

## **Rehabilitation Council of Texas (RCT)**

**August 7-8, 2025**

**2222 West Braker Lane**

**Austin, TX 78758**

**In person and via Zoom**

Day 1: <https://youtu.be/4hkIdlF71gM>

Day 2: [https://youtu.be/\\_xSJEUakhkY](https://youtu.be/_xSJEUakhkY)

### **Council Members Present**

Gennadiy Goldenshteyn, Chair, Dallas

Peggy Schmidt, Vice Chair, Lucas

Glenda Born, Austin

Mark Baird, San Angelo

Jennifer Clouse, Temple

Norine Gill, Taylor Lake Village (Virtually)

Melva Henderson, Dallas

Erica Kress, Aubrey

Tammy Martin, Austin

Michele Norris, LaPorte

Jordan Smelley, Burleson

Karen Stanfill, Houston

### **Council Members Absent**

Emily Robinson, Pflugerville

Daniel Solcher, Allen

Kiffany Jefferson, Rowlett

Michele Harper, San Marcos

Shannon Rosson, Bedford

### **TWC Employees Attendance as Panelist:**

Melinda Paninski, Christopher Speckhard, Jamie Haywood, Sara Weems, Daniel Prado, Shelly Caillouet, Lisa Godwin, Karen Hess, Elyse Luke, David Johnston, Elsa Y Perez, Michael Britt, Summer Robinson

**Public Attendance: Onsite 3 Virtual 124**

**Thursday, August 7, 2025**

**Welcome (Gennadiy Goldenshteyn, RCT Chair):**

- The Chair welcomed attendees and highlighted the meeting's relocation to Disability Rights Texas as symbolic of resilience and partnerships.
- Public comment sign-ups would be accepted until 3:30 PM Central Time.

## **Legislative Session Update/Government Relations (Michael Britt, TWC):**

- The Texas Legislature appropriated approximately \$2.9 billion (FY26) and \$3 billion (FY27) for TWC, including general revenue funding to fully match the federal vocational rehabilitation grant and additional funds for older individuals who are blind (\$9.4 million) and senior independent programs (\$1 million).
- House Bill 2791 preserved TWC's procurement authority for VR goods and services and expanded it, allowing direct negotiations with vendors (initially requested for hospitals) if open enrollment processes are unsuccessful.
- The legislature tracked about 1100 bills, with only 20 adjacent to the VR program and House Bill 2791 having any direct impact to the program. No bills passed specifically that made any changes to the VR program other than those that we requested so it's all good news for the VR program.
- A special session is underway, with no direct impact on TWC anticipated so far, but disaster preparedness and education alignment to workforce are being monitored.
- Federal funding runs out at the end of September, there are 12 appropriation titles in the US federal budget, and Congress is currently in recess and will work to pass appropriations titles upon return, potentially through continuing resolutions. Senate has passed Labor H bill, keeping funding largely level.
- In response to a question about state funds allocated for the federal match, Britt stated that the state money stays in the program even if the federal money does not fully come through, but the state allocation may be adjusted in the future.
- Federal leadership changes at the Department of Education, RSA, and Social Security Administration are being tracked, with the potential elimination of the Department of Education being a key concern, but nothing is imminent.
- The supplemental funding requested for the current fiscal year was processed in time to draw down the full federal match and actively being used within the service delivery system now.

## **TWC Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Budget Update (Scott McCune, Deputy Director of Program Operations):**

- An additional \$70 million was added to the budget beginning in May, resolving previous funding concerns.
- Robinson stated she was able to meet with VR managers to give recommendations on budgets and helped give recommendations to what they could do and what to communicate.
- Robinson and Martin stated they would evaluate regions to determine if some may need additional funds, so they would be able to move unused funds to other regions.
- Regional client services budgets as of the end of May were detailed, with significant variations in available funds.
- Client service expenditures by category (postsecondary education, pre-ETS, hearing aids, assessments, supported employment, orthotics/prosthetics, etc.) were reviewed, with percentages of customers served compared to the prior year.
  - Several council members were alarmed by the low percentage for orthotics and prosthetics and were worried the system could be turning customers off.
  - PreETS are low due to the end of the school year for 2025
- The discussion included comparable benefits, encumbrances, and the complexities of tracking expenses across fiscal years. There is a 2 year grace period to expend funds.
- The distribution plan for 2026 will be modified, shifting to a federal fiscal year alignment, with initial allocations prioritized for Pre-ETS.
- The whole senior management team has really been focusing on how we can make sure that we utilize every dollar to the best of our ability.
- A discussion on PCG rates and the desire to implement them in fiscal year 2026 but waiting on the outcome of the federal budget.
- Robinson indicated she has experience in the field as a counselor, so was able to communicate and give counselor to staff translation to get what they needed.

## **VR Division Report (Tammy Martin, Director, VR Division, TWC):**

- Scott McCune moved to a senior advisor position. David Johnston will serve as interim Deputy Division Director of Program Operations. Welcome back.
- Karen Thomas, former Executive Assistant, retired, and Monica Sayen was hired as Executive Assistant starting Monday.

- Extensive water damage to Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center due to a flood, anticipated to be closed for about a month.
- RSA 2023 monitoring Corrective Action Plan has officially closed out.
- Senate Appropriations Committee recommended \$4.6 billion for Rehabilitation Services; the language would prevent the dismantling of the Department of Education. That also includes a cost of living.
- Some of the proposals were having zero funding in 2026, specifically for programs, the disability innovation fund, the client assistance state grant, the training programs and demonstration and training programs.
- Monitor progress on state plan goals:
  - **Goal 1 (Recruit and Retain VR Staff):**
    - Implemented merit recognition plan, career ladder promotions, employee recognition, LEAD, and Pathways academies.
    - A counselor provided feedback, "counselors need to communicate with their customers"
    - There are 244 who were eligible for a career ladder promotion comparison to 196 for FY'24
    - Reduce the paperwork for what is submitted and streamline and improve the time for hiring.
    - There was a community of practice for staff and grassroots efforts for working to their recommendations and wanting a community of practice.
  - **Goal 2 (Improve Provider Recruitment, Retention, and Support):**
    - Continued regional and quarterly provider meetings.
    - House Bill 2791 passage allows direct negotiations with providers.
    - Review payment rates to ensure they are competitive and equitable, dependent upon implementation of PCG rates.
  - **Goal 3 (Streamline Policy, Procedures, and Approval Processes):**
    - VRSM redesign was published, the policy team is now working on revisions
    - Approval for a VR Services guide that IT is working to implement
  - Some council members, in response to the VR Services Guide, it is important to be accessibility and consent.
  - **Goal 4 (Improve and Develop Additional User-Friendly Resources to Maximize Customer Choice):**
    - Provide training and resources for staff on labor market information and tools

- Update training, tools, and policies related to work incentive programs and benefits counseling
- Continue workforce collaboration and service coordination. The pilot ended in July
  - The group is finalizing a customer journey map to help individuals navigate services and it's expected to be ready by November 2025.
- **Goal 5 (Provide VR Staff with Knowledge and Improve System Capacity to Enhance Service Delivery to Customers):**
  - Provide additional training and resources for VR staff to strengthen and increase expertise and specialization, Employment first policy, work being done with the Tri agency work group, peer specialist training and endorsement, Deaf and Hard of Hearing training in May.
  - Develop, pilot, and replicate innovative approaches to implementing the VR process (ongoing Region 4 and Region 6 pilots).
- **Goal 6 (Increase and Enhance Partnerships with Employers):**
  - Continue and expand efforts to raise awareness among employers of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.
  - Support collaboration between VR business relations coordinators and business service units at local Workforce Development boards.
  - Provide professional development training opportunities to the VR Division Business Relations teams.
  - Implement and expand employer partnerships
  - Diversify and increase the numbers of employers who hire, retain individuals with disabilities
- In July, it looked like in the pilot that there were some increases of services from work force to VR.
- It may be better to not focus on budget and have more of a training to make customers successful.
- Several complaints were tracked from VR, so staff were able to identify certain areas of concern.

## **VR Performance Update (Geoffrey Miller, Director of A&E and Christopher Speckhard, Manager VRGIS Team):**

- Detailed updates and progress on complying with state plan goals, strategies and success measures (previously described).
- Review of performance measures and explanation of various levels and tiers.

- Discussion of general updates and then walk through the update and progress that we've made on complying with state plan goals, strategies, and success measures.

**Election of Officers:** Peggy Schmidt and Jordan Smelley nominated for the Chair and Vice-Chair roles

**Strategic Planning Update:** A strategic planning session is scheduled for September 8-9 in Austin. Committee chairs should review their strategic plans for the upcoming year.

## **Meeting Recess for the day**

**Friday, August 8, 2025**

**Welcome and Introductions (Gennadiy Goldenshteyn, Chair):** Recapped the previous day's discussions and outlined the plan for today's meeting.

**TWC Commissioners Remarks (Commissioner Trevino):** Commended the council's work, offered support and highlighted the agency's attention to federal funding uncertainties.

**Criss Cole Rehabilitation Center (CCRC) Overview (Julie Johnson, CCRC Director):**

- Provided an update on the flooding incident, highlighting staff efforts to ensure student safety and transition to virtual training.
- Reported serving 178 students this year.
- Discussed successful outreach programs including Tour Palooza and community partnerships.
- The Deputy Director, Training Services Manager, and Career Guidance Supervisor discussed the program, which has been innovating during the year and highlighted the career journey and how the group is connecting.

**Blind and Visually Impaired Outcomes: Results of Analysis and Recommendations for Improvement (Juanita Barker, Deputy Director Department Blind Services and Chris Speckhard, Manager VRGIS Team):**

- Presentation on BVI participants, prevalence, referral source, demographics, and success rates.
  - An issue was pointed out, "The newest version of the closure letter it says that they are closing your case as rehabilitated... You are marking the case as rehabilitated.".
- Highlighted a heat map showing prevalence rates of vision loss across Texas counties.
- Detailed analysis of median earnings, retention rates, and occupational outcomes.
- Presented data and the work with the Tri agency.
- Detailed plans around career pathways that each customer is facing, the Tri agency, and those with sensory losses.
- Proposed potential data science approaches to replicate successful services, including cluster analysis, market basket analysis, and regression modeling, and looked how they could help support and replicate the program.

## **2026 CSNA Planning (Jennifer Clouse, Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Chair):**

- Proposed dates and locations for six regional town hall meetings in February, March, April and May.
- Discussed considering varying times and offering the option for hybrid meetings.
- Noted that the committee needed to look at a broader way of potential changes that might better serve their customers.

## **Liaison Reports:**

- **Client Assistance Program (CAP) (Karen Stanfill):** A new CAP representative, Jeannie, has been identified pending gubernatorial appointment.
- **Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) (Peggy Schmidt):** Focused on the need to disseminate information from quarterly provider calls to all providers, as attendance is often limited due to scheduling conflicts.
- **State Independent Living Council (SILC) (Melva Henderson):** A strategic planning meeting will be held virtually.
- **The other two reports of TEA and TWIC was asked to be read from the Binder.**

## **Committee Reports:**

- **Policy, Procedure & Personnel Development (Karen Stanfill, Chair):** Self-employment policies were being revised. Also discussed the master's program, vacancy, the increased population in referrals of customers with autism with lots of issues to be looked at.
- **Membership and Education (Jordan Smelley, Chair):** Addressed applicants, reappointments, coordinated professional development, what it looked like.
- **Customer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment (Jennifer Clouse, Chair):** Covered CSNA data with a 21% survey response from all quarter. Closed cases data, questions added, new questions, benefit enrollment.

**RCT Officer Voting Results:** Jordan Smelley elected Vice-Chair, Peggy Schmidt elected Chair.

### **Council Business:**

- Approved May 2025 meeting minutes with one addition suggested by council member, Karen.
- Reviewed budget report.

### **Public Comment:**

- Liana De la Cruz expressed concerns about declining Pre-ETS and self-employment referrals, the lack of Deaf premiums on services and the difficulty of using SARA by hard of hearing individuals with lower reading levels.
- Amanda Bowdoin shared a negative experience with the summer work program for a DeafBlind son due to delays and poor communication, she was an advocate for her son.
- Sabrina González urged the council to discuss the pause on referrals to comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs due to some clients not being able to have benefits paid.

### **Adjourn**