

ANNUAL REPORT 2022



Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

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LETTER FROM THE COMMISSIONER
Toni A. Wolf

DEAR MRC COMMUNITY:

What a year it has been! As with every organization around the Commonwealth, we at the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) learned, developed, and adapted to life as a result of COVID-19.

I could not be prouder of our agency for continuing to push cultural boundaries, going beyond service delivery to create innovative partnerships to meet the evolving needs, interests, and aspirations of individuals with disabilities and their families.

As you'll see throughout the pages in this report, our agency plays a unique and specialized role in lives of individuals with disabilities. Our programs focus on training and employment, living in the community, and disability determination for federal benefit programs. We are change agents. We bolster and build better communities and put the people we serve at the heart of everything we do.

Our programs provided jobseekers the opportunity to explore many industries and sectors so they can find what's best for them—and we supported employers to create the accessible and inclusive environment they

deserve. We addressed the diverse needs of adults and transition age youth by providing assistive technology, home care supports, and employment day services. If someone's ability to work was limited because of a disability, we made sure they received the benefits they needed to build a more independent life.

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. We are grateful to Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders, and members of the Massachusetts Legislature for their unwavering support of MRC.

I am thankful to all our colleagues and partners who make MRC an agency that is responsive, agile, and flexible to address the societal barriers individuals with disabilities face every day. Together, we are changing lives in Massachusetts for the better.

Toni A. Wolf
Commissioner
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission



Possibility is Our Purpose

MRC provides services that breakdown barriers and empowers people with disabilities to live life on their own terms. Our programs focus on employment, community living, and disability determination for federal benefit programs. We are change agents and community builders. And we put the people we serve at the heart of everything we do.

Learn more about us at mass.gov/mrc.

FISCAL YEAR AT A GLANCE

Vocational Rehabilitation

FISCAL YEAR	21	22
Individuals Actively Receiving Services	21,357	19,505
Individuals Enrolled in Training/ Education Programs	14,712	14,149
Individuals Employed	2,727	3,021
Cost Per Individual Served	\$3,690	\$3,962

Community Living

FISCAL YEAR	21	22
Individuals Actively Receiving Services	17,007	16,665
Total Funds Expended	\$65,977,357.00	\$80,100,782.00
Cost Per Individual Served	\$3,879.00	\$4,806.00

Disability Determination Services

FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR	21	22
Total Budget	\$45,399,358.00	\$47,646,946.00
Cost Per Case	\$813.36	\$741.39
Accuracy of Initial Decisions	95.2%	95%
Federal Accuracy of Decision Standards	90.6%	90.6%

* Disability Determination runs on a federal fiscal year

Overall Funding

SFY 2022		FUNDING SOURCE					% of Program Budget
		State	Federal	Trust	Capital	Total	
NET AGENCY FUNDING	Vocational Rehabilitation	\$24,048,195	\$51,442,490	\$1,796,127		\$77,286,812	38%
	Community Living +	\$71,323,115	\$3,218,369	\$1,758,138	\$3,801,159	\$80,100,782	39%
	NextGen Services		\$591,956			\$591,956	0%
	Disability Determination Services		\$47,646,946			\$47,646,946	23%
	Commissioner's Office	\$360,971		\$60.64		\$361,031	0%
Agency Funding Total		\$95,732,281	\$102,899,760	\$3,554,326	\$3,801,159	\$205,987,526	100%
% of Overall Budget		46%	50%	2%	2%	2%	

* This budget item includes a one-time, state funded ARPA funding

SFY2022 Annual Report by Division

SUM OF ACTUALS		FUNDING SOURCE				
Agency Funding		State	Federal	Trust	Capital	Total
Commissioner's Office		\$360,970.69		\$60.64		\$361,031.33
Community Living Services		\$52,139,566.64	\$3,218,368.72	\$1,753,253.34		\$57,111,188.70
Vocational Rehabilitation Services		\$18,607,062.35	\$51,442,489.86	\$1,796,126.84		\$71,845,679.05
NextGen Services			\$591,955.70			\$591,955.70
Disability Determination Services			\$47,646,945.90			\$47,646,945.90
Agency Funding Total		\$71,107,599.68	\$102,899,760.18	\$3,549,440.82		\$177,556,800.68
ANF Funding						
Community Living Services		\$255,753.84				\$255,753.84
Vocational Rehabilitation Services		\$470,019.15				\$470,019.15
ANF Funding Total		\$725,772.99				\$72,5772.99
Partnership with State Agencies						
Community Living Services		\$18,927,794.96		\$4,885.02	\$3,801,159.00	\$22,733,838.98
Vocational Rehabilitation Services		\$4,971,113.40				\$4,971,113.40
Partnership with State Agencies Total		\$23,898,908.36		\$4,885.02	\$3,801,159.00	\$27,704,952.38
Grand Total		\$95,732,281.03	\$102,899,760.18	\$3,554,325.84	\$3,801,159.00	\$205,987,526.05



Summit Success

Inaugural Explore Possibility Summit Celebrates Disability Community

BY NICK PIZZOLATO

The event fostered a learning environment for attendees, offering diverse workshops to help them understand resources, services, and tools that were available from MRC and our statewide partners.

The very first guest for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission's (MRC) Inaugural Explore Possibility Summit arrived slightly before 8:00 a.m. at the Royal Plaza Hotel and Trade Center in Marlborough, Massachusetts. By 8:30 a.m., the lobby was buzzing with hundreds of other individuals with disabilities, their families, MRC providers, government agencies, and MRC staff as attendees came together to learn more about services and celebrate the community's collective resiliency. The Summit brought together members of the disability community and allies in person for the first time since the pandemic. People were able to meet with experts, see the future of job training with virtual reality, take part in professional

networking, and even have professional headshots taken. It was designed by and made specifically for the disability community.

"I'm so thrilled with how the Summit went," said Amanda Baczko, MRC's Director of Individual and Family Engagement, who led the way in planning the event. "We were so fortunate to connect our agency with the people we serve. We put a lot of thought into the topics, activities, providers, and speakers for the Summit, and we received great feedback throughout the day. It's exciting to be able to offer an event like this and create a safe and engaging space for people with disabilities."

The day began with Commissioner Toni Wolf welcoming guests and sharing remarks about what the Summit meant to MRC and the community. "One word comes to mind when I think about today, and that is magical.

2022 EXPLORE POSSIBILITY SUMMIT

We are here to focus on our resilience, to celebrate one another, continue to learn from one another, and work together as we make Massachusetts more inclusive," she said.

Jazz composer, teacher, musician, and keynote speaker Matt Savage spoke to the audience about his experience living as a person with autism and being a piano savant as a child. "When I was a child, loud noises made me uncomfortable," he shared with the audience. When Matt turned six, he started to play the piano and found that "music started to really open me up to the outside world. To have a visual representation of a piano key match the pitch of a note, it helped me grow into music." At seven, he started playing jazz, inspired by piano greats like Thelonious Monk. "It was hard for me to stop, and since then, the piano has always been a part of my life."

"It's been a pleasure and privilege to teach this type of music. Some may think that music jobs for people with disabilities may be difficult. But the arts are therapeutic and essential," Matt concluded before playing an original piece for the 500 people in attendance.

The event fostered a learning environment for attendees, offering diverse workshops to help them understand resources, services, and tools that were available from MRC and our statewide partners.

Alison Scher, an MRC employee who has received MRC services, shared that she loved the energy in the room. "I've been with the agency for more than 20 years, and I've been to previous events, and this one was the best."

To some like, Destiny Lomonte, an MRC disability inclusion leader, it was a relief to feel included. "I felt welcomed, and it was because we were all one community," she said.



There were people there with many disabilities, and everyone embraced one another. I didn't feel alone or that I stuck out in a crowd. It felt natural and easy for me to ask for accommodations."

"I'm a professional with a disability, a parent with a disability, and I'm proud to be a part of the community."

We can continue to make an impact by working together."

JOEY BUIZON
Supervisor of Employment Services
Massachusetts Commission
for the Blind

"I was able to chat with people who had just joined the MRC community," said Brendan Shea, who also attended the Summit. "It was a great opportunity for them to see and meet other people who use services. There was someone who had questions about securing rides and mobility. They talked to other people who use wheelchairs and me, and we were able to give him advice, which is different from when you meet with a vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor. You're meeting with your peers."

"I'm so happy with how the event was structured and laid out," said Amanda. "And I'd be lost without the support of the Summit's Planning Committee. It was a truly collaborative effort to make sure we were thoughtful about the day. I also want to send a huge thank you to the team at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts. They are experts in event planning and were essential in helping us find a venue, event registration, and support."

The day ended with a panel featuring people with lived experiences sharing their stories. George Farrington, a brain injury survivor, said one of his strategies to excel in his personal and work life is how he has learned to change the way he thinks about who he is. "I've learned I have different abilities, not disabilities," he shared.

Joey Buizon, the Supervisor of Employment Services at the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind, shared that he's proud to be a part of the disability community. "I'm a professional with a disability, a parent with a disability, and I'm proud to be a part of the community. We can continue to make an impact by working together."





Discovering Success in a New Career: Meet Richard Erskine

BY NICK PIZZOLATO

Richard Erskine grew up with the dream of becoming a social worker, following in his mother's footsteps. He saw firsthand how inspiring the work was and earned a Bachelor of Science in Social Work from Westfield State. However, after his first internship, he realized the field might not be the right fit for him. Unsure of what was next, he reached out to the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) to help him with his job journey.

Richard worked with MRC as an undergraduate to gain financial support for college. After graduation, he talked with his vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC), Manuel Robles, and learned of MRC's job training programs. Richard met with Tara Raymond, a Job Placement Services team member. The Job Placement Services team specializes in connecting employers with the thousands of jobseekers at MRC who are ready to start their employment journey.

"The first thing that stuck out about Richard was his good nature," Tara shared. "He understood to reach his goals; he was the captain of his ship." With Tara's guidance, Richard became interested in the Cisco Academy Cybersecurity Program. The program, which was the first of its kind in the state, is free and a cooperative effort with MRC and Holyoke Community College. The course is an intensive education and training program which focuses on preparing students to join the growing field of cybersecurity. Individuals who graduate from the program earn a certificate in cybersecurity from Cisco, a credential many employers in the industry look for when recruiting employees. "Richard gave 110% to be sure he was accepted into this program," Tara said, and sure enough, he was.

Just as Richard and his class began the course work, they and the rest of the world had to readjust as COVID-19 forced everyone to take a step back and reassess. "I had never taken part in a virtual classroom like this before," Richard said. At first, he found it very daunting. This was new for him subject matter and how they held the class virtually. Richard thrived, though. "The instructors were hands-on and did everything they could to prepare us for the program."

After graduating from the program, Richard returned to MRC to polish his resume and participate in practice interviews as he looked to find the right job. "I must have gone through more than 100 job applications, resumes, and cover letters," Richard laughed. "For a while, I didn't think I would find anything." But his hard work prepared him for another great opportunity that Tara and MRC were able to provide.

Tara recommended Richard apply for the Neurodiversity in the Workplace (NITW) program, which specializes in helping those who are Neurodiverse prepare themselves for the job interview process and start their careers. Tara said, "I knew if Richard were provided the environment to shine, he would excel, and that is exactly what he did," Tara added. The two-week program focuses on professional development and Richard met with hiring managers from Dell Technologies. "They brought in hiring managers who spoke to me. They called them reverse interviews," Richard remembered. "I could talk about some of the work I had done and the projects I had completed."

After the program ended, Dell Technologies offered him an internship that had the opportunity to lead to full-time employment. He began the internship in 2020, and a year later, his manager asked him to join the team full-time. "I was full of so much joy when she asked me to join the team. It made me feel like all the work I had put in meant something. I had accomplished this goal!"

Richard's career is in a new field, but he is eager to learn and continue his professional development. "I'm starting to understand more every day. Things are getting easier for me." He works on a team with fifteen other people, all of which are supportive and help him to understand his tasks and network with colleagues.

He added, "It never occurred to me to even think of this career path," but he's proud of his accomplishments. "MRC has been so supportive and has many resources to offer anyone looking for help. You need to put the effort in, but MRC is there to help you every step of the way."

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) division prepares you to take on the modern workplace. Together with public colleges and universities, professional training programs, and employers statewide, we partner with people with disabilities to expand what's possible in your career and work life.

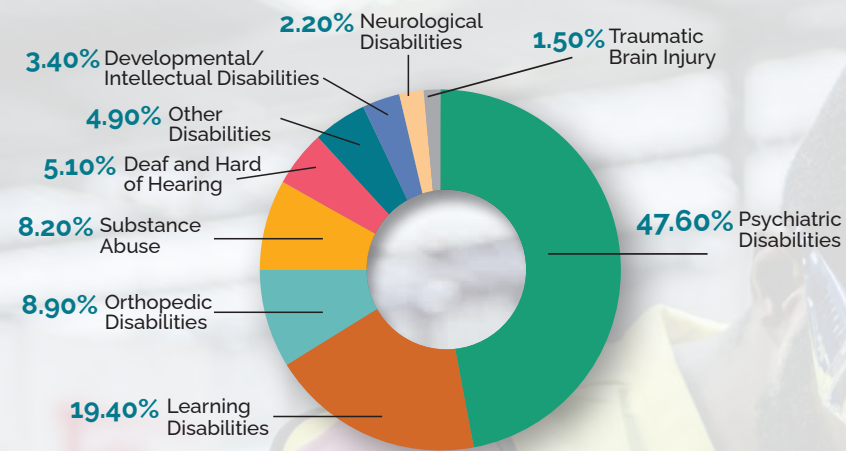
Our programs give you the opportunity to explore many industries and sectors so you can find what's best for you and your circumstances. And we guide and support employers to create the accessible and inclusive environment that is your legal right.

For Jobseekers

- Counseling and guidance
- Job-driven training and skills training
- Interest and aptitude testing
- Job placement assistance
- Diagnostic evaluations
- College or vocational training
- Assistive technology
- Financial wellness
- On-the-Job Evaluations (OJE)
- On-the-Job Training (OJT)
- Job and Employer-driven Training (JDT)
- MRC financial support for paid internships/practicums
- Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for youth
- School to work
- Employer consultation
- Communication access services: ASL interpreters, oral transliterators, Communication Access Real-Time (CART) translation, multiple language translation

For Employers

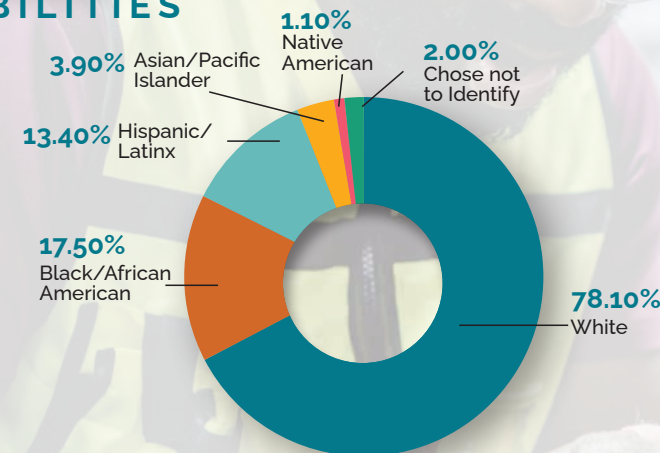
- Annual hiring event
- Tax incentives
- Disability inclusion support
- Consultation: ADA, disability sensitivity training, worksite modifications



DISABILITIES



GENDER



RACE

Measurable Skills Gain

Measurable Skills Gains are progression made by jobseekers in education or training leading to a credential/degree or employment. Examples include successful completion of a semester in college, a passing report card for a High School student, completion of an exam required for an occupational license, progression in or completion of occupational or employer-based trainings, amongst others.

2,219 jobseekers had one or more skills gain

Statewide: **36.5%** rate, target was **30%**.

An increase of **15.5%** from FY2021

All 3 districts and every office achieved the **30%** goal:

North District : **34.6%**

South District: **35.8%**

West District: **38.0%**

VR Fast Facts

3021 citizens with disabilities were placed into competitive employment based on their choices, interests, needs and skills (this was an increase of **10.8%** from the year prior)

Those individuals who were placed earned salaries that collectively totaled **\$75.7** million in their first year of employment. The estimated public benefits savings from these individuals entering the workforce in MA were **\$22.7** million.

Average hourly wage: **\$17.64**

Average work hours weekly: **27.3**

New individuals seeking services **9,499**

Applicants for services **6,802**

Individuals actively receiving services **19,505**

Individuals enrolled in training/education programs **14,149**

Job placements leading to successful employment outcomes **85.1%**

Individuals employed with medical insurance **99.8%**

Individuals with disabilities employed in competitive, integrated employment: **3,021 (100%)**

\$3,962 cost per individual served

Adult Community Clinical Services (ACCS) Employment Partnership with the Department of Mental Health (DMH)

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.

1,934 individual participants

391 total placements

298 successful employment outcomes of 90 days or more

62.3% Employment Rate



FACING FEARS TO BECOME

A Proud Business Owner

BY NICK PIZZOLATO



Phetmany Phommasing arrived in Lynn, Massachusetts, when she was just three months old, the daughter of refugees from Laos. Now, as an adult living in Dracut, and with the support of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC), her family, and her instructors at the Chelmsford Beauty Academy, she's not just an esthetician; she's a small business owner.

Phetmany was a stay-at-home mom, caring for her two children and wanted something more. With the support of her family, she began to investigate what she would need to do to work as an esthetician specializing in lashes. While attending the Chelmsford Beauty Academy, one of her instructors saw that she was having trouble with some of the work and suggested she reach out to MRC to see if there was anything the agency could do to help her.

"She described herself as scatter-brained and had faced challenges with anxiety and an inability to focus," said Sam Khoeun, a vocational rehabilitation counselor for MRC's Lowell's office assigned to her case in 2019. "She was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) in middle school," Sam shared. After having Phetmany meet with a doctor and update her diagnosis, Sam was able to find resources to help her thrive in her classwork and stay focused while studying for her statewide licensing exam.

However, the pandemic slowed down the process. In March 2020, she was about to begin her coursework when COVID-19 shut everything down. As schools reopened in the fall, Sam called Phetmany and asked her when she could start. Her answer? "I can start now." Looking back on it, she adds, "I was ready to learn and get my license."

MRC was able to provide financial aid for her to help pay for her books and the skills training at Chelmsford Beauty Academy. Working with the academy, Sam found ways for Phetmany to maximize all the resources they could provide for

her, including extra training and 1-on-1 practice. "Sam pointed me in the direction to get help," she shared. The trainer was able to help her focus on the test elements by rewording concepts in a way that she could understand. Along with the aid she received from her teachers and MRC, Phetmany is also thankful to her family for encouraging her and being able to provide support. "There's that saying, 'It takes a village to raise a child.' Well, for me, it took a village to help me achieve my goal."

"I was so scared because I didn't know what I was getting myself into. But I took that leap of faith and saw what it was all about. And I'm very thankful for it. When I was introduced to MRC, I didn't know what it was, but I was going to try it. I was going to go for it," she said. "Now, with their help and support, I have confidence in my abilities." MRC gave her the opportunity, but she added, "It was up to me to pass the state licensing board. Since then, I've been able to work as a lash artist and even started my own business, Wink Lash Lounge."

For Phetmany, her partnership with MRC and Sam couldn't have been better. "Sam wasn't pressuring, but he was always there to give me a little encouragement," she remembers. "It was never, 'I don't want to answer his phone calls.' I looked forward to them because he was a pleasure to talk to and had my best interests in mind. We always communicated well. I'm very thankful for his and MRC's help to help me achieve my goals."

Now, she wants to help others who might feel intimidated about asking for help. "I want to help other people out there because I know how hard it can be," she said. "Don't be afraid not to take that step of getting help. If there's an opportunity for you to go to school or pursue your dreams, take it. I know because I was able to do it, and I'm confident now. Take baby steps. It's the baby steps that will help you achieve your goals. My baby step was calling Sam."



WHAT'S NEXT?

BY COLLEEN G. CASEY



"Working with a peer mentor allows me to control my career goals. They listen and help guide me on my path."

Destiny Lomonte
MRC Disability Inclusion Leader

Employment of individuals with disabilities has been a national concern for decades. States across the country have worked tirelessly on performance-driven incentives, programs, and legislation to improve the unemployment rate of individuals with disabilities. Yet despite these efforts, the national employment rate for people with disabilities has remained the same.

Massachusetts plans to change that. Together with stakeholders, partners, and allies, the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) works to expand what's possible in the lives of people with disabilities and provides services that break down barriers. Thanks to a competitive \$17 million Innovation Grant the agency received from the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), MRC launched NextGen Careers—a new program to help young adults ages 18-30 with disabilities to explore the world of work.

"NextGen Careers will focus on the whole person, providing wraparound services for job-seekers with disabilities who are eager to find a meaningful career," said MRC Commissioner Toni Wolf. "We're thrilled to launch this program and modernize this approach to empowering youth on their job journey."

The innovative NextGen program will teach jobseekers to advocate for themselves, gain self-confidence, and become self-sufficient on their career path. Individuals enrolled in the program will be paired with a team of mentors, counselors, benefit advisors, and employment specialists to help navigate their career path.

Whether applicants are interested in a certificate program, on-the-job training, apprenticeship, or an internship in Science, Technology, Engineering, Math



"As a NextGen Career Counselor, I know it takes a team effort to achieve anything! Here at NextGen, our team puts the young adult at the center of the team and they lead the efforts to achieve their career goals."

Kiah Nuahn
Career Counselor

(STEM), NextGen will pair them with a team of dedicated experts in counseling, benefits, and peer support that will be behind them every step of the way.

"As a NextGen Career Counselor, I know it takes a team effort to achieve anything," said Career Counselor Kiah Nuahn. "Here at NextGen, our team puts the young adult at the center of the team and they lead the efforts to achieve their career goals."

The NextGen program is currently available for individuals living in the Boston areas (Roxbury and Downtown Boston), Braintree, Lawrence, Lowell, Springfield, and Worcester areas. To learn more about NextGen or apply for the program, visit mass.gov/nextgencareers.

COMMUNITY LIVING



Building life on your own terms

MRC's Community Living (CL) division empowers you to participate in your community and build a better life on your own terms. We partner with you to expand what's possible for adults and youth with disabilities, providing you with the support, technology, and training you need to become self-sufficient. Together, we're breaking down barriers to create a Massachusetts that's truly equitable, accessible, and inclusive.

CL Services

Independent Living Centers:	6,427
Turning 22 Services:	601
Assistive Technology (Non-VR):	1,283
Housing Registry:	3,259
Supported Living Services:	190
Brain Injury Services (SHIP):	1,008
Home Care Services:	1,179
Protective Services:	1,624
ABI-N/MFP-CL Waivers:	984
TBI Waiver:	90
Beyond Bridges Training:	1,126 participants

99.8% of Individuals Served by Community Living Programs Maintained Independence in the Community

Individuals actively receiving services:	17,771
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Total funds expended:	\$80,100,782
Cost per individual served:	\$4,507

Community Living Services

Assistive Technology & Independent Living Services	\$14,107,807.71
Home Care Services	\$4,594,068.60
Home Modification Loan Program	\$3,801,159.00
Housing Registry	\$80,000.00
Independent Living Centers	\$7,912,738.00
Statewide Head Injury Program	\$36,046,154.56
Substance Use Disorder	\$225,565.60
Turning 22 Services	\$223,409.82
Waiver Programs	\$13,010,293.48
Beyond Bridges	\$99,584.75
Community Living Services Total	\$80,100,781.52

CREATING EQUITY WITH ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

At Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC), we focus on breaking down barriers and empowering individuals with disabilities to live life on their own terms. No two people are the same, and we make sure their specific needs are met to fulfill their journey. While some individuals may need our assistance for continued education or job training, others need tools to help them live and work independently. That's when our vocational rehabilitation and community living staff reach out to those who work with assistive technology.

Assistive Technology (AT) is precisely what the name implies. Technology that assists those in creating an equitable work and living space. Kobena Bonney, the Assistive Technology Program Coordinator at MRC, likes to simplify it even more. "I talk about the word 'technology.' Some people don't see themselves as having a disability, so you have to break it down to a person who is using technology." Technology doesn't cater to a disability; everyone uses technology as a tool for their job, whether driving to work, solving math problems, or writing a report.

Technology is the great equalizer. While our job seekers may need different technological access, AT offers them tools they can use to take part in educational opportunities or acquire job skills. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselors can help to recommend an evaluation to find technology that works for them. While those who

work with independent living consumers, working is not necessarily the goal but helping them live on their own. Individuals who feel they need help with technology can call a provider, and a provider initiates a process to figure out their needs.

When hearing the term "assistive technology," people's thoughts may go to physical tools available to individuals with disabilities. Kobena points out that the most significant change in the field is the computer. "Computers, when they come out of the box, aren't necessarily considered 'assistive technology.' But the moment you turn on the accessible software features, they suddenly are." Computers, especially in the last 20 years, have become more affordable and more compact, allowing them to be not only financially accessible but also are more portable. Since March 2020, at the start of the pandemic, MRC has provided 12,000 pieces of technology equipment, including laptops, monitors, keyboards, and headsets.

For a person who is blind, a computer can help them navigate a website, read a document to them, help them compose correspondence, create presentations, and serve as a voice recorder. Those who are deaf or hard of hearing can use a computer to convert spoken words to text for meetings and videos. For individuals who are non-verbal, a computer or tablet program can help them find the words to talk and laugh. In many cases, the tools a person with disabilities can be expanded on depending on what

technology they need. Someone who can't walk may have to use a wheelchair, but what if they can't use their arms or hands to move it? Assistive technology can help a person drive their chair by tilting their head, chin, or even with their breath. Chairs can be lifted or heated for poor circulation, and cars can be adapted to accept a wheelchair as the driver's seat.

The vehicle and home modification programs we provide are also part of the assistive technology program. Program Director Eugene Blumkin has seen firsthand that they can change lives. "My father was a disabled WWII veteran in Russia, and we used a car with adaptive features." Growing up with a parent using an adaptive vehicle helped Eugene understand the profound impact adaptive technology had on his father's independence.

The vehicle and home modification process is similar to the process of securing smaller and more portable technologies. First, there is an evaluation process. For vehicle modifications, an independent evaluator will meet with the individual, assess their specific needs, and review the type of vehicle and technologies required. Home modifications need a site visit with an architect or designer who tours the house with the individual and evaluates what adjustments that person needs. While different expertise is required for all types of assistive technology and modifications, the one thing that remains the same is that every situation is different.

"That's the most exciting part about doing assistive technology. It's never the same. When you get reports and recommendations, the hardware and software for every project are completely different. And every consumer is going to require different levels of training. And it's great to see that immediate satisfaction in their eyes when the project is finished," Eugene said.

Kobena says that when he talks to those who need assistive technology, they are surprised at how financially accessible they are. "They are surprised that it's not expensive. They think making accommodations for them it's going to be expensive. They fear employers may not hire someone because it will cost too much money. But many times, the technology is basic and easily available. They learn that there are many options for them to use, and it's not just one technology."

The assistive technology field is so broad, and as everyone knows, MRC is not a one-size-fits-all agency. We work with our community to ensure their needs are met to live independently. If you have an individual who feels they need assistive technology to thrive, have them meet with an evaluator to help them find the tools that work best for their purposes. Our assistive technology team has decades of experience researching and providing resources for those who need them. Their work is critical to the agency's mission of creating a truly equitable, accessible, and inclusive Commonwealth. Eugene wants to remind MRC Staff, "We do not expect them to be an expert in any assistive technology, and don't be afraid to contact us and ask questions."





The Brain Injury Council was established in August of 2021, consisting of individuals with lived experience of brain injuries, family members, and stakeholders. The development of the council was made possible through the efforts and partnership of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) and the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts (BIA-MA).

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) is committed to engaging and elevating the voices and experiences of individuals with disabilities to ensure they are provided with an equal opportunity to access the services and supports they want and need to live the lives they choose. To help achieve that goal, MRC actively partners with people with lived experience of disabilities in various forums to ensure diverse voices guide all decision making across the Agency.

THE PURPOSE OF THE BRAIN INJURY COUNCIL IS:

- To provide ongoing feedback and thought leadership regarding the brain injury strategic plan, which is a blueprint for how services should be prioritized, developed, designed, and implemented for brain injury survivors and families.

- To ensure survivor and family voice guides the way the state thinks about, develops, and delivers supports and services.
- To provide a space for survivors, family, and community partners to forge relationships and collaboratively guide this work.
- The work of the council is guided by the council's mission and vision.

THE BRAIN INJURY COUNCIL

**ESTABLISHED
AUGUST
2021**

THE BRAIN INJURY COUNCIL MISSION IS:

To provide a voice for survivors of brain injury, family members and community partners to ensure policies and initiatives reflect the needs of the diverse brain injury population in the Commonwealth. The Brain Injury Council aims to review, reflect, and advise on the needs and desires of brain injury survivors and caregivers in MA to develop a statewide Brain Injury Plan throughout the Commonwealth.

BRAIN INJURY COUNCIL VISION:

The Brain Injury Council will infuse services and supports across the Commonwealth with the expertise and voices of survivors, caregivers, providers, and advocates to ensure services address the vastly diverse needs of the brain injury community and do so with compassion, clarity, and individual voice at the forefront.

DISABILITY DETERMINATION SERVICES

Opening Doors

If your ability to work is limited because of a disability, MRC's Disability Determination Services (DDS) division is here to help determine if you are eligible for disability benefits. You can apply for Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) through the Social Security Administration (SSA). SSA works to assess your situation and eligibility. If you are determined eligible, SSA sends your application to DDS, and we will work with you to gather necessary information, make a determination, and return your application to SSA for you to get the assistance you need.

If you are found to be disabled, you may also be eligible for health care coverage through Medicaid and Medicare. For many Massachusetts residents like you, DDS is part of our team that can improve your quality of life by helping you live more independently.

SSI/DI Claims Processed

Number of Claims Received:	64,276
% Claims Processed Accurately	95%
# of Continuing Review Claims Successfully Completed by the MRC/DDS	16,998
# of Initial Claims Processed by the MRC/DDS	27,880
% Claims Allowed by the MRC/DDS	57%
% of Favorably Processed Claims for Homeless Individuals to Provide SSI and SSDI Monthly Benefits Which Improve a Disabled Claimant's Ability to Obtain Stable Housing	28%

Fast Facts

Total Budget:	\$47,646,946
Cost Per Case:	\$741.39
Massachusetts SSI/SSDI Overall Summary (from SSA Data):	
Total MA Population:	7.03 million
MA SSI Recipients, 2021:	172,755
MA SSDI Recipients, 2021:	205,198
Annual SSDI Benefits Paid:	\$3.15 billion
Annual SSI Benefits Paid:	\$1.20 billion



Peter Droese: An Advocate for Accessibility and Equity

By: Nick Pizzolato



It's not surprising that Peter Droese has been employed at the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) for nine years. As an individual with a disability, Peter's life experience has guided him toward a career focused on advocacy. He's been a student ambassador to the USSR, an Eagle Scout, a medical librarian at MassHealth, a husband, a keynote speaker, and a father. Peter has been able to exceed the expectations of doctors and doubters and has become an advocate for people with disabilities who want to live life on their own terms.

His parents were his fiercest advocates, appearing before the school committee in their town when Peter was a child and couldn't walk. They were seeking assistance in accessibility services so their son could attend public school. A school board member told them, "We do not educate a vegetable." That ignorant comment didn't deter his family. Peter became one of the first students with a disability integrated into a public school before the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) mandated accommodations. His first piece of assistive technology—a typewriter. Thinking back on his life, Peter shared proudly, "I was a child of the disability civil rights movement."

The Droese family was always working toward providing their son with equity opportunities. "I am thankful for the services provided by Easter Seals when I was younger," he said. "I learned how to swim, and also helped me socialize with other kids." His time as a Boy Scout also allowed him to be a part of his community and break the preconceived notions others may have had. As a child, Peter didn't think anything of how local politicians were always posing with him. "I thought it was something that all kids got the opportunity to do," he laughed. He was always in the spotlight because his family never stopped working to create accessibility awareness. Over time his world and experiences began to come into focus. He reflected, "I got a deeper appreciation of how

things were slowly improving." Peter earned a Master's in Library Science from Simmons University.

Working as a medical librarian at UMass Medical School for MassHealth, he had the opportunity to be the keynote speaker at the Special Library Association Conference in 2000, where the topic was how to serve disabled patrons from dependence to independence. He also co-authored an article on the role of medical librarians in health equity. In 2004, The article received the Daniel T. Richards Prize for excellence in Collection Development from the Medical Library Association.

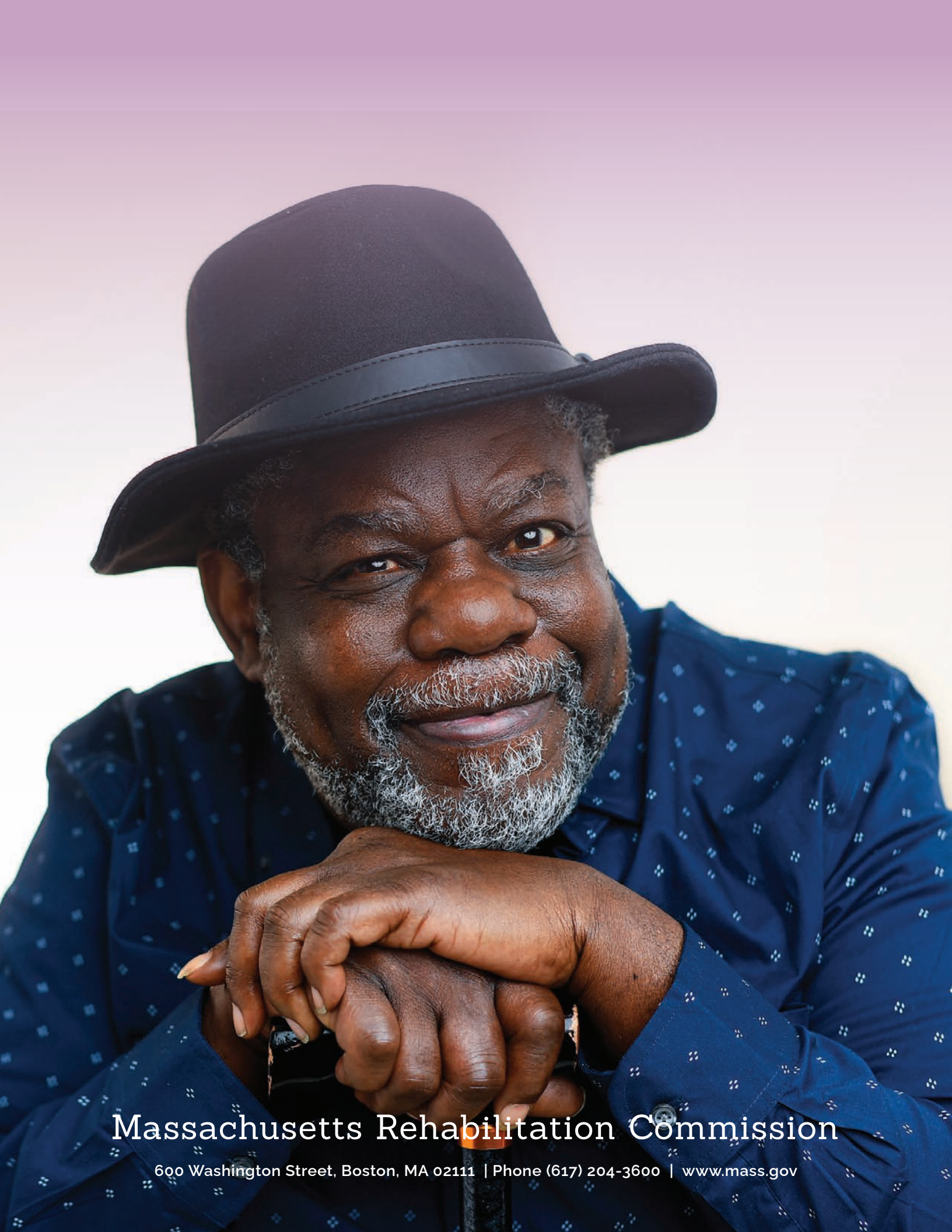
After a 12-year-career as a medical librarian, Peter chose to pivot his career to help people in the disability community. "Public service brought me to



MRC," he said. "I wanted to be a voice and an advocate." He joined MRC and thought he might become a counselor for job-seekers, helping them with their employment journey. Instead, he joined MRC's Disability Determination Services (DDS) team. DDS determines applicant eligibility for disability benefits, working with the federal social security administration. As a quality assurance specialist,

he makes sure that an applicant's needs have been met based on program rules and guidelines. He also meets with policy experts throughout the state and New England region to ensure MRC stays current with trends and updated policies.

Each day offers Peter the opportunity to create access and advocate for equity. "My initials are PWD (Peter William Droese); it also stands for a person with a disability," he laughed. "It's part of my identity. Working with people who also have a disability can help give them comfort and help them focus on their strengths. There may be a lot of people with a disability now or sometime in their life, and they need to know that support and resources are available to live life on their own terms."



Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission

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