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Testimony of Toni Wolf, Commissioner
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
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Good afternoon, Representative Vargas, Senator Rush and distinguished members of the Committees on Ways and Means. I am Toni Wolf, from the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC), and I am honored to be in front of you for the fourth time as Commissioner. I am proud to say that in the last year, despite the pandemic, with the Governor's and Legislature's support, MRC has optimized the use of available state and federal revenue to continue delivery of core services to our clients, while maintaining fiscal responsibility and limiting budgetary risks.

I want to take a moment to thank Governor Baker, Lt. Governor Polito, Secretary Sudders, and each and every one of you for investing in MRC. Governor Baker's proposed FY22 budget of \$67.6 million supports the agency's core services needed to empower MRC's operations and service delivery despite a global pandemic.

The proposed FY2022 budget of \$67.6 million:

- Includes \$1.5M for standard staff payroll increases and provider rate annualization costs
- Fully funds Turning 22 (\$332K)
- Supports changes in population needs including:
 - \$192K for additional supports to Independent Living Assistance consumers with progressive and severe disabilities; and
 - \$118K to support changes in needs of individuals with traumatic brain injuries through SHIP
- Will empower MRC to support approximately 42,000 people through our programs:
 - 25,000 people served through the Vocational Rehabilitation program, including the WIOA program and Employment Assistance for Adults

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- 4,000 people served through Statewide Head Injury Program, Supported Living and Homecare
- 11,200 people served through the Independent Living Centers
- 1,800 people served through the Turning 22 and the Housing Registry for Disabled Persons

This past year has certainly not been easy, but I am happy to report MRC quickly adapted to working in a remote environment and remains committed to improving consumer experience and outcomes. Since March 2020, MRC shifted 98% of its operations and service delivery to a remote model, with 80% of staff working fully remote. During this time, MRC provided laptops for all staff and held focus groups with managers and supervisors to better understand the experience within the remote work environment. MRC has continuously assessed the challenges and opportunities within the remote work environment for both staff and consumers.

I'd like to take a moment to share that since mid-January, residents and staff in all 36 of our congregate care programs have been eligible to become vaccinated, and there is a 77% vaccine uptake rate for residents. Our congregate care providers have worked extremely hard to support MRC consumers and the direct care staff through the vaccination administration process and MRC will continue to support consumers access to vaccine as they are eligible

MRC Services and Impact

Throughout the past year, we all have experienced unprecedented challenges individually and collectively. Day after day, we at MRC have remained resilient in our dedicated work to support individuals living with disabilities in the Commonwealth. To conduct this important work, we are careful not to do it in a vacuum or within silos. We have developed and led strong partnerships with our sister agencies, our providers, and our employers. MRC leads strong partnerships with employers who hire people with visible and/or invisible disabilities as part of their inclusive and diverse workforce. In tandem with our employment successes, we offer an array of services empowering Massachusetts residents with disabilities to live and thrive independently in their respective communities.

We have continued to work with families and individuals to ensure that people with disabilities can live in their community independently as much as possible. In addition to providing community residential placement, we provide the assistive technology to support an individual to stay in their community of choice. MRC also provides transition to adulthood services to young people with disabilities who are enrolled in special education programs, and provides funding and oversight to the Commonwealth's 10 Independent Living Centers.

MRC also processes SSI and SSDI determinations for the Social Security Administration for Massachusetts residents. In Federal Fiscal Year 2020, MRC successfully achieved all its federal workload goals by processing 65,163 Social Security Disability claims and achieving a quality rating of 95.2%. This work accounts for more than \$4 billion annually in SSI and SSDI benefits paid to the citizens of the Commonwealth.

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I'd now like to take the opportunity to highlight a number of initiatives that occurred this past fiscal year.

In an immediate response to the pandemic, MRC launched a Consumer and Family Warm Line for consumers and family members with questions or concerns regarding MRC services. Information about the Warm Line is available on our public website and social media accounts. The MRC Consumer and Family Warm Line number is **617-204-3665**.

We also provided a multi-language consumer survey on remote service delivery. While this survey identified that most consumers were satisfied with the remote service delivery, it also identified that there are consumers who lack the technology needed to access services and/or supports during the COVID-19 pandemic, and/or do not have the training needed to use the technology.

Due to this finding, MRC created the Consumer Technology Initiative in an effort to break down the digital divide. This initiative surveyed all active MRC consumers to assess technology equipment and training needs. To date, in Vocational Rehabilitation, over \$5.4 million in funds were allocated to provide technology training and support to consumers. Technology was provided to approximately 3,800 consumers. In Community Living, 1,048 consumers have been assessed, and technology for 249 of these consumers have been provided to date.

Given today's reliance on information technology and remote access, it could not have been timelier for MRC to partner with CISCO, Holyoke Community College, and Roxbury Community College to launch the MRC Technology Academy Program. The first of its kind in the state, the program provides individuals who are eligible to receive services through MRC with the opportunity to be trained in cybersecurity and earn a certificate from CISCO. The program was highly successful and was recognized nationally by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, and will serve as a model for programs in states across the country.

I'd like to share with you the story of Aidan, who graduated from the program in December.

Not long ago, Aidan was working in a local supermarket, making pizza for minimum wage. It was not a job he believed held much promise for him. Life has changed a lot since then for the 29-year-old. Like many of his classmates, Aidan has struggled with a number of issues, including anxiety as well as depression, PTSD, and ADHD. "Just a tough combination of things," he said, that made it tough at times just to get out of bed in the morning. However, after sharing the experience with his classmates and persevering through our 10-month program at Holyoke Community College, Aidan is now poised to begin a career as a cybersecurity analyst and has received several internship and job offers, most notably from MassMutual.

In addition to our external partners, MRC has continued working diligently with our sister agencies across the Commonwealth to create service models to engage our shared consumers in the world of work, job placement services, and long-term support needs by leveraging our shared expertise.

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We have continued to partner with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) on the “Empowering to Employ” initiative, which engages and supports shared job seekers to obtain and maintain employment. As the experts in employment for people with disabilities, we can provide specialized employment supports not available through DTA’s programs or vendors. An increase from last year, to date this initiative has served 348 consumers. Of those, 110 have been successfully placed in jobs, and 82 are engaged in training.

Similarly, I’d like to share some of the accomplishments of the MRC and DMH’s Adult Community Clinical Services (ACCS) Employment Partnership. Through this partnership, mental health specialty Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRCs) work with DMH clients to explore their vocational interests, assess their needs, and determine the best pathways to ensure successful integrated competitive employment.

As of January 10, 2021, MRC has engaged with 1,573 job seekers, over and above our original goal of 1,300 job seekers. MRC now hired 21 specialized VRCs expanding bandwidth in order to serve an increasing number of Job Seekers. We have focused on faster and more efficient access to these services. As of January 10, 2021, 64% of Plans for Employment were developed within 40 days.

Lastly, I am pleased to share we launched MRC Connect, a single, integrated access point that connects consumers with the full array of MRC services regardless of program. And, for the first time in agency history, consumers can apply for MRC services online. MRC Connect has created many efficiencies internally, but most importantly, has eliminated the cumbersome application process for potential consumers. Since launching MRC Connect in September 2020, MRC has received 2,089 referrals and processed 1935 applications. The agency averages 25-30 applications daily. The MRC Connect unit has begun a phased rollout process with the goal of being statewide this year.

Opportunities Moving Forward

There are many opportunities as MRC moves into FY22.

MRC has prioritized strengthening our commitment to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Currently, we are conducting an analysis that will provide the data to develop a robust strategy to address racial equity within the agency, which includes our consumers and our workforce.

I’d also like to stress to you that our most important work is the way we partner with individuals with disabilities. We want to ensure that our work is continually informed through the lens of their lived experience.

I am excited to share we recently hired a Director for our Office of Individual and Family Engagement. This Office will use a “for us by us” approach to ensure that the voice and choice of individuals we serve, as well as their family members, are front and center in the design,

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development and delivery of MRC services and supports. We are eager for this opportunity to expand and deepen our work.

As we continue to improve our delivery of services, we recognize that the way we approach our work will look different than before. In alignment with the Governor's Future of Work Initiative, we are developing policies, tools, and practices to better support our consumers and our workforce in the new normal.

Conclusion

In closing I'd like to acknowledge that people with disabilities have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and jobseekers with disabilities are among the groups that have been hit the hardest. Approximately 1 million people with disabilities have lost their job in the past year due to the pandemic, and the unemployment rate for people with disabilities has risen sharply. The pandemic and its effects on competitive integrated employment for individuals with disabilities will be felt for years to come and impact their ability to live independently and with dignity in the community.

MRC's services matter now, more than ever, to ensure individuals with disabilities are included in rebuilding the economy of Massachusetts during and post-pandemic. The workforce is richer and more productive when it includes people with disabilities.

MRC has an obligation to continue being a leader in building a more inclusive and accessible Commonwealth. Please know how much I appreciate your ongoing support of MRC. With that gratitude in mind, I ask you to support the Governor's proposed budget that will empower us to continue to provide imperative services, strengthen our partnerships, and continue building an agency that is responsive, agile, and flexible to address the societal barriers individuals with disabilities face every day.

Thank you and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.