

# Executive Summary

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As part of an annual review of MRC services, the MRC Analytics and Quality Assurance (AQA) department conducts the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA), a sweeping study investigating the needs of individuals with disabilities throughout the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in their pursuit of competitive employment. While being required by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to perform this process once every three years, MRC has chosen to conduct this study yearly in order to more effectively assess consumer needs and maintain high quality service effectiveness. In a practice of performing modern quality assurance and data analytic methods, this report presents the findings of the CSNA process in order to advise future policy and decision making within MRC in order to best serve consumers and meet their Rehabilitation needs.

The findings included in this report are incorporated into the MRC's section of the Massachusetts Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined State Plan, as well as in MRC's strategic planning, and Quality Assurance activities. The findings presented in this report are shared with MRC Management, Staff, and the public, in a continuous quality improvement process. The CSNA process includes a number of areas in order to canvas a broad range of consumer needs using several relevant tools: A detailed analysis of MRC Consumer Demographic data, Needs Assessment Survey, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, Consumer Focus Groups, and the Pre-Employment Transition Survey for Youth. This in-depth process also includes discussion and collaboration with MRC Stakeholders, and the State Rehabilitation Council. Provider and counselor surveys were not done this year due to COVID-19, the plan is to conduct these surveys going forward.

The FY21 survey utilized a sampling frame that included all individuals in active service Status (12, 16, 18, 20, 22, and 24) as of September 27, 2019, consistent with past years' Needs Assessment surveys. Using the 11,545 valid mailing addresses obtained from MRCIS, a link to an electronic survey using the online survey platform Qualtrics was distributed, opened, and completed by 2,766 individuals for a response rate of 24.03% (a slight increase from 21.52% in FY2020). The number of survey responses exceeds the amount required to make statistically significant conclusions at a 99% confidence interval.

It is also important to note that the data, including the CSNA survey, for the FY2021 report was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have noted possible differences in our information based on the pandemic.

The main findings of the FY2021 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment can be summarized as follows:

1. The 2021 CSNA report again confirmed that the MRC consumer population is highly diverse, and that a majority of individuals being served possess the most significant disabilities. Many of these individuals require multiple Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and supports in order to prepare for, search for, obtain, and maintain competitive employment in the community. There are still a significant number of consumers who report transportation as a barrier to employment. Respondents to this years' Needs Assessment survey once again were found to more accurately represent the overall consumer population than previous years, with similar proportions of gender, race/ethnicity, and geographic distribution.

2. This year saw continued increase in the number of youths participating in the Needs Assessment survey. More than 38% of respondents were between the ages of 21-30, with nearly 12% of individuals representing the second largest group being under 20 years old. The average level of education was found to increase when compared to the FY2020 CSNA. This is largely driven by the increase in younger individuals still in, or having recently completed, High School. An increase in referrals from elementary and secondary educational institutions was attributed to this rise in youth response, as well as a rise in the proportion of respondents who rely on family and friends as their source of support.

In terms of Race/Ethnicity, MRC serves a population similar in demographic breakdown to the state population of Massachusetts. Of MRC consumers, 80.2% were Caucasian/White, 17.1% African American/Black, 12.1% Hispanic/Latino, and less than 5% Asian/Pacific Islander and Native American. Regions of the Commonwealth, particularly in the South District which have been seen to have more diverse populations, also had higher levels of minority consumers. Once again, Asian/Pacific Islanders were identified as being slightly underserved by MRC VR in comparison to their proportion in the overall state population. While MRC is serving other minorities in proportion or greater to the proportion of the statewide population, MRC should focus on outreach to these communities to make sure their needs are met and to assist in addressing barriers to employment.

3. 38.2% of MRC consumers were found to be living with either family or friends. Several different groups were found to live with family or friends more frequently, including Males and those with Psych. or Cognitive disabilities. Non-minority individuals, and those with higher levels of education, were observed owning their own housing most frequently. There were changes to this question in FY2020 which impacted response patterns, however the question was returned to its original format from prior to FY2020 in the FY2021 survey.

4. Email remains the most preferred form of communication amongst MRC consumers, with two-thirds of respondents choosing this as their primary method of communicating with MRC. While some methods including Cell Phone calls, Face to Face communication, and Traditional Mail fell as preferred methods, Text Messaging increased in level of preference, now up to 24.1%. This increase in Text Message preference was driven by the increase in youth participation in the Needs Assessment survey, with nearly half of those preferring this method being under 35 years old.

5. All VR service areas were found to be important to a significant portion of MRC consumers. Job Placement Services (JPS) continues to be recognized as the most important VR service category (88%), followed by Career Counseling (84.9%), Supported Employment (83.2%), Benefits Planning (82.0%), Soft Skills Training (78.6%), Ongoing Supports (74.3%), On the Job Trainings/Job Driven Trainings (73.0%), and Vocational Skills Training (71.0%), and college disability office services or support (66.6%).

6. With the continued increase in the proportion of youth consumers responding to the CSNA, the importance of services related to obtaining a GED or High School Diploma has remained elevated from prior to FY2019. As MRC continues to focus on providing services to youth and high school students, working directly with schools throughout the commonwealth, and improving transition services through programs like Pre-ETS, this is expected to remain higher than historically observed.

7. Consumers with Physical Disabilities were found to be older on average than other individuals, report having higher levels of education, and view education relates services as less important than individuals with both Sensory and Psych. or Cognitive disabilities. Consumers with Sensory disabilities reported that career planning services were most important, including Benefits Planning and Supported Employment Services. Consumers with Psych. or Cognitive Disabilities were found to report services related to education and training as more important than other VR services, including Vocational Skills Training, Transition Services, and services related to Obtaining a College Degree.

8. Importance of VR services was found to differ by consumer's education level. Those with higher levels of education reported services related to obtaining education, such as a high school diploma or GED or a college degree, as less important than consumers with less than a college education. Consumers with less than a college degree, including some college or an associate's degree, said training services and services related to finding employment as most important.

9. Youth consumers were found to hold importance in distinctly different categories of VR services from older consumers. Youth reported holding the most importance in all services related to education and transitioning from school to work, as well as services which provide individuals with active work experiences and training such as On the Job Trainings. These training service categories focus on developing consumer's skills while also providing exposure and work experience to those who may have either limited working background or skill development. This include ongoing supports, which are meant to assist consumers in maintaining employment once it is obtained, allowing them to continuing improving their skills in their employment.

10. A total of 82.9% of consumers report being either Always or Sometimes satisfied with the effectiveness of VR services provided by MRC in meeting their needs (48.8% Always, 34.0% Sometimes). This increased by 9.9% from FY2020 and is above the 80% in observed in FY2016. The majority of VR consumers also remain satisfied with services delivered by MRC VR in the MRC Consumer Satisfaction Survey. Satisfaction with the VR service effectiveness is seen being higher in consumers who are further in the process, with those participating in job search and placement as reporting the highest levels of satisfaction. These individuals are in the action stages of their quest to obtain and maintain competitive employment, and are actively seeing results, report higher satisfaction.

11. Many consumers provided open comment on the positive impact MRC VR services have, including the effectiveness of VR staff. Responses outlined helpful and caring staff who are knowledgeable about the area in which they work, who have strong community and employer connections, who work with consumers individually to accommodate each individual's unique needs. Comments also indicated that services related to education are incredibly helpful in allowing for individuals to obtain the education they need to progress in their career. A number of consumers report difficulties with communication with their counselor/caseworker. This has been observed in previous needs assessments and continued throughout the pandemic.

12. A majority of consumers (89.0%) report being either Very or Somewhat satisfied with the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). Younger individuals displayed higher levels of satisfaction with this process.

Satisfaction with the development of an individual's IPE was found to be strongly associated with a consumer's view on the effectiveness of VR service effectiveness.

13. Consumers expressed high praise for MRC staff and their effectiveness in the development of each IPE. Consumers reported that staff were knowledgeable and helpful, guiding consumers through the sometimes confusing process. These comments described an individualized process that established unique goals according to each person's needs. More consumers expressed their satisfaction and positive experiences with staff than any other subject. However, several consumers also commented on their lack of personal knowledge about the IPE process. This year there were many comments expressing difficulty utilizing services due to COVID-19.

14. Affordable Housing (62.1%), Assistive Technology (62.1%), Accessible Recreation (61.0%), and Devices (52.2%) were found to be the most important CL services to consumers. Age was found to play a significant role in consumer's view of the importance of CL services. Younger respondents were found reporting Recreation Opportunities, Waiver Programs, and Supported Living Services as more important than older individuals. The perceived level of importance of these services decreased as age increased.

15. 72.9% of Consumers reported MRC services as being either Extremely or Somewhat useful in supporting their ability to maintain independence in the community. Minority consumers reported these services as effective more frequently than Non-Minority individuals, with Asian and Hispanic individuals having the highest levels of satisfaction. Those with a High School education and some College were observed having higher levels of satisfaction with CL services than others as well.

16. Awareness of Independent Living Centers (ILC) increased among consumers for the second straight year. This continues to reverse a negative trend observed over three years of Needs Assessment analysis. 34.1% of consumers report being aware of their local ILC, with individuals residing in the West district reporting the highest likelihood of working with these ILCs.

17. Reported transportation use by consumers continues to shift under patterns observed in the past five years of Needs Assessments. The effect of the pandemic was found to have a profound effect on consumer's reported transportation use and needs. Levels of public transportation and Uber/Lyft/Ride Share use decrease significantly from previous years increase. Respondents view as transportation as a barrier to finding work also decreased, with pandemic-related restrictions being suspected for reducing the overall need for individuals to use transportation on a daily basis. 33% of respondents to the 2021 survey reported that they view transportation as a barrier to employment. This represents a 3% decrease from 2020. As with 2020, cost is observed to be a differentiating factor in whether transportation poses a barrier to an individual obtaining employment. Open-ended responses show that many respondents need to obtain their driver's license as well as a vehicle. Many individuals point to the high cost of transportation/cost of maintaining a vehicle, using a car or ride share service, or regular public transportation, as their main deterrence from primarily relying on those forms of transportation.

18. Consumers continue to report needing services that are already provided by MRC are services that they think MRC should provide and would assist them in their vocational goals. This follows trends and patterns observed in previous years and suggests that consumers could require more information on the range of services available to them.

19. To assist in determining the statewide need for pre-employment transition services, MRC analyzed statewide data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE (<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/statereport/selectedpopulations.aspx>)). According to DESE data, there are 172,379 students with disabilities (consisting of 18.7% of all high school students statewide) enrolled in public high schools in Massachusetts as of October 1, 2020, all who may be potentially eligible for VR services and/or who may benefit from Pre-ETS services. Based on this data and the continued high need for Pre-ETS services demonstrated throughout the CSNA as described above, MRC forecasts that once again, during FY2022 that it will need to expend its entire 15% expenditure requirement of VR funds to provide Pre-ETS services as required under WIOA (approximately \$6.3 million) in order to provide the five required Pre-ETS services to students with disabilities (work-based learning experiences, job exploration counseling, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in post-secondary education and other comprehensive training programs, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy). MRC forecasts that due to the fact that the entire 15% is required on required Pre-ETS activities, that no funding will remain to provide authorized pre-employment transition services beyond the five required services due to the high need for Pre-ETS services as demonstrated in this year's CSNA findings and the DESE data.

20. A majority of MRC counselors and supervisors (73% Satisfied/Very Satisfied) are satisfied with their ability to assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining, maintaining, and advancing in competitive employment based on their skills, interests, needs, and choices. This satisfaction rate is down slightly from the last report. The majority of MRC counselors are generally satisfied with most services provided to consumers, including internal job placement services, services from Community Rehabilitation Providers, and education and training provided to consumers by schools and colleges. One area of improvement identified by counselors was the need to improve communication with both consumers and providers. Counselors identified areas that would assist them in doing their job better, such as improved support and resources for job placement, more full time job placement specialists, increased information on job leads for consumers, additional on-the-job training and other training resources, continued enhancements to the MRCIS system, more resources for vocational assessment and vocational training for consumers, and training on policies, procedures, and pre-employment transition services, amongst others.

21. There are areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to consumers. Specific areas include trainings on the MRCIS system, as well as on VR best practices, policies, and procedures, strategies for maintaining communication with consumers and time management, internal controls, WIOA common measures and requirements, trainings on autism, and on pre-employment transition services and transition services under WIOA, and remote learning and service transition strategies. The newly initiated Learning and Development department within MRC will lead ongoing staff training efforts, utilizing best practices and data driven decision making to make training related decisions.

22. MRC is increasing its collaboration with other core partners under WIOA to survey and further identify the needs of individuals working with other components of the Workforce system. Some of the identified needs include: interviewing skills, resume development, job specific skills (CVS Pharmacy Technician training, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Program, Advance Auto Parts, Lowes, Home Depot retail training, customer service jobs skills training, food service training, and human service training). MRC will continue to consult with core partners on the identified needs of their consumers as it relates to accessibility and access to employment opportunities, employment training, and provide employer trainings on disability awareness and job accommodations. MRC is reaching out to its core partners as part of its next needs assessment to gather additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to complement and further enhance the CSNA process going forward. MRC will be reaching out to its core partners in FY2022 to gather additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to complement and enhance the CSNA.

## **Recommendations**

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- 1. Develop strategies for improving communication between consumers and counselors, and reducing the total number of Unsuccessful Closures, including developing strategies to improve communication on caseloads where staff vacancies occur:**

In this year's report, findings throughout the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) including the Consumer Needs Assessment Survey, Counselor Survey, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, suggest that some consumers may experience difficulties staying in contact with their counselor and vice versa with counselors having difficulty maintaining contact with VR consumers. This is also evident when looking at the closure reasons for consumers closed unsuccessfully from the VR program. However, for the second year in a row, this trend was much less pronounced than in prior years.

It is recommended that MRC develop a workgroup to focus on engagement with consumers and to develop additional strategies to reduce unsuccessful closures and to further review the area of communication and develop strategies to improve communication between counselors and consumers on their caseload, and to develop strategies to reduce the number of Unsuccessful Closures. Staff training on remaining engaged with consumers is also recommended. Engagement strategies developed by MRC through its Kessler Grant Career Pathway Services project, the MRC-DMH ACCS Employment Initiative and the Transitions Pathways (TPS) program could be used as best practices to assist in this area. MRC should also draw upon findings on remote work surveys related to COVID-19. As part of this effort, strategies for engaging with underserved and unserved populations, as well as communities of color, should be further developed. MRC should also continue building off of its current efforts to improve program outcomes through its work with Synergy Consulting.

A focus on continued use of electronic methods of communication including email and text message may also assist in improving communication. Communication is a two-way street, and the results suggest a need for improvement in communication on both the counselor and consumer end.

MRC's newly molded Communications department should be included in the efforts to improve these channels of communication throughout the agency, including in the efforts stated above.

It is also recommended that MRC should also look at ways to improve communication with consumers on caseloads where there are vacancies while they are being refilled, including having Unit Supervisors and Area Directors assist with communicating with consumers on these caseloads to ensure consumers remain engaged. Findings in the CSNA suggest this is an area where improvement is needed as well.

**2. Modernize MRC's Technology Systems and Case Management Systems and Databases to provide a more user-friendly, streamlined, and modern system, including a frontal facing portal for consumers and job seekers:**

MRC should continue its efforts to replace its MRCIS Case Management system with the One MRC system- amore modern, mobile, and user friendly data system that integrated with Community Living programs. This will help improve the efficiency of service delivery by utilizing a more user friendly platform, and will assist the agency in developing data tools and analytics to make data-informed decisions to improve service delivery for MRC consumers across the agency. This system should include a frontal facing platform for job seekers and providers and should eliminate all paper records for the VR division.

As of the Summer of 2021, the One MRC program to construct this new case management system has begun.

**3. Continue ongoing efforts to improve services to youth consumers including high school and post-secondary students with disabilities:**

As transition-aged youth comprise a large portion of MRC VR referrals, and with the strong emphasis on serving youth and students with disabilities under WIOA, including pre-employment transition services, it is very important that the agency continue to focus on how to best serve these consumers, whose needs often differ from traditional adult VR cases. MRC should continue its efforts to expand and coordinate pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities, including potentially eligible students through

its revised Pre-ETS procurement with community-based providers. MRC should continue its efforts to improve services to youths and students with disabilities through identifying and promoting best practices, continuing collaboration with local schools and community colleges, and ensuring that information on pre-employment transition services and the transition planning process is available to consumers and their families and to staff, MRC offices, and schools through contracts, initiatives, partnerships, and other efforts. MRC should also continue its staff training in this area. MRC should continue to participate in webinars and trainings on transition services, research strategies and models to continue to expand pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities, including potentially eligible students, and come up with strategies to refer additional youth consumers for supported employment services. Finally, MRC should continue to use lessons learned from its Transition Pathway Services grant to develop innovative best practices that can be replicated throughout the state in terms of Pre-ETS services. MRC should also continue to explore creative strategies for distance service provision for Pre-ETS as we continue to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, and evaluating the success of the Pre-ETS programs as whole.

It is recommended that MRC continue its efforts to develop and coordinate the delivery of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to VR eligible and potentially eligible students with disabilities (including potentially eligible students) with local educational authorities and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and MRC Pre-ETS contracted service providers, including those services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). MRC has developed an agreement and worked with DESE to issue guidance to schools on the provision and coordination of individualized transition services for students with disabilities that lead to successful post-school outcomes in competitive integrated employment, post-secondary education and training, and community living.

#### **4. Continue efforts to enhance information to consumers and potential consumers on available services:**

Based on the results of the Needs Assessment survey and the Commonwealth Medicine focus group, it appears some consumers are not fully aware of some of the supports and services provided by the MRC, especially Community Living services. In addition, the findings of the Needs Assessment Survey, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, and the Counselor Satisfaction Survey all suggest some consumers do not fully understand what the MRC can and cannot do for them, and that some consumers may not completely understand their role and participation in the VR process. First, it is recommended that MRC update its Consumer Handbook and Orientation Video on an ongoing basis to make sure it remains up to date and accounts for any agency policy and procedural changes. Beyond this, MRC should continue to look at ways to provide more comprehensive information about services beyond its consumer orientation video(s), service lists, and consumer handbook, including training staff both on what other internal MRC services are available to consumers, and consider creating or obtaining an inventory, guide, or list of external resources and agencies the MRC counselors can refer consumers to. MRC can also continue to provide additional information on services through its marketing resources as well as through the use of social media and other methods. MRC's new office of Consumer and Family Engagement, the MRC Connect Integrated Eligibility Project, and the MRC Communications Office may also be able to assist in these efforts.

#### **5. Update Self-employment resources for consumers:**

The CSNA continues to show a high level of interest (> 20%) amongst consumers in self-employment. This level of high interest warrants a continued effort to improve the resources and materials that are available to consumers who may be interested in pursuing this form of employment through their MRC VR Services. There also appears to be some uncertainty on the part of consumers regarding self-employment assistance that MRC can provide. An update or revision of any documentation or handbook on self-employment

services should be considered. MRC should also consider the development of strategies to assist individuals interested in self-employment. These efforts should be beneficial to consumers.

**6. Continue to expand services to employers and coordinate employer services with other core workforce partners:**

MRC should continue to expand its efforts to provide services to employers through its account management system, employer advisory boards, the annual statewide hiring event, any local hiring events being planned, and other efforts designed to assess and meet the needs of employers and consumers alike. MRC also participates in a business strategy workgroup between key workforce partners as part of the Commonwealth's effort to coordinate services to employers amongst partner agencies. This effort will also assist with MRC's implementation of the WIOA Common Measure related to effectiveness of services to employers. It is also recommended MRC expand its pilot Employer Survey beyond its major employer accounts. MRC should also share the findings of the CSNA with its employer advisory boards and employer relationships to assist employer partners in best serving the needs of individuals with disabilities. These employer relationships should continue to enable MRC to direct consumers into fields and careers with high-wage and competitive employment opportunities, which may include the sharing of labor market information and further improve MRC Job Search effectiveness.

**7. Continue Efforts to collaborate with other components of the Workforce Investment System in Massachusetts to serve the needs of individuals with disabilities:**

The MRC should continue its efforts to collaborate with other core partners in the workforce investment system to reduce unemployment of individuals with disabilities and to provide effective services to employers throughout the state; to seek out collaborative opportunities including possible projects and grants that may assist individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts in obtaining competitive employment; and to continue to work closely together on WIOA implementation including common performance measures, and developing methods to track shared consumers across the workforce system, among others. MRC should continue its efforts through workgroups such as the WIOA Steering Committee, the WIOA Systems Integration Workgroup, and other committees to align services and continue to increase its presence at the career centers.

It is recommended that MRC continue to work in collaboration with other core partners under WIOA to survey and identify the needs of individuals working with other components of the Workforce system. MRC should expand and continue its efforts to consult with core partners on the identified needs of their consumers as it relates to accessibility and access to employment opportunities, employment training, and provide employer trainings on disability awareness and job accommodations. Additionally, MRC should work with its partners to collect additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to further align services and complement and enhance the CSNA.

**8. Continue staff trainings and workforce planning efforts to assist in improving service delivery to VR consumers, including remote service delivery options:**

The CSNA has identified areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to MRC consumers. Based on these findings, trainings on serving consumers with psychiatric health challenges, trainings on pre-employment transition services (including those to potentially eligible consumers) and group transition services, job readiness/job placement activity trainings (resume writing, local job markets/labor market information, career assessments, etc.), ongoing trainings on the MRCIS case management system, counselor, supervisor and management trainings on VR best practices, policies and procedures, and effective practices for supervision, updated training on recording data such as measurable skills gains connected to WIOA common

performance measures, best practices from new projects such as the MRC-DMH Employment Initiative (ACCS) and trainings on effective communication with consumers and time management are recommended. In addition, the agency should continue its efforts to create webinar trainings for staff on a variety of topics and continue to seek input from staff on areas where training can improve service delivery. It is also recommended MRC develop workforce planning efforts to continue recruitment of new staff through VR counseling graduate programs and continue to provide ongoing manager, supervisor, and aspiring supervisor trainings and workshops to assist in preparing current staff for promotional opportunities within the agency.

**9. Continue to promote job driven trainings to increase employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities:**

MRC has demonstrated over the past several years that job driven trainings and on-the-job (OJT) trainings are important and effective tools for training and employing consumers in competitive jobs in many industries and occupations. These are also effective tools to assist in eliminating stigma against consumers with disabilities by demonstrating the abilities and skills of individuals with disabilities directly to employers in their workplace. OJT and Job Driven Trainings were identified as important services by a large portion of consumers in the Needs Assessment survey and counselors have also identified the need for additional OJTs and Job-Driven Trainings. MRC should also continue to evaluate the outcomes of its Job Driven Training programs with its employer partners. MRC should continue its efforts to build off of these collaborations as a model to use with other companies to establish similar programs with the goal of increased employment outcomes for consumers and as a way to market the skills and abilities of individuals with disabilities to the private sector and to meet employer needs. MRC should also consider expansion of its hiring event to include additional employers and consider partnering with other core workforce partners to develop new employer partners for job-driven trainings. MRC could also use these programs to develop joint efforts with MassHire Career Centers and other key workforce partners.

**10. Utilize Needs Assessment and data from the MRCIS Case Management System to conduct a longitudinal analysis of vocational rehabilitation service needs to determine service gaps and inform program and policy development:**

The CSNA report has a multi-year baseline of data that can be used by MRC to look at service needs and potential service gaps on a longitudinal basis. When combined with MRCIS data, this could be a strong source of data to conduct analysis on a long-term basis to determine service gaps, to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of MRC VR programs. Use of new data analytics tools could also assist with this process. It is recommended that MRC begin the process of utilizing Needs Assessment and MRCIS data to look at consumer needs and service gaps on a long-term basis. MRC should also use the information from other efforts, such as Learn to Earn, the project with Accenture looking at the Public Benefit Cliff Effect, and the project with Commonwealth Medicine to conduct additional focus groups for MRC stakeholders.

MRC should continue to improve and further modernize the CSNA and satisfaction processes, including through its work with Synergy Consulting and the Consumer Satisfaction Workgroup. The findings and recommended alternatives from the CSNA should continue to be used by agency management and the SRC for planning purposes and remain an integral part of its strategic planning and WIOA Combined State Plan efforts for short- and long-range resource planning activities and future program development activities. The CSNA has and should continue to be used to inform agency planning efforts relative to the implementation of new innovative projects to meet the needs of consumers and to drive future agency planning efforts.

**11. Continue to increase consumer awareness of transportation options and explore efforts to assist consumers with transportation:**

This year's Needs Assessment once again demonstrates that transportation remains a significant need for many MRC consumers. MRC should continue to work with the SRC on transportation and seek out partnerships and collaboration with other stakeholders. MRC has worked with MassMobility on strategies and ideas to address the transportation issues facing MRC consumers and individuals with disabilities and how MRC can work with MassMobility and other agencies to address needs in this area. Development of other informational materials and training should be considered to assist consumers in learning about other available resources including local Councils on Aging and the EOHHS Human Service Transportation (HST) Office, and other resources, as well as innovative pilots. In addition, MRC should continue to research collaboration with MassMobility, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Career Centers, the HST office, local and regional planning boards, and other organizations on projects or programs that might be able to assist consumers with transportation, given that transportation is a systemic issue requiring collaboration on multiple levels. MRC should also do a survey of its offices to find out more about how its local staff are connected to the local transportation regional coordinating councils. MRC should also consult other VR agencies on how they address transportation challenges for individuals with disabilities.

**12. Continue outreach to communities of ethnic and diverse backgrounds on vocational rehabilitation and other MRC service offerings, especially in the Asian community:**

The MRC has made a commitment to reach out to individuals with the most significant disabilities who are also ethnic and cultural minorities through its Diversity Committee and through its Language Access Plan. The MRC should continue these outreach efforts to ethnic and cultural minorities, especially to the Asian community, which continues to be identified as slightly underserved by the VR program in Massachusetts as compared to their overall composition in the state's population. As growth in the Asian community continues to be seen in the state's general population, it is recommended that MRC continues its outreach efforts to Asian communities in particular. MRC conducted a focus group during PY2018 in its Lowell Office, which has a higher concentration of Asian consumers. A planned focus group in the Braintree Area was postponed due to COVID-19, however MRC will also be conducting additional focus groups virtually as part of its collaboration with Commonwealth Medicine to gather further information on how MRC can better address the needs of this underserved population (as well as many other stakeholder groups). Based on the results of the Lowell Focus group and from SRC input, MRC has also developed a workgroup and work plan to focus on outreach efforts to Asian and other minority communities. Strategies and resources for outreach efforts will be developed as part of this workgroup. It is recommended MRC completion of Focus Groups or community meetings in Braintree and/or Boston, and/or other areas with high population concentration of Asian communities, with consultation of the diversity and bilingual committees to review results and to develop best practices in collaboration with community organizations for increasing outreach efforts and services to the Asian community based on the comprehensive needs assessment survey conducted by the SRC, to present to agency leadership. It is also recommended that MRC continue to develop and implement its consumer engagement program which will include coordination of outreach services to community organizations in areas with underserved populations.

**13. Continue to further refine the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment process for WIOA requirements and reach out to additional consumers:**

The agency should continue its process of continuous improvement to the CSNA process with input from the SRC Needs Assessment Committee, and should continue to review RSA guidance, information from RSA Technical Assistance Centers such as WINTAC, and best practices from other states as part of this process. The process of continuous improvement has been very beneficial and has led to a strong annual product that has resulted in actions being taken to address its recommendations and findings. Other states have also come to MRC to learn about our CSNA process. Consumer needs are a dynamic, a moving target, and as new policies and new priorities are established, consumer needs will continue to evolve. The CSNA has been enhanced and modified to assist with the implementation

of new WIOA reporting, performance, and state planning requirements, and MRC should continue to refine the CSNA accordingly going forward. MRC should also continue to use the CSNA to inform further studies and analyses based on its findings. MRC should also revise and update the CSNA process with the use of new analytical tools such as Qualtrics and Tableau.

Finally, it is recommended that the MRC continue to work with the SRC to discuss how to reach out to more consumers to identify their needs, especially in underserved populations. MRC should also consider researching ways the Needs Assessment Survey could be sent to consumers via text message in addition to email (to consumers who authorize MRC to send text messages). The translation of the Needs Assessment survey into Spanish and other languages should also be considered. Recommended refinements for the process include efforts to collect data from WIOA core partners on the needs of their clients to develop a greater understanding of the needs of the overall workforce investment system as well as efforts to gather additional data from schools on transition services provided under IDEA beyond the transition survey conducted in FY2018. MRC is also working with the SRC to implement a scaled down version of the survey that can be taken by consumers at the area office.

MRC can also draw upon the strategies and efforts used by Commonwealth Medicine to conduct focus groups to various MRC stakeholders.

#### **14. Continue increase utilization of electronic resources to communicate with consumers:**

Once again, a number of consumers recommended that MRC utilize more electronic methods to communicate with consumers, such as e-mails, text messages, social media, Skype, and other similar methods. This continue to increase on an annual basis. Counselors also indicated they would like more tools to communicate with consumers including email to text messaging. Especially in light of COVID-19, it is recommended that MRC should continue to consider ways to increase electronic communication with consumers, including expanded use of text messaging. MRC has trained staff regarding email to text communication. Increased use of electronic communication may also improve consumer to counselor communication and may potentially assist in reducing the number of consumers closed out unsuccessfully because they cannot be located. This will continue to become more important as consumers become more and more versed in communicating electronically and as MRC moves towards a more modern VR case management system. The Workforce Connect dashboard which will include a consumer-end dashboard with secure messaging features may also be a tool which can have benefits in this area. It is also recommended that MRC consider a front facing customer portal as part of a potential new modern case management system. Other states have used text messaging and online dashboards as communication tools and should researched as potential alternatives as well.

#### **15. Continue to enhance methods and products to assist with job matching and providing additional job leads to consumers and counselors:**

The MRC should continue its efforts to enhance efforts to match consumers' interests and skills with potential occupational areas and job opportunities. This could also be something that could be incorporated in a new data and information management system that is being considered for the agency. MRC counselors and consumers expressed the desire for improved job matching and increased sharing of job leads that could lead to employment outcomes for consumers. The team model used in some offices where the JPS, ESS, and the counselor work together as a team to assist consumers in obtaining employment should be considered as a best-practice model that can be adopted across offices. MRC is currently implementing a new job matching tool, Simplicity, to assist with job searching and placement efforts.

#### **16. Continue to improve collaboration with Independent Living Centers:**

The Independent Living Centers (ILCs) remain important partners to MRC who can provide additional peer-driven supports to MRC consumers to assist them in their efforts to obtain employment and maintain independence in the community. Given that about only 25% of consumers are aware of the ILC in their area, the MRC should continue to improve referrals and collaboration between VR offices and the ILCs. In addition, MRC should consider efforts to increase consumer awareness of the ILCs, especially among individuals with psychological and cognitive disabilities. MRC should also consider open houses, joint orientations, or other meetings and presentations in collaboration with the ILCs. Joint marketing efforts could also be considered. Collaborations such as the Transitional Internship Program, the Pre-ETS procurement, Career Pathway Service grant, and the Transition Pathway Services grant, are good examples of beneficial collaborations with the ILCs, and MRC should continue to explore new possibilities for collaboration with the centers, including collaboration on financial literacy training.

**17. Continue to assist Community Rehabilitation Programs:**

It is recommended the MRC continue its efforts to assist and improve Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) across Massachusetts. CSNA findings suggest that vendor capacity for MRC in its CIES and Pre-ETS procurements have assisted in meeting needs for CRP capacity to serve MRC consumers. However, it appears additional CRP capacity may be needed in some areas, both geographically and to serve specific populations. MRC's recently reissued Competitive Integrated Employment Service (CIES) which procurement should assist CRPs. MRC sought input from vendors, counselors, partner agencies, the SRC, and other key stakeholders as part of this process. MRC is also working with CRPs to provide pre-employment transition services to high school students with disabilities and should continue to build in best practices for serving both eligible and potentially eligible consumers, based on outcomes and results in collaboration with providers.

It is also recommended that MRC continue efforts to improve communication and information flow between CRPs and MRC using a team communication approach with the provider, counselor, supervisor, and Business Improvement Partners (BIPs), and continue regular meetings and communication with the Providers Council and other provider trade groups.

**18. Consider creation of a guide or list to assist in procuring products and materials from vendors:**

In the Counselor Satisfaction Survey, some counselors again indicated they would benefit from additional information about available vendors and the materials they supply. While the MRC has developed some lists of vendors for particular procurements, and is conducting trainings on procurement which should assist counselors with this and other concerns and issues in this area, development of a guide or list of resources to provide more information about available vendors for purchasing items for consumers may be beneficial to staff. This guide would list available vendors and the particular products/materials that are provided by each vendor.

