

Written Testimony for the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Services, 3/21/13
Alice Pangburn MS, CRC
DHS-Vocational Rehabilitation Services

Co-Chairs Nathanson and Bates, Members of the Committee:

My name is Alice Pangburn, and I work for Vocational Rehabilitation Services, a small agency within DHS that assists Oregonians with disabilities to achieve and maintain employment and independence. Although we're a small agency we serve a great need in communities across Oregon.

As vocational rehabilitation counselors, our job is to address disability-related barriers to employment by providing services and supports that will help reduce or remove these barriers. VR caseloads are filled with clients that have co-occurring mental health disorders, orthopedic disabilities, cognitive and developmental disabilities...just to name a few. The challenges faced while providing services are exponential. Many folks coming in our doors are in crisis and have a myriad of challenges that may or may not be disability-related. For example, clients often lack access to medical services and thus may be un-medicated or unable to get the necessary medical care and treatment needed to stabilize their disability issues. To compound matters further, clients may be homeless or facing eminent homelessness as they are unable to meet their basic living needs. As a result, VR counselors often spend a large amount of their time helping clients stabilize or attempting to locate community resources to address their needs.

Currently, there are 129 counselors across the State attempting to meet the employment and disability needs of Oregonians. During the 2012 Federal Fiscal Year our agency served over 15,200 Oregonians. In 2012, over 8,500 people applied for services and over 2000 folks successfully obtained and retained employment.

In my experience however, accessing our services often means clients have to wait for several months before meeting with a counselor for an intake as our calendars are often booked out several months in advance. Once clients complete an application for services, they can potentially wait another 60 days for eligibility to be determined. Folks may be waiting up to four months before vocational services can even begin!

Many of our clients are working toward self-sufficiency and would love nothing more than to get off the "System," pay taxes, and become contributing members in our communities. When Oregonians with disabilities are out of work and working hard to gain and maintain employment, our agency can ill afford staffing levels to be reduced or our budgets cut. We actually need more "hands on deck" so that we can provide our clients timely services before they become homeless or destitute. Lessening our ability to effectively serve our clients is not the way; there is a better way forward and I can't help but wonder, "If our agency had the staff needed to serve all Oregonians with disabilities that want to go to work, how many more success stories would we realize?" Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Alice Pangburn, MS CRC
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor