

DVR Town Hall Report

Services for the Blind/Visually Impaired

September, 2007

Beginning in July, 2007, DVR conducted a series of “town hall” meetings across the state for the purpose of gathering information, feedback and ideas from individuals who are blind or visually impaired regarding the quality of services provided by DVR. Notification of the meetings was sent to all Colorado Independent Living Centers, DVR offices, the National Federation of the Blind, the American Council for the Blind, as well as numerous other service and community organizations. Meetings were conducted in Grand Junction, Glenwood Springs, Greeley, Alamosa, Pueblo, Denver, Colorado Springs and Buena Vista and approximately 85 individuals participated in the meetings. The meetings were open to the public and conducted in the late afternoon/early evening to allow working individuals to attend. The meetings were conducted by a DVR team consisting of the Administrator of Field Services, the Manager of the Organizational and Staff Development Unit, and the DVR supervisor for the district in which the meeting was being held.

Throughout the state, several common issues emerged including transportation, assistive technology, employment, public awareness regarding the availability of services and the lack of independent-living-focused services for individuals who are elderly and blind/visually impaired. In addition, at most of the meetings, participants were eager to hear about the newly formed Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired, how the director and board will be selected, and what the Commission’s role will be. Finally, although not raised in the majority of the meetings, the lack of quality services for individuals who are deaf/blind was identified as an area of concern, specifically in the metropolitan Denver and Colorado Springs areas.

The following report provides a summary of each of the major topics raised and highlights specific examples of issues and solutions as they relate to the various geographic areas.

Transportation:

With the exception of Denver and Colorado Springs, transportation was identified as one of the most significant issues impacting individuals who are blind/visually impaired. In many areas, public transportation is nonexistent and where provided, schedules don’t meet the employment needs of the individuals in the community. Other types of transportation including private companies and taxi services, while available in some locations, can be extremely cost-prohibitive. Individuals in rural communities also discussed the need to better train transportation personnel about proper communication and interaction with individuals who are blind/visually impaired. Individuals participating in the meetings understand clearly that DVR does not have control over local transportation issues, however it is acknowledged that it is extremely difficult to receive effective vocational services and training and then not have the capacity to become employed because of lack of public transportation resources. In Buena Vista, it was suggested that CDHS support the proposed bus line running from Gunnison to Denver via Buena Vista and Salida five days a week. Contact information for the county commissioner involved in this effort was shared with DVR.

Assistive Technology:

Much discussion was held about the very complex area of assistive technology. Participants identified a need to adequately inform and train individuals who are blind/visually impaired about the availability of assistive technology equipment and how to effectively use it. There appears to be a lack of individuals who are appropriately skilled to conduct comprehensive assistive technology evaluations. It was recommended that DVR work closely with various community resources such as independent living centers and qualified vendors to concentrate more effort in this area. Participants also expressed the need to be able to access a comprehensive list of assistive technology devices and resources.

Employment

Much discussion occurred regarding the need for employers across the state to receive better information and education about hiring individuals who are blind/visually impaired. Employers need to be aware that an individual who is blind/visually impaired can perform work duties successfully and that many supports are available to them as employers. It was recommended that DVR work closely with employers to train them about the ability of individuals who are blind/visually impaired to work effectively.

Public Awareness Regarding the Availability of Services

Many participants across the state spoke of the need for DVR and other service resources and providers to be better known to the general public and specifically, to individuals with disabilities in Colorado. Groups discussed the manner in which they came to find DVR as primarily “word of mouth” and questioned why the program is not more visible and known to the public. As an example, during one of the meetings an individual attempted to locate a listing for DVR in the local phone book without any success. Suggestions were made regarding various professional and community groups and organizations with which DVR could better collaborate and educate regarding its programs and services.

Services for Individuals who are Elderly Blind/Visually Impaired

Many meeting attendees were themselves individuals who are elderly blind and expressed concern regarding the lack of non-vocationally-focused services to help them function independently on a day-to-day basis. Discussion occurred about the ability for DVR to provide services if the individual meets the criteria for establishing “homemaker” as a vocational outcome. However, this approach is not always the most appropriate for meeting the service needs of the elderly blind population. In the past, DVR has administered a program that provided elderly blind individuals services to assist them with activities such as shopping independently, reading their mail, and learning alternative communication strategies to stay connected to family and community. These services allowed many of the recipients to avoid assisted living communities and nursing homes and instead, continue to live independently in their communities. Unfortunately, this program was discontinued in 2003 due to loss of state funding.

Summary

In addition to the common topic areas described above, DVR had the opportunity to hear from many individuals about their personal experiences with local DVR offices and staff. After every

meeting, the local DVR supervisor remained available to provide one-one-one follow-up with individuals regarding their specific concerns about service provision.

Participants also shared a variety of opinions and suggestions regarding philosophies and methodologies for teaching individuals who are blind/visually impaired effective mobility skills and techniques. DVR will continue to ensure that consumers are fully informed of their choices and receive services that are uniquely designed for their individual situations and circumstances.

Regarding the identified lack of services available to individuals who are deaf/blind, DVR plans to further explore the scope and nature of the unique issues confronted by this population as they attempt to secure vocational rehabilitation services leading to an employment outcome. DVR will begin by examining existing data relative to the numbers of individuals who are deaf/blind currently being served by rehabilitation counselors and associated case outcomes. DVR will utilize a counselor in the metropolitan Denver area who specializes in working with this population to begin collaborating with other community service organizations and representatives such as the Helen Keller National Center and the Colorado Center for the Blind. Through this collaboration, DVR hopes to brainstorm, generate and implement solutions for conducting effective identification and outreach across the state as well as building better service resources for this population.

Conclusion

DVR looks forward to further exploring proposed solutions and continuing to improve the quality of services provided to Coloradoans who are blind/visually impaired. Many of the recommendations shared during the town hall meetings are ones DVR will implement immediately while others will require further research and collaboration to determine the best approaches to implementation. For example, DVR will incorporate the obtained feedback and input as current initiatives are being implemented such as the addition of an assistive technology specialist to serve customers statewide, the use of the newly hired Business Outreach Specialists to effectively train employers and the education and awareness programs DVR will be building and implementing to inform the public about DVR's mission and services. Issues requiring further research and collaboration include transportation and services for individuals who are elderly blind/visually impaired.

Finally, DVR recognizes the value of obtaining input, ideas and solutions from those individuals most affected by DVR programs and intends to continue to gather their feedback through various mechanisms in the future on an ongoing basis. These mechanisms may include additional town hall meetings, statewide focus groups, formal survey tools and ongoing encouragement by DVR staff to consumers and constituents for the provision of written feedback regarding service provision.