

**Testimony of Toni Wolf, Commissioner
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees**

Good morning Vice Chair Friedman, Representative Garballey, and other distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. I am Toni Wolf, and I am honored to begin my second year as Commissioner of MRC. Prior to my appointment, I was the Executive Director of a nonprofit agency for over 35 years, providing services for individuals with behavioral health challenges to help them thrive in the Metro-West Community. During that time, I co-authored several publications with Dr. Joanne Nicholson including 'Creating Options for Family Recovery: A Provider's Guide to Promoting Parental Mental Health.' My experiences have given me a heartfelt appreciation for lived experience and made me a champion for family-informed services for individuals living with disabilities to meaningfully participate, live independently and work in their own communities.

MISSION:

It is a pleasure to appear before you today, to discuss the great work of MRC, and how we together have the opportunity to shift the paradigm for how individuals with disabilities are recognized for their strengths and not their limitations. As one of our clients recently said "We aren't disabled." Rather, we are ALL just differently abled. People with brain injuries have all the same hopes, dreams and aspirations as everyone else."

MRC develops and leads strong partnerships with employers who hire people, with visible and/or invisible disabilities as part of their inclusive and diverse workforce.

MRC continues to identify the needs of individuals who are in nursing or rehabilitation facilities. Over the past 6 years, MRC has successfully supported 977 individuals with acquired and traumatic brain injuries to move out of institutions and into community. A 31-year-old man was nearly killed and became partially paralyzed by a stroke in 2010. Recently, with MRC assistance, he was able to return to the community with supports. Now that he is living on his own, he is working on completing the next stage of his life by returning to college.

Through our Vocational Rehabilitation Division individuals with a disability can receive training and education enabling them to participate in the workforce. This division relies primarily on Federal funding. MRC's federal award had been flat for years, although costs for such things as salaries and leases were increasing, resulting in an erosion of the base resources.

Unfortunately, MRC historically relied on one time federal funds for ongoing operational support when it was more appropriate to use these funds for one time

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investments. The federal government dramatically reduced MRC's one-time funding from \$7.5M in FY 17 to \$1.9M in FY 18, a 75% decrease.

When I first began as Commissioner, MRC was facing several serious financial challenges, and was in the middle of an audit by their Federal Oversight entity, the Rehabilitation Services Administration. The audit highlighted deficiencies within MRC's internal controls, financial management and service authorization process for vocational rehabilitation.

As I mentioned earlier MRC had an over-reliance on one-time funding to sustain ongoing operations. In addition, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act required MRC to serve youth 14- 22 years of age and MRC was federally mandated to redirect 15% of current funds to serve these youth, while still addressing the needs of others with disabilities. MRC's demand for services has greatly increased over the last three to four years resulting in high caseloads, inadequate and outdated policies and depleting MRC's fiscal reserves and carryover funds. Most importantly there was little fiscal transparency and no strategic plan to address MRC's fiscal sustainability. MRC was in an extreme fiscal challenge.

I am very grateful to the MRC leadership team who developed immediate and long-term strategies to control spending, and have developed best practices to support sustainability and strengthen the agency moving forward. Fiscal transparency became key to this endeavor, with management on all levels receiving budget information for the first time, and we held over ten listening sessions with all MRC staff both to inform them of our financial landscape, while also asking for their assistance in changing practice. Believing in the participatory change management process, I asked staff to offer their assistance and expertise and together we formed a number of working groups to address the fiscal challenges. I am very grateful to the dedication of MRC staff who assisted to modify current practices and we have implemented robust monitoring and internal control processes. I am proud to say, today we have righted the ship, and with the help of the Administration and Legislature are in a position to manage our resources, be accountable to you and our consumers, and move MRC forward both financially and programmatically

I thank Governor Baker, Secretary Sudders and each and every one of you for investing in MRC this year, so that we are able to continue our important work. A supplemental appropriation of \$10.1 million has allowed us to continue to provide services to over 26,000 job seekers in our Vocational Rehabilitation division despite the loss of Federal funding. Governor Baker's proposed FY 2020 budget of \$61.5 million for MRC continues to support the agency's core services and mission. This budget allows our highly qualified staff and direct service providers to meet the needs of our consumers.

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This budget will strengthen MRC's operations and appropriately align State and Federal resources.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

MRC provided services for over 41,000 residents and processed 86,058 Social Security Disability claims during Fiscal Year 2018. The vocational rehabilitation division served 26,000 people on their path to employment, of which 5,588 were ages 14-22. Our Community Living Division served over 15,000 individuals with disabilities who are seeking their independence in the community.

The Community Living Division is comprised of a variety of programs, supports and services that address the diverse needs of adults and youth with disabilities. MRC collaborates with MassHealth and the Department of Developmental Services to manage residential and community based programs. These programs assist individuals who have been in nursing homes or inpatient hospitals to return to the community. Since the beginning of the program, 977 MassHealth funded individuals have transitioned to the community, including 244 in FY18 alone.

MRC also provides an array of assistive technology devices and services, such as home modification loans and vehicle modifications, to allow people to remain in their community and maintain their employment and self-sufficiency. Each year approximately 700 individuals benefit from the assistive technology services, this includes 250 home and vehicle modifications.

Through MRC's Disability Determination Division, we maximize the quality and timeliness of eligibility determinations for Social Security Income and Social Security Disability Income public benefits to help individuals achieve total independence. I am extremely proud to share that Massachusetts recently received a Public Service Award from the Social Security Administration for extraordinary service to the American public. In Federal Fiscal Year 2018, MRC processed 86,058 Social Security Disability claims, exceeding federal benchmarks for timeliness and quality. The work by our diligent staff accounts for more than \$4 billion annually in Social Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance benefits paid to residents of MA.

MRC has implemented a consistent functional assessment tool across all VR offices that will provide stronger data on the individuals being served. This data will inform how to tailor services to better meet the unique needs of each individual seeking assistance from MRC. The data will also assist us in determining the appropriate caseload size for each VR counselor to improve individual services.

**Testimony of Toni Wolf, Commissioner
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
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NEW INITIATIVES

MRC consumers often receive support from various state agencies across the Commonwealth. We recognize the importance of working collaboratively with our partners to identify best practices, create new service models and leverage our shared expertise and state and federal dollars.

This year, we are partnering with the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) on a new initiative called **Empowering to Employ**. This program was designed to better engage DTA clients with disabilities who have not worked with MRC in the past. As the experts for employment for people with disabilities, we provide specialized employment supports that were not previously available through DTA's programs or vendors. As part of this initiative, DTA Offices in Brockton, Quincy, and Lawrence have MRC vocational rehabilitation counselors embedded in their offices providing dedicated, on-site services to clients.

Early feedback has been positive. One client reported to us that she has regained hope and purposefulness. She said, "People don't understand how important and beneficial it is for someone with disabilities, specifically mental illness, to be able to work." I am proud to report that in this short period of time we have reached 99 individuals through this initiative, and are imbedding this into our ongoing work.

Another partnership that I am excited to discuss is with the Department of Mental Health (DMH) and MassHealth. During this fiscal year, DMH launched its redesign of Adult Clinical Community Services (ACCS), which is integrated with the healthcare system and meets an increased demand for services. The goal of the redesign is to offer active and assertive engagement for DMH clients, which will improve health and behavioral health outcomes of the individuals we serve. For many individuals living with a mental health diagnosis, employment represents not only the result of recovery, but also the pathway to it. Employment has been shown to lead to improved mental and physical health for all persons; an improved standard of living; strengthened community ties; a sense of meaning and purpose for each person; and a structure for day-to-day life – all things critically important for people on the road to recovery, as for all of us.

We are a proud partner in the redesign of the Adult Clinical Community Services (ACCS) program. We will be supporting approximately 1,200 individuals to achieve education and employment goals. Through our network of providers, individuals will have access to a broad continuum of vocational rehabilitation services, as well as, clubhouse and other employment resources.

MRC has also significantly strengthened our partnership with the Department of Labor and Workforce Development. MRC VR counselors are co-located in Southbridge at the MassHire Career Centers serving individuals with disabilities. In addition, we have

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Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
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counselors throughout the Commonwealth holding office hours within all the MassHire Career Centers. Through the efforts of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, we are leveraging resources and ultimately minimizing duplicate services.

In collaboration with families and youth, MRC is now offering work exploration services across the Commonwealth to students as early as 14 years of age. MRC has a presence in every public high school. Before students complete their high school experience, MRC and our partners provide workplace readiness training and counseling to support enrollment in postsecondary education for the next generation of workers.

MRC in partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA) and the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts have received \$300,000 annually for three years in federal funding to implement “Bridges Between”. The project aims to build connections between the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment communities, strengthen services for families and individuals living with TBI and SUD, conduct statewide training for professionals in both fields, and pilot a program that connects SUD program graduates with TBI to brain injury programs.

OPPORTUNITIES MOVING FORWARD

Over the past year, with the support of the Executive Office, MRC conducted an extensive Business Process Redesign. Throughout this work we assessed our current organizational structure and operations and, identified opportunities for improvement, which included streamlining and creating efficient processes. We have prioritized these opportunities based on feedback from our consumers, workforce and community stakeholders. With the development of a three phased, robust roadmap, we are laying the groundwork to strengthen MRC. We will align our organizational structure with a goal of strengthening consistency and visibility throughout the agency, enhanced internal controls and better alignment of operations to our mission. And, I have strengthened our relationship with our front line staff represented by SEIU/Local 509.

In order to strengthen and integrate services across MRC, we will implement the seven agency objectives identified in the business process redesign (the Consumer Experience, Staff Experience, Efficient Processes, Data Informed Decisions, Service Integration, Communication and Partnerships). Through the lens of these objectives, MRC has identified over 30 opportunities for improvement outlined over the next 36 months. I am eager to fortify MRC and the services we offer to benefit first and foremost the consumers we are here to serve.

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CONCLUSION:

In closing, please know how much I appreciate your ongoing support to MRC. Governor Baker's proposed budget allows MRC to continue to provide comprehensive services and supports for individuals living with disabilities and strengthens our financial stability while building an agency that is more agile to address the ever-changing needs of our consumers.

I thank you for your attention today and your support for shifting the paradigm for people with disabilities in the Commonwealth.