



Department of Rehabilitation Services  
Testimony before the Appropriations Committee

February 27, 2015

Good afternoon Senator Bye, Representative Walker and distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Amy Porter, Commissioner of the Department of Rehabilitation Services, and I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Governor Malloy's proposed budget for the Fiscal Years 16 and 17 biennium.

**Budget**

The department currently has a combined federal and state budget of approximately \$76 million. Our services are diverse and our funding reflects this diversity. On a state level, we currently have funding appropriated through the General Fund and the Workers' Compensation Fund. On a federal level, we receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education, the Social Security Administration, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and the Federal Communications Commission. The distribution of our budget is about one quarter state funds and three quarters federal funds. All of our programs and services assist individuals with disabilities to live, learn and work independently.

We understand the challenge that the Governor and the legislature face in developing this biennial budget and we would like to describe some of the proposed changes within the DORS state budget.

**Reduce Funding for Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

The department receives state dollars in order to draw down federal dollars for two Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Programs, one serving individuals who are blind and one serving individuals with all other disabilities. This is a federal formula grant program, with a matching ratio for the program of 78.7% federal with a 21.3% required state match. Despite the proposed reduction in funding, we will still be able to meet the match requirements of our federal grants and maintain current services. Access to reallocation dollars from the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) will be restricted, which could impact our ability to expand services. Reallocation dollars brought in to Connecticut from the USDOE have totaled nearly \$35 million over the last five years.

The program also has a Maintenance of Effort (MOE) requirement. The department will proactively manage our spending to avoid or minimize any MOE penalties incurred as a result of this reduction.

**Eliminate State Funds for Independent Living Centers**

The department has provided state funding in the past to contribute to the operation of five Centers for Independent Living across the state. These centers provide an array of services for individuals with disabilities, including peer counseling, independent living skills training, advocacy and information and referral services. The proposed budget eliminates the state funding of \$502,246. Each of the five

centers receives federal funds, with an estimated total of approximately one million dollars for FFY15. The majority of these federal funds are awarded directly to each of the Centers, with a smaller amount being administered by our department and awarded to the centers through contracts.

#### **Reduce Funding for Employment Opportunities Program**

The Governor's budget combines and reduces the funding of two different programs within the department, the Employment Opportunities Program (EOP) and the Enhanced Employment Opportunities Program (EEOP). This consolidation addresses a departmental need to allocate a very small portion of staff time to the management of the EOP program.

EOP enables individuals with the most significant disabilities to engage in and retain integrated, competitive employment. The EOP assists individuals with a wide range of significant physical, mental and intellectual disabilities who are otherwise not eligible for DDS or DMHAS services. These clients, after completing a plan of intensive vocational rehabilitation, receive long-term employment supports in order to maintain ongoing, competitive employment. The availability of EOP services, in the absence of any other long-term funding source, is required for these individuals to access the vocational rehabilitation services provided by DORS. EOP currently serves approximately 280 persons annually.

EEOP was created subsequent to the closing of the BESB Industries sheltered workshop in 2003; its purpose is to provide alternative employment options for the 92 clients who were displaced by the closing of the workshop. Subsequent legislation expanded the authority of this program to allow for these clients to receive state employee health insurance, with this account covering the employer share of the monthly premiums. Since 2003, many of the original 92 clients have left the work force due to age, medical issues or other circumstances. Today, this account funds 18 former clients of BESB Industries in community rehabilitation provider employment settings; these individuals are employed with supports at competitive wages. The account also covers the employer share of health insurance premiums for 22 of the original 92 clients.

The total reduction within this appropriation is \$165,000. We will apply \$40,000 of this reduction to the EOP program and the remaining \$125,000 to EEOP. The department can manage these reductions through attrition, and, if necessary, we reserve the option to establish and maintain a waiting list for EOP services.

#### **Eliminate Funding for Connecticut Radio Information Services**

The Connecticut Radio Information Service (CRIS) is a private, non-profit organization that provides live and recorded voice audio reading to individuals whose disabilities make it difficult or impossible to directly access newspapers, magazines and related printed information. CRIS also provides news and current events radio programming from their studio to listeners across the state. The proposed budget eliminates the state contribution to this service. State funding accounts for approximately 19 percent of the CRIS operating budget for SFY15.



### Reduce Funding for Supplementary Relief and Services

This account is used to purchase adaptive daily living aids to enable adults who are legally blind to remain safe and independent within their homes and communities. Items such as long white canes for safe travel, magnifying devices to help clients make the best use of their remaining vision, and adapted cooking aids to make it possible to safely prepare and cook meals with limited or no vision are examples of the purchases that are made from this account. Last fiscal year, the BESB Adult Services program served nearly 1,200 clients with blindness with adapted daily living devices purchased primarily by the Supplementary Relief and Services fund. The department can rely upon funds from other sources such as the Social Services Block Grant and the Older Americans who are Blind federal grant to cover the reduction that is proposed in this account.

### Annualize Rescissions

In Fiscal Year 15, there were rescissions in the following areas, which will be annualized for FY16 and 17:

- **Personal Services.** This line item had a \$50,000 rescission this year and this rescission will be annualized across the biennial budget. We currently have approximately 450 employees who provide an array of services, including direct services to about 15,000 individuals with disabilities, adjudication for approximately 42,000 disability claims, and sign language interpreting services to a wide range of federal, state, municipal and private entities. We also provide administrative support to the State Department on Aging. We will be able to maintain our staffing levels and will achieve the required savings moving forward through delays in hiring.
- **Other Expenses.** This line item had a \$40,000 rescission this year and this rescission will be annualized across the biennial budget. As a result of the hiring delays described above, we were able to delay some expenses associated with hiring for specific positions (fleet vehicles, fuel, cell phones, laptops, etc.). These savings allowed us to meet our rescission in the Other Expenses account for FY15, and we will continue to look for efficiencies to address the rescission moving forward.
- **CRIS Radio.** This line item had a \$4,162 rescission this year, and the Governor's budget proposes elimination of the remainder of the funding for this line item.
- **Independent Living.** This line item had a \$26,434 rescission this year, and the Governor's budget proposes elimination of the remainder of the funding for this line item.
- **Supplementary Relief and Services.** This program had a \$4,987 rescission this year, and this rescission will be annualized across the biennial budget. As described above, the department has other sources of funding at this time that it will use for the purchase of adaptive daily living aids.

### **Consolidate Children's Services Program Funding**

In order to create additional transparency, flexibility and efficiencies, the Governor's budget combines two funding sources for this program into one. This change will increase transparency by allocating the program's staffing resources in the same way as all of our other state funded programs. Salaries will be assigned to the program and fringe benefits will be assigned to the Office of the State Comptroller. This should provide a clear picture in relation to appropriations for this program.

The State uses this program as one of the ways to deliver accessible education to students who are blind or have visual impairments. For this low-incidence disability, school districts can either obtain teachers for students with visual impairments at no cost through the department, or they can hire their own teachers. If they choose to use the services of our department, we have a cadre of skilled teachers available for this purpose.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of the Governor's recommended biennial budget. I would be happy to answer any questions.