications, marketing, and branding strategy for SRC. Make materials available to SRC for review related to accessibility to all including from a DEI lens.

LEAD: POLICY COMMITTEE

Increase number of available vendors to better support consumer informed choice. Areas of focus should include the cultural and linguistic needs of diverse populations, as well as increasing vendors in geographic areas with historically limited choice. Additionally, there should be a transparent procedure in place to purchase services with limited delay when there is no contract in place.

LEAD: BUSINESS & EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

Develop a baseline understanding of self-employment, including but not limited to assessing needs (consumer and counselor), data trends (state and national), and identified best-practices and partners, to inform a strategy for self-employment services within MRC available in the community now.



Pictured: Caitlin with her family. Her partner Paul and her three children, Nathan, Ronan, and Shay.

Gaining Independence Through VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

By: Nick Pizzolato

Caitlin O’Leary had heard about the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) before attending an orientation session but did not understand how the agency would provide her resources to succeed. Her father, who was also a person who experienced disabilities, and had heard of MRC, brought a reluctant Caitlin to learn more. “I’m not like any of these people,” she remembered thinking.

Eleven months before that, Caitlin was in a car accident, causing her to be in a coma for a month. As a result of the collision, she suffered a diffuse axonal injury, a traumatic brain injury resulting from the brain rapidly shifting inside the skull. When she regained consciousness, Caitlin needed speech, occupational, and physical therapy as a

part of the recovery process. One of the reasons she didn’t choose to attend the orientation session was that her father was her source of transportation. “I told him, ‘No! I don’t want to go’,” she said with a smile remembering her late father’s insistence that she attend.

Since that first session, Caitlin has earned her associate’s and bachelor’s degrees. She’s been able to achieve her employment and education goals, and because of the programs and resources that MRC provides, she’s been able to afford to buy a car and a house for her family.

This economic independence and confidence in her skills and value result from vocational rehabilitation (VR).

The VR division of MRC provides and connects people experiencing disabilities with the resources and services to help them complete their educational journey, develop employment skills, and network with employers. VR can also help provide physical tools like laptops, software programs, and hearing aids when these tools are necessary to reach their employment goal.

VR isn’t a one-size-fits-all solution. Every person is different, and every program is going to differ.

“As a vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC), it is my goal to understand where the individual is at that point in time, as well as to identify the support and skills needed so the consumer can be successful,” said Caitlin’s counselor **Crystal Hodgkins**. “My job is to ensure they are happy with their plan, that it is effective, taking into account strengths, limitations, and it provides the support they need to find and keep a job throughout changes in life circumstances.”

VRC’s take the time to get to know their partner and find out their short and long-term goals. Not everyone knows what they want to do, and that’s ok. VRC’s are there to help figure out the next step. They use their knowledge and network of professionals and businesses to find the right fit for that person.

“Everyone has their own experience and response to having a disability. My job is to appreciate their experience and help them to reach an outcome that is positive for them,” said Hodgkins, who began her career as VRC after working with individuals who needed assistance. “I knew I wanted to facilitate work for people and assist them to feel empowered, confident, and worthwhile.”

For someone like **Michael Panchu**, a recent college graduate, MRC helped him continue to get the education necessary to be placed in his current job, a technical support engineer at Zerto.

“MRC helped me in pursuing continuing education in the IT field after I graduated from the University of Massachusetts Boston,” he shared. “The Cisco certificate program served as a nice buffer to keep my resume as sharp as possible, during tough times.”

Colleen Moran, the director of workplace integration at Mass General Brigham, has been an employer partner with MRC for more than 20 years. “MRC has a constant pool of talented candidates as well as a rounded team of job placement specialists and counselors who can connect appropriate job seekers to open jobs.”

To employers who are looking for qualified candidates, she has one thing to say, “Call them. They have great and talented candidates who are ready to work.”

Panchu has the same advice for those who experience disabilities but don’t know where they can turn to for help. “There is no shame in asking for help to get where you need to go to in your professional career.”

He added, “The process and support at MRC are great. A lot of us don’t have the fortune of going through life without hurdles, and MRC does a good job of stepping in to mitigate them. Take advantage of the services they have to offer. It was great to know that MRC has connections to various companies.”

“The vocational plan is driven by the consumer. Consumers have the right to a plan that sets them toward their goal. The counselor’s role is to guide them and advise them on how to achieve their goal or maybe choose a new one,” says Crystal.

“I never, ever wanted to be treated like I had a disability,” said O’Leary. “I want to do everything on my own, but I can’t. Crystal helped me get the help I needed but also expected me to work hard.”

“My success is on my terms, and I like that.”



Pictured above: MRC consumer Michael Panchu.

Massachusetts Statewide Rehabilitation Council

2021 ANNUAL REPORT

