Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired 2022 Summary of Public Comment and Agency Responses

During the fall of 2022, the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI) conducted two formal public meetings. The formal meetings were held using virtual meeting technology and in person. As in other years, these meetings provided stakeholders an opportunity to make comments regarding DBVI programs and services to assist the agency with strategic planning, development of agency policies and procedures, and implementation of services and supports to potentially eligible and eligible individuals who are blind, vision impaired, and deafblind. DBVI solicited input regarding the agency's three divisions: Services, Enterprises, and Administration.

Formal and informal meetings where public comment was received were held in conjunction with two consumer advocacy groups including the Virginia Chapters of the National Federation of the Blind State and the American Council of the Blind. During the 2022 season, DBVI also sought to provide students, youth, and parents with opportunities to make public comment during informal sessions held during the LIFE and Leap into Linux programs. It should also be noted that individuals can make public comment at any time during the year in writing, in person, or in conjunction with the State Rehabilitation Council which meets quarterly.

In the context of this document, "DBVI", "agency", and "department" refer to the Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired. "RT/IL" is the abbreviation for the Rehabilitation Teaching/Independent Living program. "VR" means the Vocational Rehabilitation Program. "VRCBVI" and "Center" refer to the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired.

Information regarding DBVI programs and services can be found at https://vdbvi.org/ or by calling 804-371-3140, toll free at 800-662-2155.

General Comments

Comment: Charity Reid and Mike Thelk in the Staunton Office do an excellent job serving people who are blind, vision impaired, and deafblind.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment.

Comment: This commenter recommends that individuals applying for services receive forms and other information prior to their appointment with DBVI.

Agency Response: DBVI generally sends forms and other materials to potential applicants in advance meetings electronically and in print. DBVI is committed to ensuring that documents are accessible for individuals who are blind vision impaired and deafblind and those with limited English proficiency.

Comment: I am a beneficiary of the services you provide. I have been very grateful over the years for the various services I have received. My most recent and notable was working as a Contract Closeout Specialist for DBVI.

I appreciate the program to train or retrain Contract Closeout Specialists. I have broadened my career and now work as a Contract Specialist for the federal government. My position allows me to provide for my family and support myself with a career not just a job.

When I was 17 DBVI had a career fair/ college get together at James Madison University. I shared a room with 3 girls my own age. I still have one of those girls as my Facebook friend. Connection was key for so many reasons. I had never met ANYONE like me. I realize this was expensive and might not have been continued however I think sponsoring smaller gatherings at key areas in the state can be economical and give guidance, assistance, and goals to youth that different futures are possible, and others are out there just like you with hopes and dream. Colleges or Universities might even be willing to pair with the agency to promote good will or a welcoming atmosphere where futures can be achieved. The same could apply for trades or partners in the community.

Second, I would like to encourage the availability of chat groups. So much information is out there. Technology has

opened the world to me and without it, things are harder. At the same time, it can be used for small groups of information sharing. Many services are out there. Many former recipients have program knowledge that could help others. This could be informal, volunteer or just parents or friends trying to support low vision or blind individuals.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment, for sharing some of your experiences, and for your suggestions.

Comment: What services exist for preschooler's who are blind or vision impaired?

Agency Response: Along with other DBVI services, the agency provides services and resources to infants, toddlers, and their families throughout Virginia. At the local level through DBVI's Regional Offices, an Education Coordinator can assess the child's needs and make recommendations for services and provide adaptive equipment, as appropriate. Education Services and Supports include, but are not limited to,

- Connecting families to the resources they need in their home communities,
- Assessment of a child's functional vision and other skills,
- Support to enhance the achievement of developmental milestones,
- Coaching families on helping their children develop the age-appropriate skills,

- Providing adaptive materials including tactile books, Large Print materials, manipulatives) and equipment such as Light Boxes,
- Providing information DBVI services in the community to possibly include referral to an Early Intervention program or assisting with transition into a public Pre-k school program, and
- Consulting services to Early Intervention and Pre-k staff and related service providers such as Teachers for the Visually Impaired, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, and Speech and Language Specialists.

For further information regarding Education Services, please contact DBVI at 804-371-3140 or toll free at 800-622-2155.

Comment: Financial literacy is very important for people who are blind. DBVI needs to actively integrate financial literacy into delivery of services.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. DBVI has identified financial literacy as a critical skill for individuals who are blind, vision impaired and deafblind. Subsequently, DBVI has been offering financial literacy programs since 2020. Currently, the agency collaborates with the Virginia Department of Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS), the Virginia Credit Union (VACU), and the Bradford Company to not only discuss financial wellness, but also the critical link of finances related to entering the world of work for individuals with disabilities.

For more information about DBVI's financial literacy programming, please contact Ms. Felicia Williams at (804) 371-3164 or felicia.williams@dbvi.virginia.gov.

Comment: Some agency staff don't understand or just don't care. Is there a way for counselors to be trained to understand various situations? Maybe it would be helpful if teachers and counselors were to understand where clients are coming from.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. DBVI hires highly trained college educated and skillful counselors and teachers who are well informed about vocational rehabilitation, workforce services, orientation and mobility instruction, low vision, education services, assistive technology, rehabilitation teaching, and deafblind services. In addition to the formal education requirement, the agency provides in-house training about blindness, medical aspects of blindness, and topics presented by other professionals in the field of blindness to ensure that agency rehabilitation teachers and vocational rehabilitation counselors can address an individual's specific needs.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors ensure that individuals actively participate in planning for and developing an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) and provide guidance so the individual can make an informed decision regarding the services they will receive as part of their IPE. DBVI encourages open communication between the individual being served and the Rehabilitation Teacher or Vocational Rehabilitation;

the first step if an individual feels they are not being heard is to talk to the teacher or counselor. If the individual feels that further resolution to their concern is needed, they are encouraged to reach out to the Regional Manager or Program Director of the office where the person is receiving services. DBVI values the relationships between agency staff and individuals who are seeking or receiving services; we want to hear from you.

Comment: What are the financial resources available for the purchase of assistive technology, especially when the technology is specific to a particular profession? It can be difficult to access some programs such as Ticket to Work. Can assistive technology be provided for people other than college students?

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act, DBVI is committed to ensuring that all individuals being served by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program have the assistive technology (AT) and support they need to enter and maintain employment. The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and the individual, along with DBVI's Rehabilitation Technology specialists, make determinations about what specific types of equipment and training will be needed for the individual to accomplish their vocational goal. AT is potentially available to individuals of all ages who are participating in the Vocational Rehabilitation program if the equipment is required for the individual to accomplish their vocational goal.

It can be challenging to access programs such as the Ticket to Work. To gather more information about the program, please contact Megan Hall, Director of Vocational Rehabilitation and Workforce Services at megan.hall@dbvi.virginia.gov.

Comment: What are some innovative ways that technology is being delivered on truly accessible platforms. What is the agency doing to make technology training more accessible?

Agency Comment: Tutoring through the Tutor Network is now mostly done virtually with Zoom since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Field offices and the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired are using virtual technology such as Zoom to deliver training, including the actual use of virtual technology. DBVI welcomes input to increase access to technology training. Please share suggestions with Dan Aunspach, at daniel.aunspach@dbvi.virginia.gov

Comment: What kind of data does the agency use to make data informed decisions? Is any research being done to determine whether agency programs are successful?

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. DBVI collects and uses many different types of data. The agency utilizes a case management system to house a database of information on individuals being served and

the programs the individuals participate in. DBVI uses the information in the case management system to report quarterly and annually on the federally funded vocational rehabilitation program and reviews and utilizes this information to improve the program and services. Review of this information is done in collaboration with DBVI's federal partners at the Rehabilitation Services Agency (RSA). DBVI also reports and reviews data annually for several other programs. In addition, as part of program evaluation efforts, DBVI collects consumer satisfaction information on several different programs. The feedback provided from individuals being served is used to improve programs and service delivery. DBVI performs program evaluation on new programs and initiatives to determine if program goals are met. The agency practices ongoing data collection and analysis to provide valuable information which helps to inform decisions made by agency leadership.

Comment: How many employees are blind or vision impaired? And, when someone is hired to work for DBVI, is the person trained in low vision.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. It is important to note that employees are not required to disclosed whether they have a disability, including whether they have blindness, visual impairment, or deafblind. DBVI estimates that, at any given time, between 20 to 40% of agency employees have vision loss. New employees receive exposure to low vision services during their orientation to the agency. More in depth training is

available as needed or requested. Staff orientation to low vision typically occurs in DBVI's regional offices.

Comments about Vocational Rehabilitation Services including Pre-Employment Transition, and Transition Services

Comment: Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors should come into the schools more often to see students in their home communities.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. DBVI Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors are encouraged to develop positive working relationships with the local education agencies within their assigned work areas. Often, DBVI is not always informed of the scheduling of critical meetings surrounding the transition plans for students they are working with; it is very helpful when students or parents share information about meetings with local education agencies.

DBVI continues to develop good communication with local education agencies throughout the Commonwealth and will certainly review strategic plans and interagency agreements to enhance communication between DBVI and school divisions. Please reach out to the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor when the student or parent becomes aware of scheduled events where DBVI could add support and collaboration as the student moves

through the transition from high school to post-secondary opportunities,

Comment: DBVI should ensure that everyone receiving services have the email addresses of their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. It is customary for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors to provide their full contact information including phone number, fax number, and email address. However, DBVI acknowledges that there may be times when this information is not readily available. DBVI encourages individuals to reach out to their regional office as listed at https://www.dbvi.virginia.gov/apps/dbviloc/Offices.aspx

Comment: Students and youth participating in agency programs want accessible documents with large print or braille when written material is shared. Additionally, they want large print and braille labels outside of rooms to identify spaces wherever programs are held.

Agency Response: Thank you for this comment. DBVI can provide large print or braille materials upon request for any program or service. Additionally, the agency will ensure that large print and braille labels are used to identify meeting spaces when programs are held.

Comment: Students appreciate the LIFE and Leap into Linux programs, receiving computers, and other devices they receive from DBVI that help them learn.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment.

Comment: How can students and youth carry over the independent living skills and confidence they learned during Leap into Linux and LIFE back home into the community? Students go back home and then lack the opportunity to learn more at home. Parents want their student to be safe and independent, but parents and students don't know how to operationalize what they learned at Super Summer Camp or other programs at home. Summer programs are like mountain top experiences and then coming home is a significant let down.

Agency Response: Thank you for this comment which helps the agency to understand the need for a more concerted effort by the agency to link students and youth with DBVI resources in their home communities.

Several times during the year, DBVI provides programs that are family focused and include parents providing opportunities for the agency and families to work together to identify next steps to put learning into action. One example is the partnership between DBVI and I'm Determined which provides resources to help students communicate their needs, establish independence, and find their voice to self-advocate.

Additionally, DBVI Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) programs are offered in a variety of formats, including virtually, with the agency being intentional about

providing programs in a variety of venues and locations throughout the Commonwealth.

It should also be noted that the conclusion of the LIFE program conducted at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired (VRCBVI), staff meets with students and parents separately to discuss various ways that students can continue putting into practice the skills they have learned during the LIFE program. Emphasis is placed on how parents can support student's efforts at home. Students also can build networks with one another and with VRCBVI staff, so that when they go home, they have a support team with whom they communicate with and receive encouragement. VRCBVI provides the final LIFE program report to each participant's Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor and parents. Parents are encouraged to share the recommendations in the report with the student's school, so school staff are aware of what the student has learned and what they need to continue learning. Parents are also encouraged to research and become involved as appropriate in consumer organizations for the blind, so that they and their students have access to positive, blind role models.

Comment: There should be more communication between Teachers for the Visually Impaired, DBVI Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, students, and student's parents.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. DBVI strives to communicate with students, agency staff, and Teachers for the Visually Impaired throughout the student's primary and secondary education. DBVI Education Coordinators facilitate the communication from the Teacher for the Visually Impaired and Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors. Upon acceptance into the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, students and their parents are encouraged to maintain regular and consistent communication with their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to discuss ways that the agency can lend support and collaboration as the student transitions from high school to post-secondary education or training. DBVI also shares information regarding upcoming agency events, programs, and services with all Teachers for the Visually Impaired to encourage student participation in transition services once the student turns age 14.

Comment: Some students don't get recommended to participate in programs at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired. Why does this happen?

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. All applications to the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired (VRCBVI) are reviewed by VRCBVI administrators, relevant DBVI Program Directors, and the Deputy Commissioner for Services. There could be several reasons that an individual may not be

recommended for a particular program. One example is that each program has a maximum number of participants. If VRCBVI receives more applications than available spots in a particular program, applicants may be placed on a waiting list DBVI encourages individuals who were not selected to attend a program of their choice to reach out to their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor to determine the best next steps to take in pursuit of their Vocational Goal.

Comment: What plans does DBVI have to make transition services smoother for individuals in post-secondary programs when the student has received little to no DBVI services in the past?

Agency Response: Thank you for your question. As part of an overall strategy to provide quality transition services for students, DBVI has added two positions that are solely dedicated to transition services. These positions, the Pre-**Employment Transition Services and Career Pathway** Coordinator and the Pre-Employment Transition Specialist focus on facilitating transition services for students. In general, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors strive to foster good communication and services with students as early as the age of 14 to lay the foundation for successful transition to post-secondary education, training, or employment. Students who feel they are not receiving their desired level of transition services are encouraged to reach out to their Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor. Students can also talk with the Regional Manager in the office where they are served. Contact information can be located at https://www.dbvi.virginia.gov/apps/dbviloc/ or by calling the DBVI Headquarters in Richmond at (804) 371-3140 or toll free at 800-622-2155.

Comment: The process for receiving help for students making post-secondary education choices is challenging and too complicated. Often people don't get jobs in the area in which they train. More flexibility is needed to help students become successful in employment in the areas in which they are trained.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment.

Comments about DBVI Communications

Comment: Information regarding public meetings should be posted in advance of the meetings. Webinar or Teams video opportunities should be provided. Meetings should be offered more opportunities including evening hours and at least one Saturday if DBVI really wants to hear from folks. DBVI does the blind and vision impaired community a dis-service by not announcing public meetings sooner.

Agency Response: This comment was received following the announcement of the DBVI meeting schedule on GovDelivery. DBVI is required to post public meeting announcements on the Virginia Town Hall two weeks prior to an actual meeting to provide the public with adequate notification for the public to participate; DBVI follows this practice routinely. The meeting announcements are updated as public meetings are added to the schedule.

During the 2022 season, DBVI conducted formal public meetings during a weekday and on a Friday night. Informal comments were taken on a Saturday in conjunction with a consumer group meeting and on two evenings during the LIFE program for students and youth. Public comment can be made at any time by contacting Susan K. Davis, Senior Policy Analyst (susan.davis@dbvi.virginia.gov), during quarterly State Rehabilitation Council meetings, or at other venues or during other meetings upon request.

Comment: Consider using social media as a mechanism to gather public comment especially with specific groups of people like consumer advocacy groups. Or using email that targets specific groups by age and program.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. These are excellent ideas.

Comment: Please let this serve as my written public comment regarding DBVI services.

I feel that it is imperative that DBVI have a strong social media presence to get information out about their services, trainings, programs, and events. I have been thrilled to see a drastic improvement in this area I've the last 2 years. Yet I still find that there are many events that are sent out via email that are not announced on social media until after the event. For families (parents and consumers) of today to stay informed this is something

that should be a priority.

Additionally, social media posts need the images to be made accessible with alt text features. After 20 years of my daughter being a consumer it still blows my mind that much of the material sent out via email and social medial is not in an accessible format. Including the platform for forms using e signatures.

Lastly, I have recently been applauding DBVI's efforts to make their events and programs more inclusive to those who have additional disabilities/needs beyond blindness. This should continue and should become the norm to span across all department and programs. Blindness is a spectrum and so is humanity. All student need access to programs and opportunities, even those who have additional support needs.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comments. During the last two years, the agency has developed a social media presence on Facebook, Instagram, and Linked In for the purpose of outreach to individuals being served, the public, and other constituents. The agency Director of Communications concentrates on providing information about upcoming programs and events and on accessibility of materials posted on social media. Individuals are encouraged to sign up for email notifications on various topics through DBVI website.

Accessibility of materials is crucial and DBVI will continue to work at ensuring alternative text is added and images posted on social media are accessible. Currently, DBVI is reviewing documents on the DBVI website and other online platforms to ensure accessibility for individuals with disabilities and individuals with limited English proficiency.

Comments regarding the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired

Comment: The swimming pool at the Virginia Rehabilitation Center for the Blind and Vision Impaired should be open during the weekend.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. VRCBVI strives to open the pool when life guards are available.

Comment: The piano in the gym needs tuning.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. Unfortunately, the old piano in the Recreation Building is being surplused due to old age and bad condition. There is no plan to replace the piano.

Comment: Students and adults need more activities at VRCBVI, so they don't need to stay in their rooms.

Agency Response: Currently, VRCBVI has a part time wellness instructor who facilitates activities for students. Adult students are not prohibited from leaving their rooms or from leaving campus and in fact, VRCBVI staff encourages adult students to plan and execute their own outings and events using the independence skills they are learning in their classes. Additionally, from time to time

during the year, instructors plan outings for students, such as movie nights and other events and outings, the purpose of which are to practice learned skills. Unfortunately, with current staffing and funding levels, VRCBVI is unable to offer consistent evening and weekend activities. I

Comment: Students want to go home on weekends during the LIFE program. Students at VRCBVI want the option to not participate in programs without having to stay in their rooms.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. LIFE students can go home on Saturdays after the confidence building activities and return to the program the following day on Sunday evenings. Sometimes parents visit their students for lunch or other excursions on Sundays.

As part of participation in the LIFE program, students are required to participate in all staff-supervised activities; VRCBVI ensures that parents and students are aware of this requirement prior to the student coming to VRCBVI. If a student reports to staff that they are not feeling well enough to participate in classes and/or activities, the student is advised to stay in their room to recuperate and to prevent spreading possible illness to others. At all times, there is supervision of students participating in the program.

Comment: VRCBVI should consider food options for meals in the cafeteria from different cultures.

Agency Response: Thank you for your suggestion. VRCBVI staff will submit this recommendation to the to the independent vendor who manages the cafeteria for his consideration. Presently, the vendor often serves Mexican, Caribbean, Italian, Asian, and foods from other cultures.

Comment: VRCBVI should have a designated music room.

Agency Response: Thank you for your suggestion. VRCBVI will consider this option.

Comment: Students at VRCBVI need extra time for meals.

Agency Response: Thanks for providing this input. As a center that includes a focus on vocational preparation, VRCBVI operates much like an employment environment. Forty-five minutes are allocated for lunch for students and staff in a similar manner to an actual worksite.

Comment: Students attending programs or training at VRCBVI want ice cream as a desert option following meals.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. VRCBVI will consider whether to offer ice cream for dessert.

Comment: VRCBVI should be turned into an actual school for students who are blind and vision impaired.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. The mission of VRCBVI is to prepare blind, vision impaired, and deafblind Virginians for employment and personal independence through the integration of individualized comprehensive blindness skills and employment skills and experiences. Virginia already has a public school for students in grades K-12. Known as the Virginia School for the Deaf and Blind (VSDB), the school is in Staunton. More information regarding VSDB can be obtained at <a href="https://www.virginia.gov/agencies/virginia-school-for-the-deaf-and-d

blind/#:~:text=The%20Virginia%20School%20for%20the,s ensory%20impaired%20with%20other%20disabilities

Comment: Students in the LIFE program would like more opportunities to go off campus.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. The LIFE program provides daily opportunities for students to go off campus with VRCBVI staff. These opportunities include Orientation and Mobility lessons, Personal Home Management lessons such as grocery shopping, and confidence building activities such as whitewater rafting, movie night, rock climbing, sailing, and more.

Comment: The summer program for students at VRCBVI makes students get up too early.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. The LIFE program runs on a similar schedule to the school system. This schedule provides for plenty of time for

breakfast and allows students to have ample opportunity to participate in classes, confidence building activities, and work-based learning experiences.

Comment: Classes should be optional for students at VRCBVI.

Agency Response: Thank you for your comment. The purpose of training at VRCBVI is to provide training in the skills of blindness to blind, vision impaired, and deafblind Virginians and to encourage people to develop positive attitudes about blindness. In most cases, students participating in VRCBVI programs are sponsored through a combination of state and federal funds. Classes are not optional, and students are expected to participate fully so they can build the foundational skills to help them go to work.

Comment: Evening activities should be optional for students at VRCBVI.

Agency Response: Thanks for your comment. Evening activities are a key component of the summer LIFE program for transition aged students and facilitate confidence building and development of skills of blindness. Students are expected to participate to the best of their abilities. For adult students, evening activities are optional.

Comment: Some students would like to have extended time in classes that they really like.

Agency Response: Thanks for your comment. Classes at VRCBVI are scheduled for one- and two-hour blocks so that all students can participate in the foundational classes to learn the skills of blindness or low vision.

Comment: Would it be possible to have a Goalball tournament during the LIFE program?

Agency Response: Thanks for your question. VRCBVI does have Goalball scheduled as an evening activity. The idea of a tournament is a good one that cannot be implemented at this time due to the tight schedule of skills of blindness classes, confidence building activities, workbased learning activities, and meals.

Comments regarding Services to Older Adults

Comment: Seniors in their mid-70s who have low vision have problems contacting DBVI about low vision services. Low vision training is needed in the community. Seniors report having problems with getting services from DBVI in their homes. Rehabilitation Teachers don't seem to understand low vision as well as blindness. Staff need more training with working with older individuals. There are problems with older adults receiving rehabilitation services. In Fairfax, seniors need more support in learning about technology.

Agency Response: Thank you for bringing this concern to DBVI's attention. DBVI strives to have an active presence in the community and to identify older individuals who need or would benefit from agency services. Rehabilitation Teachers are highly educated individuals who are required to have an understanding about the needs of older adults. DBVI recognizes that low vision training and other resources are especially important for older adults. Older individuals who feel that their needs for low vision services are not being met are encouraged to first talk to their Rehabilitation Teacher. Individuals may also reach out to the Regional Manager or Program Director of the office where the person is receiving services. Contact information can be found at https://www.dbvi.virginia.gov/apps/dbviloc/Offices.aspx DBVI values the relationships we have with individuals who are seeking or receiving services; we want to hear from you.

Comment: Seniors who reside in senior living residences and communities frequently have vision problems. How does DBVI fit in with community senior living environments?

Agency Response: Thank you for your question. DBVI provides services for older adults residing in senior living facilities and in individual's homes. Services can be accessed by contacting DBVI's local field offices. Please check the website for field office locations, counties covered, phone numbers, and the names of the Regional

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Office Managers at

https://www.dbvi.virginia.gov/apps/dbviloc/