



CHARLES D. BAKER
GOVERNOR

KARYN E. POLITO
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

MARYLOU SUDDERS
SECRETARY

TONI WOLF
COMMISSIONER

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
Executive Office of Health and Human Services
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
600 Washington Street
Boston, MA 02111-1704

(617) 204-3600
1 (800) 245-6543
Voice/TDD (617) 204-3868
FAX (617) 727-1354

**Testimony of Toni Wolf, Commissioner
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
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Good morning, Vice Chair Donato, Vice Chair Friedman, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

My name is Toni Wolf, and I am the Commissioner of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC). I am honored to appear before you today to speak about our mission, priorities, and Governor Baker's House 2 Fiscal Year 23 budget.

As of this hearing, we are two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, and in this time, MRC has strategically adapted how we provide our services to break down barriers and empower individuals with disabilities to live life on their own terms.

Together with stakeholders, partners, and allies, MRC collaborates, problem solves, and innovates to bring about a better Massachusetts for everyone – one that is truly equitable, accessible, and inclusive. Governor Baker's proposed budget of \$78 million, will allow MRC to continue to recruit, retain, and train our dedicated workforce; fund effective services and programming; make strategic investments in service models and expand what's possible in the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Our programs focus on training and employment, community living, and disability determination for federal benefit programs. MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation Division prepares individuals to take on the modern workplace. Together with public colleges and universities, professional training programs, and employers statewide, we partner with individuals to expand what's possible in their career and work life. Our programs give individuals the opportunity to explore many industries and sectors so they can find what's best for them. We guide and support employers to create the accessible and inclusive environment they deserve. Our Community

Living Division addresses the diverse needs of adults and transition age youth by providing housing, assistive technology, home care supports, and employment day services. If someone's ability to work is limited because of a disability, MRC's Disability Determination Services (DDS) is here to make sure they get the benefits they need to build a more independent life.

Governor Baker's proposed budget will enhance the needs of individuals with disabilities, including; additional supports to independent living assistance, home care assistance for individuals with progressive and severe disabilities or multiple medical conditions, individuals with traumatic brain injuries through the Statewide Head Injury Program (SHIP), and assisting individuals with physical disabilities transitioning out of high school with their supported living needs through the Turning 22 Program. In addition, the budget will also transfer funds from the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to MRC to allow us to continue serving individuals with mental health conditions in achieving their employment outcomes.

- MRC served 21,357 individuals through its vocational rehabilitation program, assisted 13,061 individuals through community living services, and determined eligibility for 59,026 individuals through its Disability Determination Services.
- Despite a high disability unemployment rate across the Commonwealth, in FY21, 2,727 citizens with disabilities were successfully placed into competitive employment based on their choices, interests, needs and skills. Those individuals who were placed earned salaries that collectively totaled \$67.6 million in their first year of employment. The estimated public benefits savings from these individuals entering the workforce in MA were \$20.5 million.

I'd now like to take the opportunity to highlight impactful initiatives that occurred this past year.

A Change Agent and Community Builder

For too long, people with disabilities have faced social and physical barriers in their path to independence and self-determination. Over the past year, MRC has partnered with several allies and organizations to innovate and transform services for job seekers.

- These days as we spend more time online, we wanted to make it easier for people to access our services. That's why we built and implemented MRC Connect, the virtual gateway that connects people with our services and programs they need. MRC Connect is all about working together. Completing a single online application connects individuals to a broad range of services for training, employment, and community living—and a staff member is there with individuals every step of the process collecting the necessary information to connect individuals with programs that are the right fit for them.
 - Since its launch September 2020, more than 15,000 individuals have reached us through MRC Connect.
 - This past month we received 500 calls.
- MRC advanced its partnership with Roxbury Community College, Holyoke Community College, and CISCO to host the [MRC Technology Academy Program](#). The program provides individuals receiving services from MRC the opportunity to be trained in cybersecurity and earn a certificate from CISCO. The labor market sector within

technology provides an average salary of \$60,000 a year. The average salary our program participants have earned is \$73,000 a year.

- Recognizing the critical need for access to technology during the pandemic, and to help combat social isolation, since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, we were able to identify and deploy more than \$13.6 million of federal funding (\$3.7 million in FY22) to purchase more than 12,000 pieces of technology equipment including laptops, monitors, keyboards, and headsets.

Federal legislation including the *Rehabilitation Act*, the *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)*, and most recently the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)* have all mandated employment for people with disabilities. No matter the amount of federal legislation or the performance-driven incentives within them, the national employment rate for people with disabilities has remained the same. Almost 50 years after the passage of the *Rehabilitation Act*, state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agencies still struggle with successful outcome and recruiting qualified VR counselors. National data on disability, employment, and race paint a grim picture, especially for young adults and those living with intellectual and developmental disabilities (ID/DD).

- According to the US Department of Labor, the labor force participation rate for persons with disabilities is currently 19.9% compared to 66.7% for persons without disabilities. Among young adults (20-24) with a disability, only 44.2% were employed compared to 70.4% of same-age youth without disabilities.
- Among working age (21-64) individuals with ID/DD, only 44% are in the labor force, compared to 83% of those without disabilities.

This past November, MRC was awarded a competitive \$17 million Innovation Grant from the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) with funds from the grant and in partnership with the MCB and MCDHH, we will begin to implement “NextGen Careers,” a new, innovative approach to assist youth with their career goals. Young adults with a disability between the ages of 18-30 are eligible, the program will prioritize young adults with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, sensory disabilities, as well as those from traditionally under-represented and underserved because of race and ethnicity (e.g., Black and Latinx).

Amplifying Our Collective Voice

MRC defines what it does, first and foremost, by the impact the agency has on those it serves. Our goal is not just to deliver services; it’s to empower people to live life on their own terms. This past year, we created the Office of Individual and Family Engagement. The goal of the department is to elevate the voices and expertise of individuals with disabilities and their families. Since its creation, the Office has:

- Hosted listening and learning forums with the disability community, resulting in connection with over 600 citizens, providing insight into MRC services and connecting individuals with supports for themselves and their families.
- In addition, we also created a quarterly newsletter distributed to more than 15,000 individuals to inform them about services and supports from the agency.

- We also recognized the need to co-create services and supports by partnering with the disability community. Through this effort, paid Disability Inclusion Leaders—individuals with disabilities and family allies— are engaging in spaces where decisions are being made at MRC to infuse their diverse lived expertise..

MRC also continued to enhance our collaboration with sister agencies. MRC partnered with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) to enhance 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, MRC provided specialized employment supports not available through DTA’s programs or vendors and assisted more than 400 individuals this year.

With the FY23 budget, MRC will receive \$4.6 million to support the Department of Mental Health (DMH) Adult Community Clinical Services (ACCS) Employment Partnership. Last year the program exceeded its goals by 34% and assisted 1,744 individuals. Through this partnership, mental health specialty Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (QVRCs) work with DMH clients to explore their vocational interests, assess their needs, and determine the best pathways to ensure successful integrated competitive employment.

Our Community Living Division has played an integral role in providing support for individuals pathway to becoming self-sufficient. Through our Waiver program, 1,079 individuals were supported to move into their communities. More than 205 individuals were moved out of a nursing home, and 107 individuals received modifications allowing them to transition to live back in their home. The Waiver Program staff also supported nursing facility staff in completing 800 applications. In addition to providing access to food, shelter, transportation, medical care, PPE, and technology, our Independent Living Centers (ILCs) successfully transitioned 178 people from nursing homes back into the community and prevented 103 individuals from becoming institutionalized.

I’d also like to recognize that in September, the Joint Motion for Dismissal in Hutchinson v. Patrick was approved. The Judge recognized that there had been significant system change and that the efforts of the Commonwealth had changed the world for individuals in nursing facilities with acquired brain injury (ABI). Under the leadership of EOHHS, and in collaboration with DDS and MassHealth, MRC was deeply invested to finalize the Hutchinson Settlement.

Closing

After close to two years of navigating the pandemic, we at MRC have been resilient. In addition to providing remote and in person services, our workforce has led extensive efforts for individuals residing in institutions to live in the community. We know there is much work ahead and we are committed to our role of providing a wider variety of services that meet people with disabilities where they are, literally and metaphorically. Our agency operates as an agent of change in people’s lives. We bolster and build better communities and put the people we serve at the heart of everything we do.

The FY 2023 House 2 budget of \$78 million submitted by Governor Baker and Secretary Sudders supports continued progress for MRC and allows the agency to strategically utilize funds to better meet the needs of individuals with disabilities. We will continue to adapt and respond to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, and to align our resources in the most efficient manner to sustain improvement in our priority areas and adapt to the needs of individuals with disabilities.

We are grateful to Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders, and members of the Massachusetts Legislature for their unwavering 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. We are changing life in Massachusetts for the better.

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