

HORIZONS

SOUTH CAROLINA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION DEPARTMENT

Budget cuts bring challenges for agency

The state's ongoing budget deficits have brought cutbacks to SCVRD, but the agency has worked hard to minimize the impact on South Carolinians with disabilities.

Unlike the VR programs in some other states, SCVRD continues to serve all eligible applicants. However, the cuts bring steep challenges in meeting all client needs.

The steady decrease in state funding in recent years has put the agency in the position of losing federal matching funds. Those funds are allotted at the rate of nearly four federal dollars to every dollar of state funding.

Consequently, SCVRD has taken additional measures to address that growing gap. The



"[Staff] attitudes are exceptional as they remain focused and committed to doing what it takes to help our clients."

***—Barbara Hollis
SCVRD Commissioner***

agency has had to plan for the long-term effect of these shortfalls, while at the same time working with the state legislature in hopes of obtaining funding needed to maintain a high level of quality services to clients.

Beginning in February, all VR general program staff were required to take five unpaid furlough days before the end of the state fiscal year on June 30.

In addition, the department

further reduced the part time hours worked by temporary employees, and in many cases, all hours for some were eliminated. The hiring freeze implemented several months earlier also was extended with rare exceptions for critical circumstances.

Travel continues to be reduced and all but safety-related buildings/grounds maintenance projects have been deferred.

Although staffing has been stretched, employees have worked diligently to fill the gaps and provide quality services to help clients achieve their employment goals.

"I am so proud of our staff and how they have reacted to the cuts that we have made," said Commissioner Barbara Hollis.

"Their attitudes are exceptional as they remain focused and committed to doing what it takes to help our clients. We may not have a lot

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SCVRD enables eligible South Carolinians with disabilities to prepare for, achieve and maintain competitive employment. DDS provides quality disability determinations to South Carolinians in a responsive, timely and cost-effective manner.

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Commissioner Barbara Hollis displays the Otis A. Corbitt Leadership and Community Service Award. She is flanked by Willie Bethune, left, director of the annual Cross-Cultural Mental Health and Human Services Conference and James Starnes, president of the organization's Action Council.

Hollis honored with Corbitt award

The Action Council for Cross Cultural Mental Health and Human Services recently honored Commissioner Barbara Hollis with its Otis A. Corbitt Leadership and Community Service Award.

She was chosen for "her commitment to cultural sensitivity demonstrated by the exemplary way she approaches people regardless of their circumstances, background or cultural heritage," said Willie Bethune, director of the annual Cross-Cultural Mental Health and Human Services Conference.

The organization, founded

by Dr. Corbitt, is a broad-based educational forum that promotes awareness, knowledge and skills pertaining to racial, ethnic, spiritual and other cultural differences that affect the assessment, diagnoses, treatment and recovery of people with mental illness and their families.

Hollis met Corbitt when she first started her career.

"His compassion for the unserved and underserved was an inspiration then and I am delighted to see his work being carried on through this organization," she said.

Disability claims now easier for homeless

South Carolinians who are homeless or at risk of being homeless now have better access to the Social Security disability claim system thanks to a new program.

People who are homeless, have mental health issues or who are returning to the community from institutions such as jails, prisons, or hospitals can find access to the claim process for Supplemental Security Income and Social Security Disability Insurance extraordinarily challenging.

The SSI/SSDI Outreach, Access and Recovery (SOAR) initiative offers training, technical assistance and strategic planning to help



navigate the complicated application process.

The initiative involves a partnership among the Social Security Administration, Disability Determination Services, the S.C. Department of Mental Health and the Veterans Administration, in addition to prison systems, homeless shelters and free clinics.

Case managers, entitlement specialists and other interested

parties will be trained on the SSI/SSDI disability application process and serve as official representatives for the applicants. Mental health centers and free clinics will provide medical summaries and functional evidence that will be considered in the disability claim.

SSA field offices and DDS will expedite SOAR claims.

SOAR is currently used in 34 states and has increased the percentage of claims meeting the criteria for allowance that are approved on initial application.

The initiative is being piloted in Charleston, Greenville and Columbia.

Collaboration provides key to outreach efforts

Disability Determination Services and the general program have joined forces in a creative effort to save money while continuing to present information to the public and the medical community about SCVRD, DDS and the Social Security Administration.

Traditionally, one of the ways we have gotten the word out about our services is to offer it at statewide conferences as exhibitors. Although it's an

effective method, it involves costs for exhibit fees and, in some cases, overnight travel.

Instead, general program and DDS staff members have collaborated to provide presenters at many conferences, including the annual meetings of the S.C. Health Insurance Managers Association and the S.C. Association of Family Physicians.

In addition, general program and DDS staff members have

given presentations to the S.C. Department of Mental Health, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of South Carolina, the South Carolina Brain Injury Association and the S.C. Psychological Association.

Since there is no charge to provide presentations, SCVRD is able to continue providing education and information to the community and the people we serve.

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of financial resources, but we have talented, hardworking employees," she said.

"We continue to educate our public officials about the value of the state's investment in our clients, both in terms of what our services mean to people with disabilities who want to work, as well as the outstanding return on the state's investment through the addition of our clients as taxpaying members of the workforce."

At the time of this writing

the House of Representatives had just passed its version of the budget bill for Fiscal Year 2011-2012. While not as deep as originally expected, the cuts for next year would continue the trend of recent years to lower most agencies' base funding.

In the House version, SCVRD would see a six percent reduction in its base state funding, now at its lowest level in thirty years.

The House did provide some relief through the Capital Reserve Fund bill, which would provide \$2.5 million to

SCVRD in one-time funding that could be used to draw down federal matching funds.

We now await the Senate version of the budget.

While the cuts have necessitated redirecting staff from some external service points at community partner agencies and organizations, the agency continues to work with those partners to keep the relationships strong.

"We are still here to serve," said Hollis. "We look forward to the time when the state's economic situation improves and we can return to full strength."