

HORIZONS

SOUTH CAROLINA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION DEPARTMENT

Reorganization improves DDS results

Reorganization within the Disability Determination Services program is producing nationally significant results.

DDS, a division of the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department, processes Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income claims in South Carolina under the provisions of the Social Security Act. DDS makes the medical and vocational determination of whether the claimant's impairment fits the criteria for benefits and eligibility for benefits is determined at the Social Security regional office in Atlanta.

In July, DDS had the highest increase in the nation for number of claims adjudicated this year—55,073 compared to 49,508 at the same time last year, an 11 percent increase. It also has the lowest turnaround time in the nation—8.6 weeks as opposed to 13 weeks nationally and 11.5 weeks regionally; and it has reduced the number of pending claims a whopping 28 percent since last year—13,906 compared to 19,225.

What's the difference?

An increase in disability examiners from 35 percent of the staff to 50 percent, said Tom Paige, DDS director.

Several changes have made that possible:

- Conversion to an electronic file has virtually eliminated the use of paper and streamlined the process. Applications are done electronically; medical evidence is gathered electronically; final determinations are made electronically; and adjudicated cases are sent to the SSA regional office

in Atlanta electronically. "No paper, no delays," said Shirley Jarrett, DDS assistant director.

- Bill payment has been centralized at the DDS central office in West Columbia, rather than processing bills at each of the DDS offices in Greenville, West Columbia and Charleston. This eliminated redundant



The DDS Central Office staff moved into its new building in West Columbia the first weekend in August. The old quarters will be renovated for expansion by the Columbia office.

positions and allowed for the increase in examiners. "It keeps the bill payment process in one room, which improves consistency and provides good oversight," said Ken Norris, DDS senior manager for administration.

- The introduction of a dual computer monitor system, which allows examiners to review medical evidence on one monitor while making notes or filling out forms on the other. That alone increased productivity 20 percent, Paige said.

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New Horizons is published by the South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (SCVRD), 1410 Boston Ave., P.O. Box 15, West Columbia, SC 29171-0015.

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Agency:

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 Alease G. Samuels, Walterboro
 Joseph A. Thomas, Conway

SCVRD:

Commissioner—Larry C. Bryant
 Editor—Sharon H. Kelly

Area Offices:

Aiken: 855 York St. N.E.
 (803) 641-7630 (Voice/TDD)

Anderson: 3001 Mall Road
 (864) 224-6391 (Voice/TDD)

Berkeley-Dorchester: 2954 S. Live Oak Drive
 Moncks Corner

(843) 761-6036 (Voice/TDD)
 (843) 577-9057 (Voice/TDD)

Charleston: 4360 Dorchester Road, North
 Charleston

(843) 740-1600 (Voice/TDD)

Conway: 3009 Fourth Avenue
 (843) 248-2235 (Voice/TDD)

Florence: 1947 West Darlington Street
 (843) 662-8114 (Voice/TDD)

Greenville: 105 Parkins Mill Road
 (864) 297-3066 (Voice/TDD)

Laurens-Greenwood: 22861 Highway 76 East,
 Clinton

(864) 833-4121 (Voice/TDD)

Lexington: 1330 Boston Ave., West Columbia
 (803) 896-6333 (Voice/TDD)

Marlboro: 1029 Highway 9 W., Bennettsville
 (843) 479-8318 (Voice/TDD)

Orangeburg: 1661 Joe S. Jeffords Hwy S.E.
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Richland: 516 Percival Road, Columbia
 (803) 782-4239 (Voice/TDD)

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Enabling eligible South Carolinians with Disabilities to prepare for, achieve and maintain competitive employment.

Transition services target youngsters with disabilities

Youngsters with disabilities have an even better chance of achieving their career goals as the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department focuses on helping them overcome barriers to employment even before they leave high school.

“It makes sense to provide employment-focused services while they’re still in school,” said Barbara Hollis, assistant commissioner for planning and program development. “If we don’t help them early on, we often see them later, when they have even more challenges.”

The department is taking a coordinated approach in four areas:

- The High School/High Tech program is a community-based partnership designed to promote technology-oriented careers and education for youths with disabilities. The program exposes participants to careers with math, science, engineering and technology components to encourage them to stay in school and plan for their future. Project sites are located in Greenville, Gaffney, Richland, Sumter, Greenwood/Laurens/Newberry, Charleston and Anderson.
- SCVRD has entered into collaborative agreements with four school districts—Lexington District Four, Richland District Two, Laurens District 55 and Orangeburg Consolidated District

Five—to jointly fund a Transition Employability Specialist (TES). The TES acts as a liaison between the school district and SCVRD



A High School/High Tech student learns about computerized machinery.

to aid in removing barriers to the successful delivery of transition services. The program targets youth with mental disabilities to strengthen the coordinated services provided to them.

- Employment coaches and job-readiness training centers provide additional services to youth with physical and/or mental impairments. Employment coaches provide all aspects of case service delivery, including job development, direct job placement and job coaching/training to enable these young people to successfully find competitive employment. Each area office will have at least one employment coach assigned to work with the transition population. Some of SCVRD’s

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OT makes it up as she goes along

Marlise Guillerault seldom knows what challenge is going to come through her door next, but it's a sure bet she'll figure out a way to deal with it.

Guillerault, an SCVRD occupational therapist, spends her days making the tasks of daily living easier for people with disabilities.

She brings a wealth of practical experience to the job. After two years in nursing school, she quit to go to art school, then went on to get her degree in education and taught science and math. She married a farmer and raised sheep, horses, cows and children. She has three children, four stepchildren and 12 grandchildren. Then she had what she calls her "mid-life career crisis."

"I fell out of the attic and broke my leg," she said. Six months in a cast watching daytime television convinced her she needed a change.

She went to a nearby college for career counseling. Jobs she was suited for included occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy and the U.S. Army.

"I was too old for the Army, and OT sounded like the most fun," she said.

That was 15 years ago. She's been at VR for 10.



The "Let Go" Dynamic Extension Splint

Based in SCVRD's Evaluation Center on the main campus in West Columbia, Guillerault and Lee-Ann Danko are the two OT's on staff. Clients come from all

over the state and have significant disabilities. They spend a month at the Center for Comprehensive Programs, increasing their stamina, receiving rehabilitation technology services and learning how to become as independent as possible so they can pursue their vocational goal.

Often that independence requires tools or techniques that have to be invented. For instance:

- A woman with spina bifida couldn't bend over to put on her shoe. Using two metal bookends, some Velcro and some ropes, Guillerault came up with a rest that holds the shoe so the woman could put her foot in it.
- For a man who had had a stroke and couldn't write, she developed a pen holder

made of two loops of double-faced Velcro that hold the pen in proper position.

- For people who have difficulty picking things up, she put a lint pickup refill on a long-handled paint roller. It can pick up papers and small objects that otherwise would be inaccessible.
- A man with spastic cerebral palsy couldn't put a CD in the CD tray on his computer. A couple of plastic paint pail liners provide a chute that directs the disc into the tray.
- People who have had a stroke or a spinal cord injury often have trouble with their hands curling inward. Guillerault designed a splint out of Velcro, rubber bands and PVC pipe that allows the hand to extend.

Her pack-rat tendencies serve her well and her office is littered with items that may come in handy for one device or another.

"It's part of being an OT," she said. "If you don't have imagination, you're going to be a pretty lousy OT."



Pen holder



Shoe holder



Guillerault

Transition

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most seasoned counselors also are being re-directed to work with these youngsters.

- In addition, SCVRD has established partnerships in local communities with the S.C. Department of Juvenile Justice. The objective is to work with schools and families to provide coordinated services to youngsters with physical and/or mental impairments to try to head off incidents involving law enforcement. Services also are available to youth in DJJ facilities and SCVRD has staff assigned to work at those facilities.

A Rehabilitation Issues Institute will address the successful delivery of transition services in early October.

DDS

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"We're producing at a higher rate, our quality has improved and the percentage of aged cases has been significantly reduced," he said.

Aged cases are those that have been in the system more than 90 days.

Another significant improvement has been in staged cases—those that had to wait because an examiner was not available. Last year, there were 9,000 staged cases; this year there are none.

"The changes have allowed us to process cases faster, more accurately and at a more efficient cost," Norris said.

"That allows us to better meet the needs of South Carolinians with disabilities."

SCVRA meeting set for February

The S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Association will meet Feb. 11–13, 2007, at the Marriott Hotel in Columbia.

The theme of the conference will be "Education for Life: Putting the Pieces Together."

A special celebration will mark the 80th anniversary of the S.C. Vocational Rehabilitation Department.

"Put it on your calendars now," said Debra Moses, co-organizer of the conference. "We're really looking forward to an informative meeting and good time."

The former Adam's Mark, the Marriott is located on Main Street within walking distance of the Congaree Vista, which features a variety of restaurants and shops.

The South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department reports that it printed 5,500 copies of this newsletter at a cost of \$658.36, or about \$.12 a copy.



**South Carolina Vocational
Rehabilitation Department**

1410 Boston Avenue
Post Office Box 15
West Columbia, SC 29271-0015

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