

The Georgia State Rehabilitation Council
SFY 2007 Annual Report, July 1, 2006 – June 30, 2007

The members of the Georgia State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) represent a cross section of the state's citizenry who have a stake in the vocational rehabilitation process, and bring expertise to the council from a wide spectrum of disciplines. They were appointed by the Commissioner of Labor, a duly elected constitutional officer, and may serve no more than two consecutive three-year terms.

The council works jointly with state officials to develop VR goals and priorities and review them annually. To accomplish this effort, the council aims to build partnerships among people and organizations that participate in realizing the mission and vision of the organization; to forge a spirit of trust and cooperation among all partners; to reach out to people with disabilities and employers throughout the state to create a true spirit of inclusion; and to be receptive to the concerns and issues raised by people with disabilities, employers, and other concerned individuals so that its work can be a catalyst for positive change.

The members of the SRC are:

Linda Shepard, Chairperson, Parents Educating Parents & Professionals, Inc., Douglasville

Joe Tedesco, Vice Chairperson, TECH-ABLE, Conyers

James Ashworth, AirTran Airways, Atlanta

Dexter M. Brown, Bank of America, Atlanta

Cornelius L. Butler, Butler New Media, LLC, Bainbridge

Fred Cannon, AirTran Airways, Atlanta

Thomas W. Dennis, Georgia Client Assistance Program, Decatur

Russell C. Fleming, Georgia School of the Deaf / Cave Spring, Rome

Michael G. Hale, Synovus Financial Corporation, Bogart

Virginia C. Harris, BAIN, Inc. Center for Independent Living, Bainbridge

Charles W. Lamb, Jr., The Lamb Law Firm, P.C., Albany

Wes Massey, Commerce High School, Commerce

Walter Morris, Conley

B. Lu Nations-Miller, Ph.D., Georgia Department of Education, Atlanta

Bennie Butler Newroth, Columbus Regional Healthcare System, Inc., Columbus

Pricilla L. Peters-Ward, CRC, GDOL / VR Program, College Park

Charles F. Wells, CRC (Alternate), GDOL / VR Program, Macon

Alice Ritchhart, Brunswick

Shelia H. Thomas, Easter Seals of East Georgia, Augusta

Dorie Tuggle (Retired), Lockheed Martin Aeronautics, Austell

Christina Peggy Venable, Lower Muskogee Creek Indian Tribe, Whigham

Peggy D. Rosser, Assistant Commissioner, GDOL / Rehabilitation Services, Atlanta, is an ex-officio member of the council.

The mission of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is to work in partnership with the Georgia Department of Labor (GDOL)/Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program to prepare Georgians with disabilities to enter, return to, and/or advance into competitive employment, and to promote their hiring.

The vision of the SRC is to advocate for VR to be the premier organization that assists people with disabilities to maximize their work potential and level of independence, and to ensure that each person with a disability will have the opportunity to guide his/her own education and career path.

The philosophy of the SRC notes that its members believe that all people deserve the best the council has to offer; therefore, the council strives to actively value Meaningful Work, Inclusion, Informed Choice, Self Determination, Trust and Integrity, Positive and Effective Change, and Purposeful Collaboration

This is a Letter from the SRC Chairperson:

On behalf of the Georgia State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), I am honored to present the SFY 2007 annual report. It was a busy and productive year for the SRC, and while it was characterized by a significant transformation of the membership, I believe the council achieved a balance of support for today's needed decisions and thoughtful input to shape tomorrow's challenging plans.

This was a year of transition, with new leadership, new SRC members, and a unified commitment to the administrators of the 110 program that we are here to work side-by-side with them to achieve measurable outcomes. We stand ready on all fronts to align our efforts strategically to ensure that Georgia's vision for the VR program becomes a reality: *To be the premier organization that assists people with disabilities to maximize their work potential and level of independence.*

The SRC is committed to carrying out the spirit as well as the letter of the law – to integrate, coordinate and improve all services to achieve full inclusion for persons with disabilities. Individually and collectively, we value and respect our role as a voice for persons with disabilities in Georgia, and we are focused on promoting a common agenda for their benefit.

Under the leadership and guidance of the past council chair and members, the new council has learned that its job is vitally important to the future of the 110 program. We have also learned that the only constant is change, and *change* is simply another word for *transition*, a necessary step to move ahead.

Perhaps the most important thing we have learned is that an alliance of SRC members, VR staff, and community and business partners makes virtually anything possible. A testament to that underscores one of the SRC's proudest accomplishments, a series of public hearings across Georgia that gave individuals the opportunity to provide vitally important comment on the VR strategic plan for 2008.

This alliance is critical to our support of VR's mission to assist people with disabilities and businesses to reach their respective workforce needs. It is also integral to moving each of us closer to understanding the true foundation of the VR program: *Disability is a natural part of the human experience; it should not stand in the way of any person to achieve success in work or in life.*

Sincerely, Linda Shepard, Chair

This is a letter from the Assistant Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services:

The dictionary defines *transition* as a "passage from one form, state, style, stage or place to another." Add a few synonyms from a thesaurus – *shift, change, alter, modify, transform* -- and what emerges is an accurate picture of what this fiscal year was like for Georgia's 110 program.

This was a year of transition second only to when Rehabilitation Services moved from the Department of Human Resources to the Department of Labor. It was a year marked by rigorous examination of our policies, principles and complex challenges, each with its own impact on our continuum of services and each affecting the very way we do business. It was a year that brought about a great appreciation for what a committed team of rehabilitation professionals and a dedicated, participatory and knowledgeable rehabilitation council can bring to a state VR program.

A great deal was accomplished during this fiscal year, and both old and new council members remained steadfast in their support of staff efforts and readily accepted their advisory and policy-affirming roles. It is no accident that for the past six years on average, 4,300 people with disabilities have achieved successful, competitive employment. Yet numbers do not tell the entire story; achievements do.

In those same six years, the Georgia SRC fostered development of the independent evaluation process for employers and clients; it championed the move to require Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) status for front-line VR staff and initiated the collaboration with the University of Kentucky's Master's Rehabilitation Counseling program to help make it possible; it forged and sustained key legislative relationships that forestalled budget cuts; and it consistently offered sage and spirited inspiration to ensure that we always kept our eyes on the prize – to assist people with disabilities to work.

I appreciate the thoughtful input both old and new SRC members provided to the design of the comprehensive needs assessment, the precedent-setting public hearings and the 2008 strategic and state plans for Georgia's 110 program, and I am confident that their continued involvement and oversight will help us achieve our measurable outcomes.

It has always been my privilege to work with council members who give so readily of their time and talent; this new group of dedicated professionals will continue that legacy. Beyond that, however, I am genuinely heartened by the council's sincere advocacy on behalf of persons with

disabilities, and its commitment to ensure that vocational rehabilitation remains a significant force in their lives.

Sincerely, Peggy D. Rosser, Assistant Commissioner for Rehabilitation Services

The next section of the Annual Report is titled Facts and Figures, and highlights statistical information.

The first table shows 110 Program Expenditures in millions of dollars:

Services Purchased (Total)	
Community Rehabilitation Programs	12,068,642
All Other Vendors	25,371,880
Services Provided to Consumers by Roosevelt Warm Springs	6,597,929
Services Provided to Consumers by Business Enterprise Program	1,836,086
Services Provided to Consumers by Vocational Rehabilitation	42,302,562
Administrative Support	7,403,881
TOTAL	95,580,980

The next table shows 110 Program Funding sources by percentages:

Federal	76%
State	22%
Social Security Reimbursement	1%
Other Match	1%
TOTAL	100%

The section continues with several statements:

The Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center (CSRC), a residential program focusing on job readiness and employment training, served 93 clients this fiscal year. Over half of the client census received either a Learner's driving permit (36) or a Driver's license (22) while at CSRC. About a third (30) of the residents were involved in Community Work Adjustment outside the Center.

The VR Program continued its contract with the Georgia Department of Human Resources, Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) to provide assessments to Georgia Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients. In FFY07, VR offered assessment services for 110 new TANF recipients with 17 referrals carried over from FFY06. Of the total 127 recipients receiving assessment services, 38 were referred to the VR Program and 64 were referred back to DFCS with recommendations for services; of the remaining individuals, 13 referrals discontinued their assessments and 12 referrals were carried into FFY08.

The Social Security Administration's (SSA) Ticket to Work (TTW) program provides beneficiaries of SSI and SSDI greater choices in receiving employment, vocational, and other services they need to go to work and/or increase their earnings from work, thus reducing their dependency on cash benefits programs.

Georgia VR received 496 ticket assignments in SFY 2007. Since the TTW program began in 2002, more than 4,000 tickets were assigned to Georgia VR; 362 tickets were assigned to the other 26 Employment Networks in Georgia.

The VR program's federally funded Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) project provided direct benefits advisement and guidance to more than 260 Social Security beneficiaries with disabilities in SFY 2007.

During SFY 2007, the VR Assistive Technology unit received 1,302 client referrals from counselors, and provided 4,951 individualized AT services (devices, home and vehicle modifications, work site accommodations) in support of work goals.

The next table is titled VR Program Service Trends and shows three years of statistics, from SFY 2005 to SFY 2007:

	SFY 2007	SFY 2006	SFY 2005
Referrals	12,019	12,594	12,797
Applicants	11,613	12,703	12,051
Work Plans	6,969	7,691	7,968
Clients Working	5,576	6,341	6,394
Rehabilitated	4,648	4,477	4,747
Served	34,117	34,070	35,206

There is a brief section on Transition Cases Served:

Transition cases, ages 16-21, total 8,114; this is 23.78 percent of all VR clients served.

Transitioning students who are goal directed toward employment, post-secondary education and independent living receive a variety of services. In SFY 07, 88 schools systems participated in a total of 65 VR/DOE Collaborative Agreements to enhance VR services to eligible students with disabilities.

The next table indicates the number and percentage of VR clients served according to Race and Ethnicity:

American Indian or Alaskan Native	66	0.19 %
Asian	214	0.63 %
Black or African American	15,648	45.87 %
Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	20	0.06 %
Hispanic or Latino	532	1.56 %
Multi-Racial	117	0.34 %
White or Caucasian	17,520	51.35 %
TOTAL	34,117	100 %

The next table indicates the number and percentage of VR clients served by disability category:

Visual Impairments	1,464	4%
Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing	2,106	6%
Communicative Impairments	169	1%
Physical Disorders	7,844	23%
Cognitive Impairments	14,732	43%
Mental & Emotional (Psychosocial) Disabilities	7,056	21%
Other	746	2%
TOTAL	34,117	100%

The next table indicates the number and percentage of VR clients served according to age and gender:

	Served	Percentage	Female	Female Percentage	Male	Male Percentage
Under 18	2,012	5.90%	787	2.31%	1,225	3.59%
18-24	15,265	44.74%	6,056	17.75%	9,209	26.99%
25-30	3,165	9.28%	1,281	3.75%	1,884	5.52%
31-39	3,875	11.36%	1,750	5.13%	2,125	6.23%
40-54	7,531	22.07%	3,660	10.73%	3,871	11.35%
55 and up	2,269	6.65%	1,158	3.39%	1,111	3.26%
TOTAL	34,117	100%	14,692	43.06%	19,425	56.94%

The next table shows the source for new VR referrals for SFY2007:

Educational Institutions, Elementary and Secondary	3,360	27.96%
Educational Institutions, Post Secondary	405	3.37%
Physician or other Medical Personnel or Medical Institutions	608	5.06%
Welfare Agency, State or Local Government	167	1.39%
Community Rehabilitation Programs	1,097	9.13%
Social Security Administration	255	2.12%
One-Stop Employment and Training Centers	427	3.55%
Self-Referral	3,571	29.71%
Other Sources	2,129	17.71%
TOTAL	12,019	100%

The following table shows Employment by Occupation of Clients Closed 26 with supports for SFY2007:

Farm/Fishing/Forestry	16	Less than 3%
Industrial/Trades/Manufacturing	54	9%
Professional/Technical/Managerial	53	9%
Miscellaneous Occupations	105	17%
Clerical/Sales	161	26%
Service Occupations	231	37%
TOTAL	620	100%

The highest average weekly salary was \$543.20; the lowest was \$197.34. The highest average hourly wage was \$14.20; the lowest was \$7.00. Average hours worked per week ranged from a high of 42 to a low of 28.

The next table shows Employment by Occupation of Clients Closed 26 without supports for SFY2007:

Farm/Fishing/Forestry	103	3%
Industrial/Trades/Manufacturing	653	17%
Professional/Technical/Managerial	488	13%
Miscellaneous Occupations	561	14%
Clerical/Sales	802	21%

Service Occupations	1,267	33%
TOTAL	3,874	100%

The highest average weekly salary was \$510.41; the lowest was \$236.33. The highest average hourly wage was \$14.04; the lowest was \$7.02. Average hours worked per week ranged from a high of 40 to a low of 34.

The next section has information about the Business Enterprise Program.

Georgia's Business Enterprise Program (BEP) provides work opportunities to persons who are blind and who want to manage small businesses, primarily in establishments in the food-service industry.

In SFY 2007, there were 133 BEP sites operated by 96 licensed BEP vendors, who also employed 139 other individuals. Total sales equaled \$11,240,292 dollars, and generated \$747,315 dollars in sales tax revenue. Excluding the BEP contracted vendors who manage the Fort Benning military feeding operation in Columbus, Georgia, the average annual salary of a licensed BEP vendor was \$40,560. The lowest BEP-vendor salary was \$3,469; the highest was \$176,087. Including all operating sites, BEP vendors employ more than 300 people with disabilities at their various work sites.

The next section has information about the VR Unit at Roosevelt Warm Springs:

One hundred ninety seven (197) VRU students completed their academic education training in SFY 2007, and received such services as academic remediation, GED prep and testing, tech school preparation, keyboarding, and Off Campus Opportunity Summer Program. It is important to note that VRU academic education services increased by 73% this fiscal year, and the VRU received certification from the Georgia Accreditation Commission.

There are four certificate-training programs aligned with the VRU. In SFY 2007: 47 students participated in the Certified Nursing Assistant program; 29 students studied in the Basic Printing Assistant program; 24 students worked in the Forklift & Heavy Machinery category; and six were enrolled in the Lawn Care & Maintenance area for the spring quarter.

One hundred sixty (160) VRU students graduated work ready during SFY 2007.

The VRU offers students a 24/7 dorm life experience coupled with job skills training, independent living and academic education classes. VRU students experience not only vocational, but also personal, social, spiritual and recreational growth during their enrollment at VRU. Attending the VRU as a student is oftentimes the first time that many of these young men and women have been away from home. VRU programs and services are designed to be as close to college life as possible. Because of this environment the students complete their programs as well rounded young men and women. One student stated it best when he said, "RWSIR stands for Reaching Whatever Star It Requires" to become successful.

The next several pages provide a summary called The Year in Review:

In spite of a year of monumental change that demanded a significant time commitment to administrative detail, the Georgia SRC remained active with regard to its initiatives and partnerships. Selected new activities also received the council's attention. The summary that follows highlights the significant efforts of the SRC membership:

► The Client Assistance Program (CAP) provides information, assistance, and advocacy to applicants and consumers with disabilities who are applying for and receiving services from the VR Program. The Law Offices of Martin and Jones administer CAP in a manner that informs and empowers people with disabilities to fully understand and exercise their rights to services.

One of CAP's priorities is to resolve problems to the customer's satisfaction. As a result, very few issues have to be resolved through the formal appeals process. CAP's experiences with resolving disagreements through mediation and informal negotiations have been highly successful for VR consumers.

During SFY 2007, CAP:

- Responded to 867 requests for information and referral.
- Provided direct services to 91 individuals
- Provided services to 81 applicants and 88 clients of the VR Program.
- Settled consumer problems through mutual agreement rather than fair hearing decisions before an administrative law judge.
- Resolved one case through formal mediation.
- Represented one VR client in administrative hearings.
- Represented one client in appeal in Superior Court.

► The Georgia Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, Inc., which is affiliated with the National Association of Governors' Committees, is a 501(c)(3) non-profit corporation committed to maximizing and enhancing the employment of people with disabilities in Georgia. Over the past several years, the Georgia Committee has focused largely on activities affecting youth and students with disabilities, most particularly as they relate to the Georgia High School/High Tech (HS/HT) initiative, and has utilized funding from the SRC and other sources to support the efforts of the HS/HT project. Activities during SFY 2007 included:

- The fifth annual Youth Leadership Forum, held at Georgia State College and University in Milledgeville, allowed 17 HS/HT students to experience a college campus atmosphere while they learned about employment and post-secondary options, and explored leadership skills presented by successful adults.
- High School/High Tech Capitol Day, which was attended by more than 100 students and site coordinators.
- The presentation of \$1,000 post-secondary scholarships for HS/HT graduates: three awarded from the Atlanta Industry Liaison group, the fourth from Georgia Committee funds.

- Four interactive audio conferences for HS/HT site coordinators. Topics and participants included a discussion of mentoring, federal employment opportunities and self-advocacy, led by the former Associate Director of the Domestic Policy Council, The White House; and an examination of work-based opportunities with the Senior Program Associate of the Institute for Educational Leadership.

In addition, Georgia Committee support of local site activities included funding to assist students to attend the Related Vocational Instruction (RVI) Conference in Jekyll Island, Georgia, as well as financial aid for student transportation to various mentoring opportunities at area technical colleges, the Georgia State Capitol, and the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation.

► Muskogee Vocational Rehabilitation (MVR), Georgia's Section 121 Program, works to serve American Indians with Disabilities to return to, train for, obtain, and maintain employment. Those identified American Indians who reside on or near Tama Reservation and have disabilities are served through the MVR project. Twenty (20) consumers were served in SFY 2007.

MVR engages in numerous activities and planned initiatives designed to provide culturally appropriate services to American Indians with Disabilities, as well as training and awareness-building opportunities to staff, SRC members, state VR administrators, and community and business partners.

Consumers are exposed to Wellness Circle, Herbal Healing, and Ceremonies, aspects that are vital to providing VR services to American Indians with disabilities. It allows them the opportunity to learn within their cultural setting, to build self-confidence with Tribal Elders as their mentors, to receive VR services in a manner that allows the diversity of tribal culture, and acknowledges and embraces the culture towards building a successful future.

MVR hosts a Disability Awareness Day annually for state VR staff, MVR staff and Advisory Board Members, Employers and Consumers. This year's training addressed Hidden Disabilities, and allowed participants to assume a "disability" for the day, which helped to further understanding for those individuals who have disabilities.

The MVR Advisory Council implemented two new activities during SFY 2007. The first was a survey the council developed to determine the overall needs of the Tribal population. This will allow MVR to provide services that address the needs of the population, as well as obtain comparable services. The Advisory Council also hosted its first annual Appreciation Reception for MVR staff and consumers; awards were given to recognize consumers for outstanding academic success, academic excellence, most improved, and successful achievement, among others.

► The Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia, Inc. (SILC) and eight Centers for Independent Living (CIL) across the state comprise Georgia's Independent Living Network. Each of these organizations is governed and staffed by people with disabilities.

The SILC works with the VR Program to develop the State Plan for Independent Living, and focuses on promoting policies and practices that enable independent living for all Georgians with

disabilities. The CILs assist people with all types of disabilities to set and achieve personal goals toward independence.

During SFY 2007, Georgia CILs provided a wide range of independent living services to nearly 2,400 Georgians with significant disabilities, including but not limited to: information and referral, independent living skills training, nursing home transition, home modifications, advocacy, orientation and mobility skills training, assistive technology, and computer skills training.

Georgia Centers were also involved in a diverse mix of important initiatives, including: transitioning people out of nursing facilities; providing rural voucher-based transportation services; influencing urban transportation policy toward greater accessibility; assisting people with disabilities, especially those who live on the coast, to prepare for disasters; reaching out to disabled victims of domestic violence; and leading the local community in voter registration and education.

► The Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment provided an unprecedented opportunity for the SRC, especially its newly appointed members, to discover first hand the opinions of consumers, rehabilitation staff and employment professionals regarding the delivery of VR services in Georgia. The knowledge gained from the needs assessment will directly affect the organization's ability to help people with disabilities obtain and keep suitable employment. This knowledge is also clearly important for strategic planning and developing goals for the next few years, which is a primary focus area for the new council.

In SFY 2007 the SRC supported the VR Program in contracting with an independent consultant, Christine Lewis, to conduct a comprehensive statewide assessment of the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities in Georgia. Federal regulations at § 361.29 (a) (1) require the VR 110 Program State Plan to include the results of a comprehensive statewide needs assessment, jointly conducted by the designated State unit and the SRC every three years. The SRC and VR Program administrators and staff worked with Ms. Lewis to develop assessment instruments resulting in a report of the rehabilitation needs of Georgia residents with disabilities, specifically in the following areas required by federal regulations:

An assessment of the vocational rehabilitation needs of one, individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services; two, individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the vocational rehabilitation program; and three, individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment system as identified by those individuals and personnel assisting those individuals through the components of the system; as well as an assessment of the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs (CRP's) within the state.

The needs assessment included individual, accessible, confidential surveys of VR clients, VR counselors, and Georgia Department of Labor One Stop and Career Center managers. There were links to web-based surveys, as well as telephone and personal surveys when desired by the survey participant. The comprehensive needs assessment was conducted in two phases resulting in separate lengthy reports. The SRC and VR leaders and staff reviewed the reports and incorporated key points into the State Plan goals, objectives and strategies, particularly in the areas of enhanced

services for people who are Blind, Deaf and Deaf-Blind, transition services for students with disabilities, and for more community based supported employment and job coaching services. The comprehensive needs assessment report was included as part of the VR 110 Program FY 2008 State Plan that was approved by the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

Seven conclusions were noted in the analysis of the client survey; four bear mentioning:

One, there is a high level of demand for core services such as counseling and job seeking skills; two, there is also a high level of unmet demand for services, which links directly to concerns about counselor vacancy rate and noncompetitive salary; three, transportation is a major barrier to employment for persons with disabilities, affecting nearly half of all consumers; and four, health insurance is a significant unmet need for nearly a third of the sample.

The comprehensive needs assessment confirmed that individuals with severe disabilities need vocational rehabilitation services with the greatest needs being for job seeking skills, job training and transportation. More than a quarter of the consumers expressed a need for job support services, counseling, education and benefit planning. The research also found that approximately 7.6% of the working age population has an employment disability and may qualify for VR services, which far exceeds the program's capacity. The VR program appears to be serving a greater proportion of minority applicants with an employment disability than exists in the general population of Georgia. Also, the research found that 96% of VR counselors participating in the survey referred clients to CRP's and that most services seem to be available but that capacity is often inadequate. The most severe supply gap was reported to be in employment skills training.

The following section provides information about the Public Hearings held in 2007:

The SRC held ten public hearings across the state designed to elicit thoughtful responses to the FY 2008 State Plan for the 110 Vocational Rehabilitation Program; cities were selected to reflect the largest geographic representation from Georgia's diverse regions and populations. Nearly 350 participants attended the various hearings; additional written statements were received, and close to 150 individuals responded to a web-based survey about the state plan.

Georgia Department of Labor Assistant Commissioner for Rehabilitation Peggy Rosser and VR Program Director Carl McRae were present at the majority of hearings, which were facilitated by Linda Shepard, SRC chair, and Joe Tedesco, SRC vice chair. RSA staff was represented via teleconference at the meeting in Savannah, Georgia.

Participants represented various governmental agencies, school districts, VR professionals, disability providers, disability organizations and advocacy groups, students, parents, and VR clients from community rehabilitation programs (CRPs), the Roosevelt Warm Springs Institute for Rehabilitation (RWSIR) and the Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center (CSRC). Attendees with disabilities included people with visual impairments, learning disabilities, physical disorders, and deaf and hard of hearing disabilities. Accommodations and alternate format materials, including large print, CD, floppy disc and Braille copies, were available, as were ASL and Spanish language interpreters.

All audiences seemed to agree that “VR is Georgia’s best kept secret,” and gave credence to the observation that increased statewide marketing and awareness is essential. There was considerable discussion about the misinformation, myths and misconceptions about VR, and the supports and services available. The need for training and cross training in all areas for all stakeholders – VR professionals, business and education partners, consumers and their families and advocates -- was emphasized.

The state’s goals and priorities for the 110 program as stated in the 2008 State Plan helped to focus specific attention on four key areas: 1.) How to improve services to increase employment outcomes for clients with sensory disabilities (deaf, blind and deaf-blind); 2.) How to enhance services at Georgia’s two residential VR programs (RWSIR and CSRC) to increase employment opportunities for their student populations; 3.) How to improve transition services to increase the number of students with disabilities who become successfully employed; and 4.) How to enhance relationships with the business community to increase the number of employers who hire VR clients for the first time.

Repeatedly stated concerns regarding these four key areas formed the basis of the SRC’s input and recommendations to the 2008 State Plan. They included:

- The lack of certified rehabilitation counselors (17% vacancy rate), the noncompetitive salary and the length of time it takes to fill positions adversely affects the quality of VR services.
- The lack of funding for VR’s two residential programs hampers critically-needed facilities improvement, and inhibits hiring adequate specialized staff.
- There is a need for a dedicated funding stream for transition programs and a closer relationship between school transition specialists and VR counselors so that students could be reached in the ninth grade or earlier.
- Little knowledge in the business community about the supports and services available from VR reinforces myths and misconceptions about hiring people with disabilities.

There were also often repeated positive comments about Georgia’s VR program; for example:

“The success of our students would not be possible without the diligent work and dedication of the vocational rehabilitation counselors and staff.”

“The value of the residential programs especially designed to serve this population is huge for them socially and they see adult role models.”

“We can really count on the Rehabilitation Employment Specialist (RES) to be the key to employers willing to hire people with disabilities for the first time.

“It is the VR program that finds ways to make it easier to find jobs.”

“The value (of VR) is tremendous. . . being a team is the key.”

“I came from another state and I’m impressed with access to the job readiness person, the assistive technology staff and so forth.”

The next section of the annual report gives legal and organizational information about the SRC::

The council has Mandated Membership. The United States Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, directs that the members of the council work in strategic partnership with the Georgia VR Program to make certain that individuals with disabilities receive the services and supports they need to become productive Georgia citizens through gainful employment and self-sufficiency. To ensure true representation of individuals with disabilities from diverse populations, the Council must be comprised of at least 15 members, including one representative from the following: the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC); a parent training and information center established in relation to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); the Client Assistance Program (CAP); community rehabilitation program service providers; the American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Program; institutions of secondary or higher education responsible for the education of students with disabilities; the State of Georgia Board of Education; the Georgia Workforce Investment Board (WIA); a qualified vocational rehabilitation counselor; current or former applicants for, or recipients of, vocational rehabilitation services; representatives of disability advocacy groups representing individuals with physical, cognitive, sensory, and mental disabilities; and individuals with disabilities who have difficulty in representing themselves or are unable due to their disabilities to represent themselves; and four representatives of business, industry, and labor. In addition, ex-officio members are appointed as deemed pertinent by the membership. The Assistant Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services is an ongoing ex-officio, non-voting member.

The council has Mandated Responsibilities. The State Rehabilitation Council is part of the policy development of the Georgia Rehabilitation Services, Vocational Rehabilitation Program. Its key federal mandates focus on:

Reviewing and analyzing VR’s performance in the delivery of rehabilitation services, including its effectiveness and consumer satisfaction;

Collaborating in the development and review of State goals for the VR Program;

Providing advice and assistance to the VR Program about activities geared towards maximizing the delivery of services for the employment of Georgians with disabilities;

Assisting in the preparation of the VR Program Annual State Plan, and related updates, reports, needs assessments, and required evaluations;

Conducting forums or public hearings that are publicly announced, and are open and accessible to the public, including individuals with disabilities; and

Coordinating with other statewide councils on disability issues and initiatives.

The council is also directed to coordinate its efforts with other groups. To avoid duplication of efforts and to enhance the number of individuals served, the SRC cultivates productive relationships with, but not limited to, the following councils: the Statewide Independent Living

Council of Georgia, Inc. (SILC), the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities (DD Council), Mayors' Committees on Employment of People with Disabilities, the Georgia Mental Health Planning Council (MHP), the Georgia Workforce Investment Board (WIB), the Georgia Brain and Spinal Cord Injury Trust Commission, the Georgia Department of Labor's Employer Committee, the State Advisory Panel for Special Education, the National Federation of the Blind of Georgia, the Council on American Indian Concerns, the Georgia Independent Living Network and other Georgia service agencies.

The last section of the annual report is titled A Nod to the Past. . . A Look to the Future:

The SRC has had an exciting, busy and productive year. The council said good-bye to those who completed their dedicated service for the past several years, and welcomed new members who are eager to demonstrate their commitment to help empower Georgians with disabilities to achieve success in work and independence in their communities.

As noted in detail in other sections of this annual report, the council assisted VR staff in the preparation, development and monitoring of the annual State Plan and the Strategic Plan. The SRC devised and facilitated a series of public hearings across the state and ensured the public feedback from those hearings was incorporated into the VR strategic plan for 2008. Additionally, the SRC worked cooperatively with VR to implement comprehensive needs assessment activities that enabled the agency to better identify and address the vocational rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities in Georgia.

Additional activities included participating in VR policy development and review processes, representing the SRC during the RSA on-site monitoring review, Beta Testing the SRC On-Line Training Series, which was funded by RSA and produced by Georgia State University and San Diego State University, and discussing current transition policies and practices in light of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the planned reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

Lastly, employment not only provides individuals with disabilities independence and dignity; it also provides significant returns to Georgia's economy. Therefore, the council worked with legislators to secure adequate funding for VR to enhance services and employment opportunities for Georgians with disabilities.

There are many references in this report to this year being one of transition for the council, and the ramifications of that circumstance cannot be overstated. FY 2007 saw a significant change in composition of the SRC – all but three members were replaced with new appointments. The size of the council also grew from 16 to 21, with more representation from the business sector to help maintain focus on employment. Moreover, while that meant a tremendous amount of training and orientation on the part of staff, it was offset by the gains new members brought in intellectual capital, business acumen and political savvy.

Individually and collectively the new SRC members will continue to uphold the 2007 goals: to improve marketing and customer service to employers who hire people with disabilities; to

advocate for awarding regular diplomas to students with disabilities; to assess existing transition policies.

The new council is also in full agreement with the four 110 Program goals submitted in the SFY 2008 State Plan: to assist people with disabilities to go to work; to enhance services to unserved and underserved populations; to enhance transition services for students with disabilities; and to help employers meet their human resources needs.

That said, the new council also recognizes it has a steep learning curve and aims to solidify specific goals and objectives for 2008 based on the knowledge and talent of its members, the feedback from the public hearings and an ever-increasing understanding of the public vocational rehabilitation system in Georgia.

As a first step, small groups of SRC members visited each region of the VR program, as well as the Roosevelt Warm Springs VRU and Cave Spring Rehabilitation Center campuses, and shared their observations with the entire council.

The new council subsequently identified five priority focus areas that will shape the way it approaches its work: Educate, Collaborate, Advocate, Monitor & Oversee, and Feedback & Report.

It is within this framework that the new Georgia SRC will seek to lead with integrity, accountability and innovation, and act with the intent to help create an environment where all people have an opportunity to express their talents.