

**Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Annual Family Support Plan
State Fiscal Year 2007**

I. BACKGROUND:

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) is organized pursuant to M.G.L. c6 paragraph 74-84 and operates programs authorized by State Law, The Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, and by the Social Security Act. The MRC provides comprehensive services to individuals with significant disabilities, intended to promote equality, empowerment and independence.

The MRC serves individuals with all types of disabilities as its constituency. While each MRC program has its own focus and eligibility criteria, the Commission's overall mandate and purpose are to assist all eligible individuals with disabilities, regardless of age, nature of disability or functional ability to maximize quality of life and self-sufficiency in the community. Consistent among all services and across all programs, is a consumer-focused and consumer-directed planning and service delivery process that respects and is driven by informed decisions of empowered consumers.

Generally speaking, consumers of MRC services are competent, independent adults who choose to control their involvement with MRC personally. In many cases, the provision of service to that adult is, by nature, a support to the family. For example, assisting a disabled youth who is transitioning to adulthood to find an accessible, affordable home and to receive the supports necessary to remain in that home supports the family who, until that time, had provided all of the help necessary to keep that individual in the family home. This independence can be achieved with the assistance of such MRC programs as Home Modifications, Assistive Technology, MassAccess Housing Registry, homemaker services, supportive living services, specialized case management and Independent Living Center services.

In other examples, the economic self-sufficiency achieved through Vocational Rehabilitation Services to assist an individual to find and keep a job, or to obtain Social Security benefits through the Disability Determination Services, are, in effect, supports to the whole family who might be dependent upon that individual's income.

While MRC is primarily an adult service system, there are a number of services and programs that are available to children and youth with disabilities. Specifically, the Turning 22 Supported Living Program, Transition to Adulthood Program, the Family Assistance Services of the Statewide Head Injury Program, the Home Modification Loan Program, the Housing Registry and the Assistive Technology Loan program have no age minimum for eligibility and are utilized by adults and children.

Of particular note, in FY'06, the MRC launched an Intra-agency Transition Initiative which aims to bring together all programs and services within the agency to address and coordinate services provided to transitioning youth.

II. SUBSTANTIAL CONSULTATION:

Consumer Involvement is an integral component of all aspects of MRC services and programs. This begins with involvement of the consumer and, when appropriate, his or her legal guardian in all aspects of development and implementation of an individual service plan, individual transition plan or individual plan for employment.

Through exploration of existing program and service options, to participation in the Statewide Rehabilitation Advisory Council, to connecting with Independent Living Centers, consumers direct the types of services they receive, provide advice and consultation to the administration in terms of how services might best be provided, and join their voices to advocate for new and/or different services to best meet their needs.

In FY'06, avenues for obtaining Substantial Consultation have included:

- A Needs Assessment piloted by the Vocational Rehabilitation Division in conjunction with the Statewide Rehabilitation Council, in which over 1,300 responses were received,
- Individual Consumer Consultants involved in agency projects and activities such as development of publications including the Consumer Voice, the MRC Annual Report and the HCAP Resource Newsletter,
- A review of the results of the On-line housing survey with over 1,000 respondents indicating their preferences for types of housing and housing supports, and subsequent planning on new housing initiatives,
- Regional Transition Teams, comprised of consumers, families, family organizations, educators and MRC staff, to continue to improve upon the rehabilitation process for youth transitioning from the Educational to the Adult Service system,
- Regular meetings of Advisory Boards, including the Statewide Head Injury Advisory Board, the Home Care Assistance Program Advisory Committee, the Statewide Rehabilitation Advisory Council and its regional and topic-based subcommittees,
- On-going Consumer Satisfaction Survey completion and review,
- Regular meetings of the Statewide Independent Living Council,
- An Assistive Technology Needs Assessment,
- Completion of 25 regional Focus Groups to gain input from consumers with brain injuries, their families, service providers and other interested parties.

Moreover, many of the agencies with which MRC contracts are required to have advisory councils and other means of consumer input to ensure high quality, satisfactory services.

III. ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN FY'06:

For Fiscal Year 2006, the MRC had as a major strategic planning goal, streamlining agency transition activities and increasing outreach to youth and families. These goals were formulated in response to input received from youth and families in many of the various forums listed above.

Families consistently reported the need for timely information about the adult service system, particularly as it differs from the special education system. The need for earlier referrals to adult service programs was another common theme that informed the work of the MRC and highlighted the importance of such an agency-wide Transition Initiative.

1. Family Empowerment and Substantial Consultation:

- a) In FY '06, the MRC's Annual Consumer Conference included a workshop on Transition which incorporated information about both Vocational Rehabilitation and Independent Living/Community Services. Moreover, the workshop included youth with disabilities on the panel and in the formulation of the agenda. As the Conference Committee emphasized outreach to youth, the workshop was well-attended.
- b) The Regional Transition Teams met regularly throughout the year. As the Teams had identified the need for more information about transition and adult services to be available to youth and families, they had significant input into the Family Ties Resource Guide published by the Department of Public Health, and assisted in the development of a new Transition section of this very important guide.

2. Family Leadership:

- a) The Statewide Head Injury Program (SHIP) continues to fund the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts' I&R services, support group network and prevention programs. It also offers trainings to families and individuals on such topics of interest to families as substance abuse treatment, pharmacology and housing. The Massachusetts Acquired Brain Injury Advisory Board (MABIAB), which recommends policy, practices and funding for SHIP, is comprised of 64% families of, and consumers with acquired brain injury.
- b) The Transition to Adulthood Program funds Independent Living Centers to run peer support and independent living planning and support services to disabled teens as they begin to prepare for adulthood.
- c) Also in FY'06, MRC began a Statewide Mentorship program through a contract with Partners for Disabled Youth. This partnership matches disabled youth, between the ages of 14 and 18 years old, with disabled adults for the purpose of mentoring and empowering youth to make choices about the types of services to access to assist them in fulfilling their employment and independent living goals.
- d) Finally, the MRC Transition Program was actively involved in providing essential information to youth and families at various conferences and workshops. This included presentations at the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) Family Forums, and Independent Living Workshop at the FCSN's Annual Conference and a workshop for parents at the Partners for Youth with Disabilities' Annual Leadership Forum.

3. Family Resources and Funding:

In FY'06, the Statewide Head Injury Program held a series of Regional Family and Consumer Focus Groups. The purpose of these forums was to gather substantial input from consumers and their families regarding the types of services most needed in their communities. The SHIP is working with MABIAB to review the findings of the Focus Groups and incorporate the information and feedback garnered into an updated state plan which will drive future program development.

Also in FY'06, the Vocational Rehabilitation Services division, in conjunction with the Statewide Rehabilitation Advisory Council, conducted a Needs Assessment that will help to inform the agency as it works toward improving services, as well as in looking at new ways to get information about existing programs and services out to individuals in need.

IV. GOALS FOR FY '07:

Accessing Services and Supports:

An immediate goal of the MRC will be to directly connect with the Massachusetts Families Organizing for Change (MFOC) leadership to share information about the activities of MRC and to hear from MFOC and its constituency about the unmet needs and/or need for information about the agency's services, eligibility and intake procedures. A goal will be to organize a meeting of leadership from both organizations in the Fall of 2006.

Also in FY '07, the MRC Transition Initiative will more comprehensively look at all of the transition activities the agency is involved in and determine how best to streamline efforts to more effectively serve transitioning youth.

In November 2006, the MRC will hold its first Intra-agency Transition Conference to analyze current service delivery systems and identify best practices. The training department will then be involved in follow up training for all staff involved to ensure that they have the skill and knowledge base to incorporate best practices into daily operations. This intra-agency conference will include participants from all programs within MRC to more clearly identify how the various programs and services touch on lives of youth and families and how they can become more effective at doing so.

Finally, a goal of the Transition Teams for '07 and beyond is to increase communication and determine best practices for ensuring that MRC staff are able to provide information and/or referrals necessary to assist each individual in formulating a comprehensive plan to meet his/her individual needs regardless of point of contact with the agency. This will require improved informational materials, staff training, integrated Regional Teams that represent both Vocational Rehabilitation services and Community Services, and integrated Information Technology, all of which will make up the work of the MRC throughout the year.

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission also recognizes the importance of Inter-Agency collaboration in ensuring the best possible array of services is made available to children with disabilities, transitioning youth and their families. The collaborative work of the Transition teams, and the Intra-agency transition initiative will continue to identify future goals for collaboration and inter-agency work.