

DORS-MRSC 2020 Public Meeting Notes

The Maryland State Rehabilitation Council (MSRC) and DORS continually assess the rehabilitation and career needs of Maryland citizens with disabilities. As part of this assessment, DORS and the MSRC hold annual public meetings.

DORS and the MSRC held two virtual public meetings in 2020: on June 22nd at 4:00 PM and on June 25th at 10:00 AM, and approximately 140 people attended. Presenters included DORS Director, Scott Dennis, Office of Field Services Director, Jody Boone, Office for Blindness and Vision Services, Toni March, Workforce & Technology Center Director, Jean Jackson, Manager of Quality Assurance, Policy & Planning, Patrick Peto, and Staff Specialist for Transition & Supported Employment, Jill Pierce. The main theme of the 2020 Public Meetings is that DORS is "open for business!"

On March 12, 2020, DORS staff were sent home when Governor Hogan elevated State operations to Level II of the pandemic attendance and leave policy, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By the following Monday, most DORS staff were teleworking and, within days we had adapted to providing most services virtually.

For the first several weeks, DORS managers and management information systems staff were working to get all staff set up to work in a virtual environment.

We had long discussed how to do more in an all-electronic environment, now our hands were forced. So, the saying *Necessity is the Mother of Invention*, has been true in our transition and transformation.

We have developing new policies both internal and external to describe a new set of procedures, including:

- Approval of electronic signatures
- Web portals for providers and vendors to submit reports and invoices
- Virtual methods to allow counselors to meet with consumers and providers that keep the cases moving forward.

Other virtual services such as assessments, job fairs/clubs, and job placement assistance were quickly developed and put into place.

An analysis of these new virtual services shows that antidotal feedback has been positive, with service providers reporting that they are able to supply some services more efficiently.

We plan to conduct a survey in the near future of providers, clients, and counselors to get their feedback on the use of virtual services as a means of doing business going forward.

With Governor Hogan's June 3rd announcement of the gradual reopening of State government, DORS is evaluating all offices to see how we can comply with the CDC guidelines. Our office spaces are generally not set up for social distancing, therefore once reopening starts, it would be by appointment only and the office would have a small contingency of staff at any one time. We will continue to post reopening information on our website.

We know that FY 2021 will be a challenging year due to COVID-19, and we expect that our State funding will be reduced. However, at this point, we do not know how much and we are not sure what, if any, impact those reductions will have on our Maintenance of Effort or 4 to 1 Match.

As a result of the growth of [Pre-Employment Transition Services](#) (Pre-ETS), DORS has had to shift staff from the VR program to the Pre-ETS program. As such, we no longer have the human resources available to manage both programs. [Category 2 is fully closed](#) now due to increase in Pre-ETS,

Office of Field Services

The DORS [Office of Field Services](#) (OFS) quickly altered procedures and worked out many complicated details to ensure that OFS and its community partners could continue to provide quality customer service to students and consumers.

Many of the processes that were implemented to accommodate working remotely have improved the handling and timing of services, particularly the accounts payable process.

Just before the transition to telework, OFS' Montgomery County Transitioning Youth unit had been formed. It proceeded to open virtually and has already processed hundreds of referrals. Since the new unit has some vacant counselor positions staff from the DORS Workforce & Technology Center (WTC) have been helping with caseloads.

Funding authorizations for some for in-person vocational rehabilitation (VR) services, provided outside of DORS offices, will begin on July 1st and the services may begin on July 6th.

DORS has issued guidelines for in-person services for providers and vendors. CDC guidelines must be adhered to, requiring:

- Social Distancing
- Limiting access to areas
- Wearing of Mask
- Sanitation of areas

DORS offices will not be available to outside providers and vendors.

The Reaching Independence through Self Employment (RISE) Program is back. A Request for Proposal and the bid process has been completed, and a contract was finalized with Psychometric Solutions, LLC. Virtual services have begun and preliminary review of consumer business plans is underway.

In order to meet the US Department of Education Rehabilitation's Services Administration reporting requirements and the measurable skills gains goal of 20%, OFS is working with local school systems to develop processes for obtaining grades for the students served.

Office for Blindness & Vision Services

DORS' [Office for Blindness & Vision Services](#) (OBVS) also adapted quickly to providing services virtually, with 507 people in the ILOB program and 893 people in the VR program

OBVS staff are taking applications and doing interviews on the phone, and determining eligibility and developing plans through phone or virtual interviews.

New virtual services include: Blindness Basics, which is a series of virtual sessions designed to introduce individuals to basic blindness skills and tips. OBVS affiliated with WTC are providing: Career Life Planning, Virtual interviewing, Resume Development, assessments, and Pre-ETS, including mentoring and Explore Work.

The OBVS [Independent Living Older Blind](#) (ILOB) program is continuing to take applications, determine eligibility, and develop plans. ILOB staff are not going into homes, but are doing interviews and assessments virtually.

The [Maryland Business Enterprise for the Blind](#) (BEP) has seen 75 % of its vendors shut down their operations due to COVID-19. BEP staff have been providing information and support for vendors as they apply for benefits, unemployment, and small business assistance, and are working with some vendors to develop reopening plans.

Workforce & Technology Center

Services through DORS [Workforce & Technology Center](#) (WTC) Career & Technology are continuing virtually, including:

- An electronic curriculum for Automotive Training
- Online Office Technology lectures
- Virtual GED and Driver's Permit tutoring and Driver's Education Class
- Vehicle Modification services

- Residential Modification services
- Autism Services
- Low-Vision Support Group
- Assistive Technology assessments, training, technical assistance, and computer quotes
- Worksite services for consumers and employers
- Individual Computer Skills Development training
- Pre-ETS Summer Programs
- Deaf/Hard of Hearing programs
- Behavioral Health Services, support groups, addictions assessments and counseling

WTC has also provided some "Virtual Tour" presentations for school personnel, parents, and students using Google Hangouts.

Pre-Employment Transition Services

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, [Pre-ETS](#) have continued in a new virtual environment and we have been able to maintain four out of the five services categories, with the exception of work-based learning services.

DORS transition counselors continue to collaborate with partners to prepare students for the future world of work or post-secondary education by providing and/or coordinating virtual Pre-ETS through our providers. Including partnering with more than twenty providers to expand virtual Pre-ETS through the Explore-Work program.

Although many Pre-ETS are being offered virtually, DORS has suspended support of on-site work experiences for students until further notice.

For now, DORS is continuing to offer only offering virtual Pre-ETS, but we are closely monitoring schools' recovery plans and are working internally on what the future of Pre-ETS will look like and how students will be supported through DORS funded Pre-ETS this fall.