



## Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities December 10, 2025 – Meeting Minutes

### Meeting Location

Held virtually via Zoom.

### Call To Order

Tonya Gilchrist, Chair, called the meeting to order.

### Meeting Agenda Items

- 1. MD Department of Education, Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) Vocational Rehabilitation for all People with Disabilities and Updates for Services for People who are Blind/Low Vision and Deaf/Hard of Hearing – Toni March, Director of the Office for Blindness and Vision Services, DORS; Valarie Pridgen, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, DORS; Wendy Hill, MSW, Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Specialist for the Deaf, HOH, DeafBlind, DORS**

Valarie shared a [YouTube video](#) that explains the general services offered by DORS.

- DORS partners with people with disabilities to offer services that help them get ready to work, find a job, or stay employed.
- DORS employment services can include career assessment and counseling, assistive technology, job training, higher education and job placement.
- Many DORS counselors are specially trained to work with disabilities like being [deaf/hard-of-hearing](#), [blind](#), or having a [mental illness](#). Some DORS counselors work with [students](#).
- Start by filling out the form to [Request DORS Services](#).
- A DORS staff person will talk with you about DORS services and find out if you are [eligible](#) or qualified for services.

What Makes Someone "Eligible":

- You must have a physical or mental disability that seriously affects your ability to work. You must need DORS services to help you get or keep a job. If you get Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and/or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), you are presumed eligible for DORS services.
- Federal law requires that DORS' Vocational Rehabilitation program must serve people with the most significant disabilities first - this is called [Order of Selection](#). To comply with this law, DORS counselors determine the severity of the disability of individuals who are [eligible](#) for services, as follows: Category 1: Most Significant Disability; Category 2: Significant Disability; Category 3: Non-Severe Disability
- DORS will determine if you have a "significant," "most significant," or "non-severe" disability. A "significant disability" is one that makes it hard for you to function in [one or more](#) of these areas: the ability to walk; the ability to use your arms and hands; the ability to

talk; the ability to take care of your personal needs; the ability to get along with others; the ability to adapt to the workplace.

- If you are blind or deaf, have moderate or severe cognitive disabilities, or have epilepsy (and have not been seizure-free for two years), you automatically meet the definition of a "significant disability". Even if you have a "significant disability", there may be a [waiting list](#) for services.

Employment services can include career counseling; career assessment; college or career training; work-readiness training; assistive technology; job placement; job coaching; other support services; and [Pre-Employment Transition Services](#) (Pre-ETS), available to students with disabilities.

- DORS employment services, such as career counseling, skills assessments, referral and job placement, are provided at no cost to you. Other services are subject to a financial need determination process, which is reviewed annually. There is no cost to you or your family for Pre-ETS for students. However, due to funding limitations, DORS can only pay for the least expensive services or goods that will meet your needs. If you decide you want more expensive services or goods that cost more than DORS is allowed to pay, you will need to pay the difference.

If DORS cannot assist you at this time, an [American Job Center](#) (a.k.a. One-Stop), may have programs and services that could help you become employed. DORS staff are located within AJCs. There are additional resources for job seekers with disabilities in our [Job Seeking Tools](#).

**DORS Office for Blindness & Vision Services (OBVS)** oversees programs and services for individuals whose disability is vision loss. OBVS teachers, counselors and technical specialists are specially trained to help individuals who are blind, vision impaired, or deaf-blind. [View YouTube video](#).

The **Independent Living Older Blind (ILOB) Program** helps individuals who are 55 or older who are blind or have a vision impairment to live independently in their homes and communities. Examples of services may include training in how to manage personal care and household tasks; labeling and organizing personal care items clothing, appliances and medications; safe cooking techniques; referral to community resources and peer support groups. There is no upper age limit to take part in this program. Most people who receive ILOB services do not have an employment goal. The program serves many consumers with limited resources.

**Services for Students:** A Student with a disability is someone who meets these requirements: is enrolled in a secondary school (including home school or other alternative secondary education program), post-secondary education program or other recognized educational program, and has not graduated or withdrawn; is at least 14 years old but less than age 22; and has a disability documented with an Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 plan or medical records.

DORS offers two set of services for students with disabilities.

1. [Pre-Employment Transition Services](#) (Students ages 14 to 21) – Pre-ETS provide students with disabilities the opportunity to experience and explore the world of work. The five specific Pre-ETS services are Job Exploration Counseling; Instruction in Self-Advocacy; Counseling on Post-Secondary Education Opportunities; Workplace Readiness Training; and Work-Based Learning Experiences.
2. [Student Employment Services](#) (Students ages 14 to 21) – Student Employment Services are for students with disabilities who would like to receive Pre-ETS and also

obtain or prepare for meaningful employment and a successful career. A broad range of vocational rehabilitation services may be available to these students.

There are [eligibility](#) requirements for Student Employment Services/vocational rehabilitation services. DORS may support college/post-secondary education only under Student Employment Services. If you request Pre-ETS you may also request Student Employment Services at any time, particularly as a career pathway comes into focus or services beyond the five Pre-ETS are required. DORS provides these important student transition services in close partnership with the student, family, school staff, approved community rehabilitation providers (CRPs), and other important people in the student's life. Students enrolled in Vocational Rehabilitation can still receive Pre-ETS services.

The floor was opened for questions and comments.

- **There are some parents in the intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD) community that believe that jobs should be created specifically for individuals with I/DD, especially within Montgomery County Government.** Set aside employment and sheltered workshops are no longer legal in the state of Maryland. Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) became the standard many years ago. Per Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) regulations, competitive integrated employment outcomes under the Vocational Rehabilitation program must meet the following three criteria: (1) competitive earnings, (2) integrated location, and (3) opportunities for advancement. Community education is key.

DORS offers several ways for individuals to be work ready with Pre-ETS. DORS Rehabilitation Technology Services (RTS) staff provides customized assessments for individuals with disabilities to find them the appropriate AT to assist them with their employment goals. The team also provides training and technical support to individuals and groups on the use of the AT hardware and software. AT assessments and training may be held at WTC or in the individual's community. Equipment may be free of charge depending on their financial situation. DORS can also assist with tuition assistance.

- APPS (Autism Program Planning Success for Employment)** assists job seekers with Autism with self-determination and employment readiness skills. Pathways provides educational support services for people with Autism transitioning from high school to college. The DORS Pathways program is a collaboration between DORS and community colleges throughout the state. Currently, Pathways is offered at Anne Arundel Community College, Community College of Baltimore County, Howard Community College, Prince George Community College, College of Southern Maryland, and Montgomery College.
- Virtual College Autism Mentoring Program (VCAMP)** is a virtual mentoring and support service for consumers on the autism spectrum attending college and not participating in the Pathways program. This program is available to individuals attending either in-state or out-of-state two- or four-year colleges.

Individuals transitioning from high school must understand that they are not entitled to services once they exit the school system. Services are now based on eligibility, even for accommodations at the college level. DORS will review an individual's IEP and may start with diagnostic testing or career assessments. Staff will work with each individual to determine which training program fits their needs, which include work readiness trainings, DORS Workforce Technology Center, and community colleges.

Staff will work with individuals to determine what is an affordable college for them as well as what is the best fit to help them achieve their goal. They also need to understand the current job market is not the same as it was 10 years ago. DORS will help the individual find careers available in their area.

DORS has agreements with the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Administration (DDA) and the Maryland Behavioral Health Administration (BHA) so that funding and services are aligned. DORS provides initial work to get the person employed and then DDA and BHA take over with services.

- **Should parents who have children with I/DD contact DORS for an assessment?** Yes, if the child is over the age of 22 and out of high school. Staff will work with the individual to identify a reasonable goal to obtain a job in the community. It may take several job trials to find the right fit. DORS does work with a number of DDA providers who have expertise in providing job coaching and job development for individuals with I/DD.
- **Patricia Cochrane, Montgomery County Public Schools, reported MCPS works very closely with families and DORS Pre-ETS.** For students specifically with I/DD, DDA funding is acquired first so they can use employment services from DDA providers. Students are also encouraged to apply for vocational rehabilitation services through DORS so they can work together for those competitive employment opportunities in the community. Plans should be developed before high school ends. DORS attends IEP meetings along with family members, MCPS, Transition Support Teachers, and Coordination of Community Services providers. Students with severe I/DD should work with their TST to apply for DDA services.
- **DORS does have extended youth services for individuals until age 25.** DDA may have a long waiting list, but it is long term funding for life.

**Extended Services for Youth with Most Significant Disabilities** – Section 604(b)(2) of the Act, as amended by WIOA, mandates that the VR agency make available extended services for youth with the most significant disabilities for a period not to exceed four years or until the individual reaches age 25, whichever comes first. The Act defines “youth with a disability” in section 7(42) as an individual with a disability who is not younger than 14 years of age, and not older than 24 years of age. Extended Services may not be provided by DORS for individuals who are not youth with most significant disabilities.

## **2. James LeBlanc – Director of Community Impact, WorkSource Montgomery**

James reviewed a [PowerPoint presentation](#).

WorkSource Montgomery (WSM) does not have direct services for individuals with disabilities. Since WSM is federally funded, there are restrictions for services offered. WSM will work with their community network to help find community-based organizations that can provide more specified services. WSM offers a general operating grant through the Community Workforce Network (CWN) Grants Program, designed to support community-based provider organizations committed to directly serving Montgomery County residents. This program emphasizes support for populations facing significant barriers to economic mobility, such as immigrants, unhoused residents, disabled individuals, older adults, young adults, ex-offenders, and small business owners looking to scale their operations.

Consumers create an account on the Maryland Workforce Exchange, then assigned a career advisor and receive training services. WSM is measured on retention a year after placement.

WSM now offers a new [Federal Workers Resource Hub](#) for those affected by federal government layoffs and shutdowns.

The LYFE program is for Montgomery County residents age 16 to 24 currently not enrolled in school or formal education. It offers paid work experience with a \$400 a week stipend emphasizing career exploration and job readiness training. Consumers gain experience and continue to work with WSM to get permanent full-time employment.

The floor was opened to questions and comments.

- **Why should an individual be referred to WSM and not DORS?** WSM serves higher functioning people with disabilities. All individuals go through the intake process and orientation. If WSM is not the best fit, then services are identified through the CWN that will have the most impact on the individual.

### 3. **Fidos for Freedom – Diane Bernier, Executive Director**

Diane reviewed a PowerPoint presentation.

The floor was opened to questions and comments.

- **Are there challenges that an individual that uses a service dog can encounter?** There are ongoing issues with Uber and Lyft, which has resulted in litigation, as some drivers refuse to transport individuals with their service animals and that is against the law. MetroAccess is a better transportation option for an individual with a service animal. There can also be issues if the individual has a hidden disability. Public education is important.
- **Cindy LaBon reported that she was denied service from Uber and Lyft five times last week because of her service animal. Do Fidos for Freedom service animal handlers receive any kind of training?** Yes. Fidos for Freedom is an accredited member of Assistance Dogs International and follows their guidelines. They put service animal handlers through education and training including mock tests in public.

### **Updates on FY27 Priorities for the Year**

The Commission sent a follow-up letter to County Executive Marc Elrich and the County Council regarding that the County initiate and pass legislation for Universal Design features in new homes built in the County that would be in accordance with Prince George's County Universal Design legislation. The letter was also forwarded to the Commission on Aging.

The Commission can further discussion FY27 priorities at the Steering Committee meeting next week.

### **Other Updates**

Some Commissioner terms have expired, but they have been asked to stay on until they have been replaced. A vacancy notice has not been posted yet.

### **Review and Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes**

A motion was made to approve the November 2025 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the November 2025 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved as written.

[Approved minutes are available on the Commission's website.](#)

### **Updates – Ex-Officio Members, Commission Members**

Denise Isreal, Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT), reported that students, older adults 65+ and persons with disabilities can continue to ride Metrobus fare-free within Montgomery County, but only by tapping a valid Youth Cruiser SmarTrip, Senior SmarTrip, Reduced Fare SmarTrip or Metro Access SmarTrip card on the farebox. MCDOT will be participating in a County Executive Budget Forum at Leisure World as well as three events in December for students with disabilities where WMATA will provide discount cards and travel training.

Angela Luskey, Montgomery County Recreation (MCR), reported former County Councilmember Gabe Albornoz will be returning as Director of MCR next month. He is an advocate for people with disabilities. MCR is working to make a larger split between youth programs and adult programs to separate the ages. Angela also reported there will be a ballroom class for adults with Down Syndrome being offered at Leisure World in the future.

### **Next Meeting**

The next full Commission Meeting is Wednesday January 14 from 6 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. and will be held virtually via Zoom.

### **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 p.m.

### **Attendance**

#### **Voting Members Present**

- Shameen Anthanio-Williams
- Jennifer Berzok
- Tonya Gilchrist
- Karen Goss
- Tria Gray
- Leslie Green Lyles
- Cindy LaBon
- Ricardo Lopez
- Jamila Michael-Sobratti
- Deborah Rozell
- Teresa Villani

#### **Voting Members Absent**

- Azeb Adere
- Rebecca Murphy
- Mary Simons
- Christopher Sinsheimer
- John Whittle

#### **Ex-Officio Non-Voting Members Present**

- Jennene Blakely, Montgomery Parks
- Pat Cochrane, Montgomery County Public Schools
- Rebecca Grayson, Housing Opportunities Commission
- Candace Groudine, Human Rights Commission
- Elizabeth Lang, Department of Libraries
- Angela Luskey, Department of Recreation

#### **Ex-Officio Non-Voting Members Absent**

- Matthew Barkley, Department of General Services
- Denise Isreal, Department of Transportation
- Soumya Nukala, Office of Human Resources

#### **Commission Staff Present**

- Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison, Community Outreach Manager
- Carly Clem, Staff Support, Program Specialist II

**Public Attendees**

- Karen Morgret, Treatment & Learning Centers
- Stacey Ibekweh, Loving Support Center
- Tyler Folster, American Sign Language Interpreter
- Katie Wilson, American Sign Language Interpreter

**Guest Speakers**

- Toni March, Director of the Office for Blindness and Vision Services, DORS
- Valarie Pridgen, Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor, DORS
- Wendy Hill, MSW, Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Specialist for the Deaf, Hard of hearing, DeafBlind, DORS
- James LeBlanc, Director of Community Impact, WorkSource Montgomery
- Diane Bernier, Fidos for Freedom