



**Creating Opportunities For
Independent Living And Work**

**2016 Comprehensive Statewide Vocational
Rehabilitation Consumer Needs Assessment –
Executive Summary and Recommendations**

**Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Research, Development, and Performance Management Department**

**In collaboration with:
Statewide Rehabilitation Council
Needs Assessment Committee**

**June 2017
Executive Summary**

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) in conjunction with the Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) conducted its annual Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment (CSNA) in the Fall of 2016. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) requires the MRC to conduct a Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment at least every three years, but the MRC administers it on an annual basis with the information and findings incorporated into the MRC's section of the Massachusetts WIOA Combined State Plan, as well as in MRC's Strategic Planning, and Quality Assurance activities. The findings on consumer needs listed in this report are presented and shared with MRC Senior Management and VR staff, the entire body of the SRC, and other key stakeholders as part of the MRC's State Plan and continuous quality improvement processes. It is also publicly distributed via the MRC website. The 2016 CSNA process constituted a number of areas, including: a consumer survey which also included additional content for students with disabilities on pre-employment transition services; focus groups; analysis of key statistical and demographic information and facts; findings from other reports and surveys including the Consumer, Provider, and Counselor Satisfaction surveys; pilot youth and employer surveys; and collaboration and discussion with the SRC and other key stakeholders.

The MRC 2016 Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment Survey was administered electronically via Survey Monkey in September and October 2016. A focus group of MRC consumers was also conducted at the Consumer Conference in June 2015. There were 1,691 consumers who responded to the survey out of a total of 7,247 recipients, for a response rate of 23.4%. The number of responses exceeded the amount required to make statistically significant conclusions at a 99% confidence level, according to the Raosoft.com sample size calculator, by a wide margin. There was a 2% increase in the number of consumer respondents from the 2015 Needs Assessment Survey and a 16% increase in the number of consumers offered the opportunity to participate in the survey compared to 2015. Those consumers aged 16 to 22 were sent a version of the survey which included additional questions on pre-employment transition services and other transition related questions. 281 responses were received (included in overall total).

The main findings of the 2016 Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment can be summarized as follows:

1. The 2016 CSNA confirms that the majority of consumers served by the MRC are people with the most significant disabilities. The findings indicate that a majority of MRC consumers require multiple Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and supports to assist them in their efforts to prepare for, choose, obtain, maintain, and advance in competitive employment. There is also a high need for transportation and Community Living (CL) services amongst many consumers. The need for multiple VR services was found to be slightly greater amongst individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (particularly African-Americans and Hispanics) and for individuals with cognitive or psychological disabilities. This finding was more pronounced than 2015. The findings suggest that many consumers also require supported employment and ongoing and extended employment supports. The need for multiple CL services was greatest among individuals with physical or sensory disabilities.
2. Overall, the majority of MRC consumers believe MRC services are addressing all or most of their needs and are satisfied with MRC services. 80% of consumers feel MRC services are at least somewhat effective in meeting their vocational service needs. 86% of MRC consumers are satisfied with the services they receive. Also, the majority of consumers (82%) are also somewhat or very satisfied with the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment. All of these are increases from 2015. Many of those who feel MRC services are not meeting their needs indicate they have difficulty maintaining contact with their counselor, have experienced changes in their assigned counselors due to high levels of staff turnover, feel they have not been provided consistent or adequate information on services, or are struggling with health issues, financial issues, and other difficulties.
3. Many consumers expressed strong praise and gratitude for the hard work and support provided by the MRC and its counseling staff. It is very evident that MRC and its staff make a significant positive impact on the lives of many of its consumers. The level of positive feedback from consumers this year is once again exceptionally notable. A need raised by consumers included better contact with their counselor and more information about available services and MRC procedures, including information and referral to other agencies. It also appears some consumers may not have a complete understanding of what the MRC can and cannot do for them. Many consumers also appear to be struggling with the high cost of living in Massachusetts.
4. The most important and needed VR services listed by consumers were job placement (89%), career counseling (87%), benefits planning (82%), supported employment (82%), work-readiness training

- (73%), vocational training (71%), ongoing supports to assist in retaining employment (71%), assistance with college education (70%), and On-the-Job Training and Job-Driven Trainings (68%).
5. Among individuals with less than a high school education at application, 94% indicate that transition services to assist in transitioning from high school to college and employment and 90% find pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities as important service needs. Obtaining a high school diploma and college education were also rated as important services by youth.
 6. The most important and needed pre-employment transition services listed by MRC consumers of transition age (16-22) included internships/work-based learning experiences (87%), assistance in enrolling in post-secondary education or training (85%), work readiness training (83%), career counseling (81%), and advocacy/mentorship/peer counseling (72%). 77% of consumers of transition age indicate they have received some pre-employment transition services from MRC. Some consumers report they receive pre-employment transition services from schools outside of MRC, the frequency of the responses range from 16% for advocacy/peer counseling to 37% for assistance with enrollment in college education or trainings.
 7. The majority of transition age consumers indicate they are satisfied with pre-employment transition services provided by MRC and their partners in meeting their needs towards future education and employment (72% satisfied/very satisfied, and 91% somewhat satisfied/satisfied/very satisfied), and the majority who are receiving these services (72%) indicate these services are effective in preparing them for their future career.
 8. Results throughout the CSNA demonstrate a need for pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) among high school students with disabilities and youth consumers of transition age and MRC is working to address this need through its various transition initiatives. MRC is working closely with local school districts on transition and WIOA pre-employment transition services, including those provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). MRC has a counselor assigned to every public high school in the Commonwealth and has developed strong working relationships with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). MRC is also working to coordinate its transition services with local schools and DESE with those transition services by these provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. MRC is involved in several initiatives in this area, including the B-SET project, and has hired a Transition Manager to oversee transition and coordination with educational authorities. MRC has also been awarded a 5 year

demonstration grant on work-based learning experiences by RSA for students with disabilities entitled Transition Pathway Services which will also assist with needs in this area.

9. Based on an analysis of data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/selectedpopulations.aspx), there are 167,530 students with disabilities enrolled in public high schools in Massachusetts as of October 1, 2016. Based on this data and the high need for Pre-ETS services demonstrated throughout the CSNA, MRC forecasts that it needs to utilize all of its 15% reservation of VR funding (approximately \$7.2 million) to provide the five required Pre-ETS services to students with disabilities across Massachusetts and 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.
10. The most important job characteristics that MRC consumers indicated they are looking for in a job include a friendly job environment (96%), job satisfaction and personal interests (95%), earning a living wage (94%), an adequate number of hours worked per week (94%), vacation and other leave benefits (90%), and promotional opportunities (89%).
11. The most common occupational areas of interest listed by MRC consumers included Community/Social/Human Services (38%), Self-Employment (28%), Administrative (28%), Customer Service (24%), Arts/Entertainment (21%), Arts/Entertainment/Media (21%), Computers/Information Technology (21%), and Education/Childcare (15%). All but Self-Employment are amongst the top 10 occupational goals by Standard Occupational Code (SOC) in consumer employment plans in the MRCIS Case Management System. A number of consumers also asked for additional information on self-employment supports.
12. Only 30% of consumers indicated that they are aware of the Independent Living Center in their area. Individuals with psychological disabilities, younger consumers, and those in the South and North District tended to be less aware of ILCs compared to consumers with other types of disabilities.
13. Transportation continues to be an area of need for some MRC consumers. The most important and needed transportation services and options listed by consumers are the Donated Vehicle Program (18%), public transportation (18%), driver's education and training (13%), the Transportation Access Pass (8%), The Ride/paratransit (8%), information on transportation options (8%), and car pool/ride sharing (5.5%).

14. Transportation can serve as a barrier to some consumers and 33% of consumers find transportation to be a potential barrier to obtaining employment (down 1% from 2015 and 3% from 2014). Common reasons for how transportation is a barrier include inability to access jobs in areas without transportation, the cost of transportation, the distance to available jobs, reliability and the time required to travel via public transit/paratransit, lack of a vehicle and/or driver's license, and health conditions or the nature of disability.
15. The most important and needed Community Living services indicated by responding consumers were affordable, accessible housing and the Mass Access Housing Registry (66%), accessible recreational services (53%), Home and Community-Based Waiver Services (46%), the Consumer Involvement Program (46%), the Individual Consumer Consultant (ICC) program (45%), Assistive Technology (38%), Home Care (37%), Supported Living Services (35%), and Home Modification (34%).
16. When factoring out consumers who indicated they do not require Community Living services, 87% of MRC consumers indicated that MRC's services were somewhat or extremely useful in assisting them to maintain independence in the community. As with the section on VR, many consumers reflected on how the MRC's assistance has been tremendously valuable. Many consumers, however, were not aware of some or all of the CL services provided by the MRC. Others indicated they do not require CL services. There appears to be a higher need for CL services amongst women and minority consumers.
17. Finding affordable and accessible housing continues to remain a challenge for many consumers due to economic conditions and the high cost of living in Massachusetts. The Independent Living Centers may be able to assist consumers in this area, and counselors may be able to refer consumers to other resources to assist with housing needs.
18. A total of 19% of consumers feel they require additional services and supports. This number increased by about 1% from 2015 but is steady looking at the longer term trend. These services include job search assistance, job placement and job training, financial assistance, transportation, affordable and accessible housing, counseling and guidance, information on available services, assistive technology, education and training, services from IL centers, and services and supports from other agencies, and computer/technology skills training.
19. The most important single service consumers are receiving includes job placement and job search services, assistance with college education and job training, tuition waivers, vocational counseling and

guidance, assistive technology, job readiness training, assistance with obtaining supplies for school and work, ongoing employment supports, job trainings, and transportation,

20. A majority of MRC counselors and supervisors (82% 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 up from 2015. 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 WIOA implementation, amongst others.
21. Most consumers appear to be satisfied with services received from Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs). The majority of MRC staff also are somewhat or very satisfied with CRP services. Nearly 90% of CRPs indicated they are satisfied with services they provide to MRC consumers. Improved communication as well as information flow between CRPs and MRC staff may assist in improving service delivery to consumers and lead to more successful employment outcomes. Some CRPs have asked for MRC to provide additional information on client referrals for CRP services. Recent vendor expansion undertaken appears to have addressed CRP capacity needs, but there still may be a need for additional capacity in specific geographic areas, client population focus areas, and in particular service areas such as assessment based on counselor and provider feedback. MRC has also used CRPs to roll out new procurements to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities aged 16 to 22.
22. A pilot survey of MRC employer partners through MRC's account management system and those employers participating in the MRC Annual Hiring Event indicate a very high level of satisfaction with MRC job placement services amongst employer partners (88% satisfied/very satisfied) including satisfaction with the job performance of employees hired through MRC (93% satisfied/very satisfied). Most responding employers indicated that MRC meets their recruitment needs and would recommend MRC to other businesses for employment and recruitment. These findings suggest that MRC's efforts

to work with employers are effective towards accommodating the needs of our consumers and employer partners. It is recommended MRC expand these surveys to other employers.

23. 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, WIOA common measures and requirements, and on pre-employment transition services and transition services under WIOA.
24. The MRC has again identified Asian and Pacific Islanders as being slightly underserved by the MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation program compared to their proportion in the overall state population. MRC continues to see growth in minority populations served by the MRC VR program in general. Growth in the Asian population continues to be seen in the state's general population while it has remained steady amongst the MRC population. It is recommended that the MRC continue its outreach efforts to Asian communities. MRC has translated key agency marketing and information materials and recently completed a project to translate all MRCIS correspondence letters into several Asian languages common in Massachusetts including Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer as part of its Language Access Plan.
25. In order to meet the needs of individuals served through other components of the Statewide Workforce Development System, MRC continues 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. MRC continues its efforts 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 participates in numerous workgroups such as the WIOA Steering Committee, WIOA Systems Integration Workgroup, and other committees who are working on the alignment of services under the workforce system.
26. MRC will 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. 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, 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 will be reaching out to its core partners in 2017 to gather additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to complement and enhance the CSNA.

27. The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission VR Program has a growing presence at the Massachusetts career centers; the MRC Commissioner serves on the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB), and each area director has a formal relationship with at least one career center. In addition, area directors or other MRC staff are on local workforce investment boards. MRC VR counseling staff make frequent visits and often conduct interviews at the local career centers and will be leasing space at all career centers as part of WIOA implementation. MRC is working on aligning its services and increasing its presence at the career centers as MRC is a required partner in the Career Center network. MRC is working on finalizing MOUs and infrastructure funding agreements with local areas and the Career Centers. Finally, the MRC's job placement specialists and other assigned MRC staff work closely with local career centers to provide high quality vocational rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities seeking expanded employment opportunities and to make the career centers more responsive to the needs of individuals with disabilities including providing disability sensitivity training for career center staff.

Suggested Alternatives

- 1. Focus on improving communication between consumers and counselors, including developing strategies to improve communication on caseloads where staff vacancies occur:**

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. It is recommended that MRC continue its workgroup of VR staff focusing on the reduction of Status 28 unsuccessful closures and expand the reach of this workgroup to further review the area of

communication and develop strategies to improve communication between counselors and consumers on their caseload.

A focus on reducing Status 28 unsuccessful closures and 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.

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. A separate workgroup or task force could be convened to develop recommendations or solutions or the Status 28 workgroup could also explore strategies in this area.

2. Continue efforts to enhance information to consumers and potential consumers on available services:

Based on the results of the Needs Assessment survey and 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. The good news is that this theme continues to become less pronounced in the CSNA suggesting that there is continued improvement in this area. MRC's completion of a basic service list which has been published to its website which had been recommended in previous CSNA's is a big accomplishment in this area. Despite these improvements, it is suggested that MRC should continue to address this finding. First, it is recommended that MRC update its Consumer Handbook and Orientation Video to make sure it remains up to date and accounts for any policy changes made as a result of WIOA. 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.

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. These efforts should be beneficial to consumers.

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 pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities through its new Pre-ETS procurement with community-based providers and Independent Living Centers, continue its summer Area Office internship programs, the Transitional Internship Program (TIP), the Youth Leadership Forum and consider other efforts to provide services to youth and students. 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 its WIOA Family Service contract and other efforts. MRC is also working to finalize new transition brochures for students, families, schools, and other stakeholders. 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 and come up with strategies to refer additional youth consumers to the Statewide Employment Services office for supported employment services. MRC should also use its new Transition Pathway Services grant to seek out innovative best practices that can be replicated throughout the state in terms of Pre-ETS services.

4. Continue to develop pre-employment transition services for high school students with disabilities in coordination with local educational authorities:

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

5. Continue to utilize findings to promote program development, assist with WIOA implementation, and planning within the agency:

The findings and recommended alternatives from the CSNA should continue to be used by agency management for planning purposes and remain an integrated 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 WIOA and to drive future agency planning efforts.

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, 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.

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, increase its presence at the career centers, and finalizing MOUs and infrastructure funding agreement with local areas and 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 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 70% 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 CVS Health, Advance Auto Parts, Home Depot, Lowe's, and other 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.

9. Continue staff trainings and workforce planning efforts to assist in improving service delivery to VR consumers:

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 the implementation of WIOA; job readiness/job placement activity trainings (resume writing, local job markets/labor market information, career assessments, etc.); trainings on the MRCIS case management system; counselor, supervisor and management trainings on VR best practices, policies, and procedures, and effective practices for supervision; training on WIOA common performance measures; and trainings on effective communication with consumers and time management are recommended. In addition, the agency should continue its efforts to create e-learning 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 continue its successful workforce planning efforts to continue recruitment of new staff through VR counseling graduate student interns 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.

10. Consider continuing the Donated Car Program beyond FY2017 based on available resources:

In this year's Needs Assessment survey, the Donated Car Program currently operated in partnership with Good News Garage was again one of the top transportation resource needs specified by consumers. As mentioned before, the program has been extended through FFY2017. The program has been very successful over the past several years in assisting consumers in obtaining transportation to assist them with going to work based on an analysis of employment outcomes and a satisfaction survey. Consumers receive a donated vehicle that is repaired and inspected for safety and receive

training on how to maintain and register a vehicle. Consumers must have the resources to register, insure, and maintain the vehicle.

11. 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 only 30% 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. Given MRC is releasing a new RFR for the VR-IL contracts, and has undertaken collaboration with several ILCs through the Transition Pathway Services grant, now is a good opportunity to increase communication and collaboration with the ILCs. MRC has established a workgroup with the ILCs related to the new VR-IL contracts which could be leveraged in developing new partnerships. In addition, 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, 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.

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

This year's Needs Assessment demonstrates that transportation remains a significant need for many MRC consumers. MRC should refine and update its transportation fact sheets on MRC's website and incorporate these into trainings and informational materials based upon its research and what was learned at the Mass Mobility conference in May 2017. There are a number of programs which may benefit consumers which can be incorporated into these materials. 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 the MBTA pilot project with Uber and Lyft. In addition, MRC should continue to research collaboration with MassRides, MassMobility, the Massachusetts Department of

Transportation, Career Centers, the HST office, 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.

13. 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 has been identified as slightly underserved by the VR program in Massachusetts. MRC should focus on how to reach out effectively to these communities, including conducting outreach to local community agencies and organizations that serve ethnic and cultural minorities, among other methods. MRC should also consult its Bi-Lingual Committee and its Khmer speaking staff for recommendations on how to reach out more to minority communities. MRC has been successfully increasing its numbers in terms of Hispanic community and best practices in this area may assist with outreach to the Asian community.

It is also recommended the MRC continue its efforts through its marketing initiative to reach out to the Asian community and other minority communities, and complete the translation of all letters from MRCIS into all identified languages in the language plan and incorporate them into the system. The SRC Unserved/Underserved Committee should add reaching out to the Asian community to their agenda. Furthermore, it is recommended that the MRC's Diversity Committee, the SRC Needs Assessment Committee and Unserved/Underserved committee consider meeting jointly to come up with ideas for enhanced outreach to minority communities, including the Asian community.

14. 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. It is recommended that a guide or list of resources providing more information about available vendors for purchasing items for

consumers be developed. This guide would list available vendors and the particular products/materials that are provided by each vendor.

15. 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. Counselors also indicated they would like more tools to communicate with consumers including email to text messaging. It is recommended that MRC should continue to consider ways to increase electronic communication with consumers, including text messaging. MRC has sent a bulletin to staff about 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. A series of staff trainings on electronic communication should be considered. This will become more important in the future as consumers are more and more versed in communicating electronically and as MRC moves towards a fully paperless VR case management system. Other states have used text messaging and online dashboards as communication tools. These and other models should researched as potential alternatives.

16. 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, WIOA 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, 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 based on the final rules, 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.

Finally, it is recommended that the MRC continue to work with the Committee to discuss how to reach out to more consumers to identify their needs, especially in underserved populations such as the Asian community, through methods such as population-specific focus groups being considered. The translation of the Needs Assessment survey into Spanish and other languages should also be considered. Recommended refinements for the 2017 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.

17. 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. MRC has undertaken several efforts in this area including rollout of the ResuMate software system to allow staff to match consumer skills from resumes to required skills from job leads. MRC has also begun using the InFor Talent Science system. Both 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.

18. Continue to assist Community Rehabilitation Programs:

It is recommended the MRC continue its efforts to assist and improve Community Rehabilitation Programs across Massachusetts. CSNA findings suggest that the recent addition of additional vendor capacity in terms of new CRP vendors and expanded vendors have assisted in meeting needs for CRP capacity to serve MRC consumers, including the addition of Pre-ETS contracts by CRPs. However, it appears additional CRP capacity may be needed in some areas, both geographically and to serve specific populations. Upcoming rate increases to the Competitive Integrated Employment Service

(CIES) procurement should assist CRPs. MRC is also working with CRPs to provide pre-employment transition services to high school students with disabilities. MRC should continue to refine and evaluate its Pre-ETS procurement 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 regional contract supervisor, and continue regular meetings and communication with the Providers Council. It is also recommended the MRC continue its collaboration with CRPs through the Partnership Plus Advantage Program.

19. Continue to evaluate and research computer and technology skills trainings or web-based trainings and assessments for consumers to assist in obtaining employment:

As the world becomes more mobile and electronic, it becomes increasingly important the MRC assist consumers in preparing for employment by developing and refining skills in using technology. This year, there was a notable increase in the number of consumers indicating their need for trainings and workshops on computer skills and other technology. MRC refers consumers to a web-based system called the Manpower Training and Development Center (TDC) to undergo industry-based assessment, evaluation, and skills development. MRC also recently purchased access to web-based assessment tools for counselor use and is continuing to implement the use of the InFor Talent Science tool. The MRC should continue to evaluate results of its efforts in terms of employment outcomes and its overall benefit to consumers, and continue to research computer and technology skills trainings, and web-based assessment, training, and evaluation solutions to assist consumers with preparing for and obtaining employment.

20. Continue to focus on collecting valid email addresses for VR consumers:

MRC should continue its emphasis on the importance of collecting, recording, and maintaining valid email addresses in the MRCIS system. While the proportion of consumers with email addresses has increased significantly over the past five years, notable variations between some area offices in terms of the proportion of consumers in each office with an email address in the MRCIS system still exist. In addition, as job search processes have become more electronic, it is important that consumers have a valid and appropriate email address to apply for positions online and communicate with employers.

A certain percentage of MRC consumers may not have an email address when they begin services. In these situations it is important for MRC counselors to assist the individual with setting up a free email account such as Gmail or Hotmail. It is also very likely that many consumers have active email accounts, but this information is not being recorded. MRC implemented an enhancement to the MRCIS case management system which allowed emailing of official letters and other correspondence from counselors to consumers, which has further increased the proportion of email addresses in MRCIS. Obtaining more email addresses will benefit consumers in improving their ability to find competitive employment as well as assisting counselors in maintaining regular contact with their consumers. This will also assist in improving quality of data stored in MRCIS, leading to improved communication with consumers and facilitating higher response rates to electronic surveys. It is recommended that MRC complete an E-learning training for staff on email addresses and continue to emphasize the importance of recording addresses in relevant trainings and bulletins.

21. Attempt to increase the number of vendors for driver's education and training the next time the procurement is opened:

Over the past several years, the CSNA findings demonstrate a number of consumers who indicate they need driver's education services through survey results and open-ended responses. It is recommended that MRC should research the next time the Adaptive Driver Evaluation and Training Procurement will be opened for new vendors, and at that time should consider attempting to increase the number of qualified vendors under the RFR to assist with improving driver's education and adaptive evaluation services to consumers.