Christine Tosti

Disability Representative

MA State Rehabilitation Advisory Council

Recommendations FY 2024

I would like the opportunity to speak on my contributions to the FY 2024 recommendation process as a disabled consumer of MRC services and member of the SRC. At the last State Plan meeting, I was very uncomfortable having my recommendation wording changed but am pleased Cheryl Scott has asked such important detailed questions and I plan on answering them thoroughly while clarifying my recommendation rationale.

**Recommendation 1:**

**Similar to MRC’s NextGen program and Family Partnership forums, I recommend MRC reach out to Worcester County House of Corrections to explore outreach to incarcerated individuals with disabilities involved in their** [**shelter dog training program**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JYVSnLxMnCA)**. The purpose of this would be to let the inmates openly share their experiences with shelter dogs in a public forum and what kinds of career aspirations they have thought about as a result of being in the dog program. It would also be an opportunity for MRC to explain vocational rehabilitation and offer guidance on how to access MRC upon release.**

SRC Committee: Customer Satisfaction/Needs Assessment Committee

1. **What problem is this trying to solve or what issue is this trying to address?**

Recently, Worcester [has closed several inpatient substance use treatment programs](https://www.masslive.com/worcester/2023/04/community-healthlink-in-worcester-to-close-programs-lay-off-80-president-to-step-down.html) due to an audit. Given Massachusetts’ mental health [parity compliance issues](https://www.mass.gov/lists/attorney-generals-office-behavioral-health-parity-agreements) and settlements with insurance companies and the SRC’s commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, this is an important initiative to support. It would help us have a framework for anti-racist work as jails and prisons in [Massachusetts disproportionately incarcerate Black people](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/MA.html) at an alarmingly high rate and has the HIGHEST incarceration rate in the world overall.

Additionally, [jails and prisons house more mentally ill people](https://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/storage/documents/backgrounders/smi-in-jails-and-prisons.pdf) than psychiatric hospitals. [Disabled people](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/disability/#:~:text=People%20with%20disabilities%20are%20overrepresented,state%20prisons%20have%20a%20disability) are also disproportionately incarcerated.

1. **The intended value and purpose as it relates to vocational rehabilitation. In other words, how will this help achieve “competitive and sustainable employment for all people with disabilities”? (The quote is from the SRC mission.)**

By offering support and outreach to incarcerated individuals, MRC would be putting anti-racism initiatives into action. Supporting this recommendation would give MRC an opportunity to [curb recidivism](https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/outofwork.html) as unemployment is a contributing factor. It would also demonstrate commitment to recent federal efforts to address the [disproportionate impact unemployment has on formerly incarcerated individuals](https://www.whitehouse.gov/cea/written-materials/2022/05/09/expanding-economic-opportunity-for-formerly-incarcerated-persons/).

1. **What is the expected outcome or deliverable for this recommendation? What impact is it expected to have?**

By supporting this recommendation, MRC would show that incarcerated human beings are just as valuable to society as anyone. Allowing incarcerated individuals to share their experiences openly could prompt a written report to disseminate to other jails and prisons in Massachusetts. It could open up conversations with other counties most impacted by arrests in the hopes of developing dog training programs in multiple jails and prions in the state. My hope is for this idea to prompt participatory action research opportunities to keep incarcerated people front and center in developing and studying this process.

**Recommendation 2:**

**Recommend MRC counselors identify if a consumer is financially struggling upon intake and educate the consumer about possible resources and barriers to access these resources. I also recommend that MRC staff and SRC members host publics meetings to discuss the impact of** [**financial privilege**](financial%20experiences.jpg) **to raise awareness and visibility for disabled individuals living below the poverty line.**

1. **What problem is this trying to solve or what issue is this trying to address?**

Disabled people are [disproportionately impacted by poverty](https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-and-us-disability-facts-statistics-2020/download#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2025.9%25%20of%20individuals,%2C%20and%2010.5%25%20in%20Massachusetts.). There is also mounting legal and moral arguments for including [socioeconomic status as a protected class](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26790710) under antidiscrimination laws. Additionally, poverty is an experience that [disproportionately harms Black people](https://www.nationaldisabilityinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/disability-race-poverty-in-america.pdf).

The [Rehabilitation Service Administration’s findings](FFY%202023%20MTAG%20Final%20(01.20.2023%20update).pdf) that states are returning unused dollars is a concerning trend and one MRC could easily fall into again without more thoughtful outreach to consumers at and below the poverty line.

1. **The intended value and purpose as it relates to vocational rehabilitation. In other words, how will this help achieve “competitive and sustainable employment for all people with disabilities”? (The quote is from the SRC mission.)**

[Vocational rehabilitation services](VR%20services%20chart%20with%20examples.pdf) are an important factor in returning to work. Many disabled people at the poverty line do not have access to sufficient healthcare and mounting research shows the horrific [outcomes poverty has on health](https://nationalhealthcouncil.org/blog/limited-access-poverty-and-barriers-to-accessible-health-care/).

1. **What is the expected outcome or deliverable for this recommendation? What impact is it expected to have?**

I would hope this initiative helps provide funding directly to disabled consumers at and below the poverty line. It would allow disabled people at the poverty line to participate in rehabilitation services without cost being a concern. They could rehabilitate with dignity if funding was provided for their disability needs.