

LINDA WINSLOW, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL REHABILITATION ASSOCIATION AND JAMES ROTHROCK, COMMISSIONER, VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATIVE SERVICES

TESTIMONY
OF
LINDA WINSLOW, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NATIONAL REHABILITATION ASSOCIATION
AND
JAMES ROTHROCK, COMMISSIONER
VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATIVE SERVICES
BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

OVERSIGHT HEARING: REVIEW OF VETERAN'S
DISABILITY COMPENSTION --
REHABILITATING VETERANS

FEBRUARY 5, 2008

Chairman Akaka, Ranking Member Burr and Members of the Veterans Affairs Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on the Public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program, a State/Federal/Public/Private Partnership that has been and continues to be one of the most effective career-producing, independence-inducing programs in the history of the workforce world.

My name is Linda Winslow and I am proud to serve as the Executive Director of the National Rehabilitation Association, a public, not-for-profit, nonpartisan national organization founded in 1925, and is one of the longest serving and strongest supporters of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program, a program which over its almost 90-year history, has assisted millions of eligible individuals with disabilities maintain or regain economic and personal independence.

I am pleased to be here today with Jim Rothrock who serves as Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services, whose Department works with our wounded warriors through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The National Rehabilitation Association has a diverse membership including qualified rehabilitation counselors and associated qualified rehabilitation personnel representing the public and private sectors, veterans, independent living specialists, OTs, PTs, Speech Therapists, mental health specialists, private providers of rehabilitation, rehabilitation counseling educators and programs, special education professionals and many others.

In response to the Committee's question as to whether the Vocational Rehabilitation Program can assist veterans with disabilities return to economic and personal independence, the answer is a

resounding YES.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, Title I of which is commonly known as the VR Program, was originally authorized as the Smith-Fess Act, Public Law 236, signed by President Woodrow Wilson on June 2, 1920. The Act was designed to return injured workers, including veterans of WW I, to suitable remunerative employment. Over the last 87 years, the Act has responded to public input and the changing needs of society. VR now includes services to a wide range of individuals, including but not limited to, individuals with physical, mental and sensory disabilities and intellectual and developmental disabilities. This range includes individuals with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which has taken a toll on so many of our wounded warriors and their families.

We would like to take this opportunity to share one of the many stories about a veteran with disabilities and a family perspective.

Matt is a disabled veteran from Washington State. He is a person with quadriplegia who also has a traumatic brain injury. Matt spent seven months in a trauma hospital and now receives outpatient support from the VA Hospital in Seattle. Matt was not expected to live after the injury and he was certainly not expected to return to work, be an active father or contributing member of his community. Despite the dire medical predictions, Matt is a single parent raising his 10 year old daughter, he has returned to school, owns a home and lives independently in the community. Two months ago Matt re-entered the workforce on a part-time basis and plans to return to work full time when his daughter is older.

What was the difference for Matt and his family? It was the combination of a great team of caregivers, actively involved family members and a coordinated team approach between the VA system and the public VR Program that supported Matt's vision of independence. Family members were actively involved and advocated to bring in experts across systems that supported Matt's success. Matt has received support from a variety of programs funded under the Rehabilitation Act, including the Public VR Program, independent living supports, advocacy services and the support of qualified staff trained in programs under the Rehabilitation Act such as the specialists in neuropsychological evaluation and TBI. The systems were coordinated, the family was involved and Matt attained his goals and is working toward a future career. Matt is contributing to our country through his payment of taxes, his role as a father, son, brother and Matt is supporting success for other veterans and their families. As Matt's case clearly demonstrates, a coordinated system approach is a proven model of success for the individual and for America.

The hallmark of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program has always been the qualified rehabilitation counselor and associated qualified rehabilitation personnel, many of whom hold Master's degrees in rehabilitation counseling, rehabilitation engineering and associated disciplines. The VR Program serves a wide range of individuals with disabilities through the network of 80 State VR Agencies and partnerships with Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs), and other private providers. The VR Program serves over one million eligible individuals with disabilities per year through comprehensive, multi-faceted, individualized employment plans, placing more than 200,000 eligible individuals with disabilities, including

individuals with significant disabilities, into competitive employment each year.

The VR Program is accountable, bipartisan, comprehensive and cost-effective and has the documentation to support this claim. The return on investment of the VR Program is impressive.

Many of the State VR Agencies, including Virginia, have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as joint cases.

Veterans continue to benefit from the jointly served cases between VR and the Department of Veterans Affairs, with VR providing many "gap-filling" services that positively impact the veteran's rehabilitation and subsequent employment or return to work. These services include strong connections to business partnerships.

The National Employment Team (NET) is a network of business relations consultants from the 80 Public VR Agencies. The NET is actively working with the employment specialists in the Veteran programs to support business partners in meeting their employment needs by hiring and retaining qualified individuals with disabilities, including veterans. These VR specialists work closely with business, rehabilitation engineers and assistive technology specialists to accommodate individuals in the workplace. They bring expertise in return-to-work strategies for service men and women, National Guard and Reservists who are newly-disabled and returning to previous jobs that they held before being called to active duty.

Moreover, the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), which administers the VR Program, is presently sponsoring an Institute on Rehabilitation Issues (IRI) and will publish a "guidebook" on how to enhance services to veterans with disabilities by strengthening the working relationship between Vocational Rehabilitation, VA-VRE and DOL-VETS. The publication draft will be ready for critique and review in May at the National IRI Conference, which takes place in Washington, D.C.

In developing the content for one of the chapters focusing on the "customer's opinion" a great deal of information has been gleaned from disabled veterans around the need for increased collaboration, more rapid access to medical information needed for return to work, more comprehensive vocational, rather than medical assessments only, improved job matching and follow-through, improved outreach to family members who may be the first to spot residuals from PTSD or TBI, as it impacts the success or failure of the veteran who has returned to work, and much more.

The Vocational Rehabilitation Program is an accountable, bipartisan, comprehensive, and cost-effective program of supports and services to eligible individuals with disabilities which includes career counseling, development, training, and ultimately employment that leads to economic and personal independence.

Presently, there are 41 State VR Agencies on an Order of Selection, which means that if the VR Agency projects that there will not be enough resources to serve all eligible individuals with disabilities, then those with the most significant disabilities will be served first.

Moreover, in some States there are waiting lists for the excellent services and supports that the

VR Program provides to eligible individuals with disabilities who want to achieve or re-achieve the American Dream.

The State VR Agencies and the qualified rehabilitation counselors and personnel they employ are some of the best in our country.

Our wounded warriors deserve no less than the best. We can help. We want to do more, but we will need additional resources in order for us to serve those most in need, including those who sacrificed so much for us to be here today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members for this opportunity to assist our country's wounded warriors achieve or re-achieve economic and personal independence.

State VR Director Rothrock and I look forward to working closely with you over the next several months to ensure that every service member receives the quality training, services and supports offered by qualified rehabilitation counselors in the Public VR Program through increased collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

We will be glad to answer any questions that you may have.