

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Statement by

Alexa Posny

Assistant Secretary

Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services

on

Jobs Training and Education

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the President's FY 2011 budget request for the Department's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services' programs for students and adults with disabilities. Ensuring that all people with disabilities have access to a high-quality education and the vocational, career development, and employment services necessary for participation in our economy are top priorities for both the Administration and the country, and I know that the Members of this Subcommittee and the Congress as a whole share this commitment. Including the talents of people with disabilities in the American workforce must be an integral part of our economic recovery and will help strengthen our competitive position in the global economy. Providing young people with disabilities with a solid educational foundation supported by high educational and career expectations is the key strategy for preparing the next generation of American workers and meeting the workforce needs of employers. I will describe how our budget request focuses on direct support for individuals with disabilities to obtain education and then employment and on improvement of the systems providing the supports and services to accomplish these tasks.

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

Our FY 2011 request will build on the work supported by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). Under ARRA, States and local educational agencies (LEAs) received an unprecedented additional \$12.2 billion for special education programs under the Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act and an additional \$680 million for vocational rehabilitation (VR) and independent living services under the Rehabilitation Act. These funds are being used to improve the capacity of States and LEAs to provide the full array of special education and related services to students with disabilities and have allowed States, school districts and other grantees to continue to provide vital services to individuals in great need of these services during a time of economic stress. For IDEA programs, States report using ARRA funds to pay the salaries of over 50,000 personnel, including teachers, providers of related services, and others. According to a survey of 52 VR agencies recently conducted by the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, VR ARRA dollars have been used to serve 38,807 consumers and assist 1,766 achieve competitive employment. Fifteen agencies have used VR ARRA dollars to get out of order of selection status or open previously closed categories of service, and approximately 27,000 consumers have been removed from waiting lists.

Employment Statistics for Individuals with Disabilities

Disability measures recently introduced into the U.S. Current Population Survey offer an opportunity to track, month by month, the labor force status of working-age adults with disabilities in the midst of a major economic downturn. An analysis conducted by OSERS research grantees shows that over a one-year period, the number of employed workers with disabilities declined at a rate more than three times that of workers without disabilities. Further, the eventual re-employment of individuals with disabilities substantially lags overall employment recovery when the economy improves. OSERS programs are intended to help address these factors by better preparing young people with disabilities to be career- and college-ready and to assist individuals with significant disabilities obtain high quality employment that will enable them to achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Funding for Special Education Programs

To support a strong educational foundation for youth with disabilities, the FY 2011 request contains \$11.8 billion for the Special Education Grants to States program, an increase of \$250 million

over the 2010 level. This level of funding maintains the Federal contribution toward meeting the excess cost of special education at approximately 17 percent of the national average per pupil expenditure and provides an estimated average of \$1,750 per student for over 6 million children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 who need special education and related services. The request also includes \$374.1 million for Preschool Grants and \$439.4 million for the Grants for Infants and Families program. These programs provide critical services that help ensure the future academic success of children with disabilities and their full inclusion in the community.

There has been increasing emphasis on transition planning and services as students with disabilities progress through the education system to postsecondary education, training, and/or employment. The individualized education program (IEP) process requires individualized consideration of transition options. Most students with disabilities graduate with regular diplomas and continue to employment, job training, or higher education (often starting at the community college level) in the same progression as students in regular education. Data from a national longitudinal study on post-school outcomes for youth with disabilities show that 45 percent of youth with disabilities reported having continued on to postsecondary education within 4 years of leaving high school and 57 percent of youth with disabilities who had left high school were employed for pay outside the home.

Vocational Rehabilitation State Grants Program

The Administration is requesting \$3.6 billion to support rehabilitation and independent living services and disability research. The State-Federal program of vocational rehabilitation, a Workforce Investment Act partner program, is the flagship program for providing job training and employment assistance to individuals with disabilities. The VR program has specialized expertise and can provide services for individuals with disabilities that more generalized workforce programs cannot. Frequently the VR program is the “go-to” agency within a local workforce system to which clients with special disability-related needs are referred from other partner programs.

The VR State Grants program provides formula grants to State VR agencies to help individuals with disabilities become gainfully employed. Over two million individuals with disabilities have achieved employment through the VR program over the last 10 years. A wide range of services, including vocational evaluation, counseling and guidance, work adjustment, education and vocational training, job placement, supported employment, assistive technology, and post-employment services are provided. The VR State Grants program currently serves approximately 1 million customers and places nearly 200,000 individuals into jobs each year. Approximately 70 percent of VR customers who obtain employment also exceed the substantial gainful activity (SGA) level, as defined by the Social Security Administration. We believe that it is critically important that we raise expectations for customers and counselors alike and focus the VR program's resources on helping individuals with significant disabilities to attain high-quality employment and careers that will lead to self-sufficiency. We are also committed to working with our WIA partners to ensure that individuals who do not need the comprehensiveness of the VR program have access to appropriate services through our One-stop partners.

The VR agencies also play a role in assisting youth with disabilities in making a successful transition to postsecondary education or the workforce. Approximately 33 percent (116,544) of the cases closed by VR agencies in FY 2008 after receiving services were transition-age youth. Nearly 22 percent of them received postsecondary education as a service under the VR program. Over 65,000 (55.8 percent of those who received services) achieved successful employment outcomes.

Rehabilitation Act -- Proposed Consolidations

As part of our Workforce Investment Act reforms, we are proposing to consolidate nine Rehabilitation Act programs into three. The proposed consolidations would reduce duplication and administrative costs, and would improve program management, accountability, and the provision of rehabilitation and independent living services. Specifically, we are proposing to consolidate the three smaller employment-related programs into the existing VR State Grants Program. The services of these

programs (Supported Employment State Grants, Projects with Industry, and Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers) are also provided by the larger VR State Grants program and their mission in demonstrating how these services can be provided has been accomplished. In addition, we are proposing to reduce burden and improve the use of funds to support the in-service training needs identified in the State's plan for personnel development. Under our budget request, the Training program set-aside to support competitive grants for the training of State VR agency personnel would be eliminated and the funds consolidated into the State's VR allotment for use in supporting these activities.

National Activities and the Workforce Innovation Fund

Our request will provide funding for innovative practices and technical assistance to enable State VR agencies to better prepare individuals with significant disabilities for competitive employment leading to economic self-sufficiency. Our request for a new National Activities program would bring together activities currently scattered in several programs under the Act into one authority that will improve our ability to plan and will provide the needed flexibility to target our national investments in improve program performance and the delivery of vocational rehabilitation and independent living services.

Our overarching purpose for this year's budget request is to emphasize the development of effective practices and the provision of technical assistance that leads to program improvement, with the ultimate goal of higher quality employment and independent living outcomes for individuals with significant disabilities.

The FY 2011 request includes \$30 million to support a Workforce Innovation Fund. Funding for this activity would be combined with \$30 million requested under Adult Education National Leadership Activities to support a partnership with our colleagues at the Department of Labor. This partnership would encourage innovation and support projects that identify and validate effective strategies for improving service delivery and outcomes for individuals served under the Workforce Investment Act. Funds would be awarded competitively and rigorous evaluations would be conducted in order to help

build evidence of promising practices and effective strategies that improve services and outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Supported Employment for Youth with Significant Disabilities

Our request also includes \$25 million for discretionary grants that would be awarded on a competitive basis to assist States in expanding supported employment opportunities for youth with significant disabilities as they transition from school to the workforce. Early intervention and seamless coordination of services is the key to ensuring that young people with disabilities build upon their strong education foundation and launch successful careers. The limited availability of resources for extended services is a major barrier to increasing supported employment opportunities for youth with significant disabilities transitioning from secondary education to employment. Under this new program, State and local agencies would be required to work together to develop and implement innovative methods of expanding the availability of extended supported employment services for youth with significant disabilities. We believe this initiative will enable workforce participation for individuals with significant disabilities who have had difficulty gaining entrance to the labor market.

National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research

We can improve our programs and results for individuals with disabilities with knowledge gained through research. Our request includes \$111.9 million for the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) for the purpose of improving the lives of persons of all ages with disabilities through a comprehensive and coordinated program of research, demonstration projects, and related activities. The \$2.7 million increase for NIDRR in FY 2011 would support research projects related to VR and rigorous evaluations of programs and activities authorized under the Rehabilitation Act. The new focus area will capitalize on NIDRR's research and evaluation expertise and allow NIDRR, in close collaboration with RSA, to provide leadership in addressing the need for evidence-based practices that could improve the effectiveness of programs administered by RSA. NIDRR would work with RSA

in developing its research agenda and to disseminate and promote the implementation of the evidence-based practices. It is vital that State VR agencies have available evidenced-based research as they work with significantly disabled populations who have unique challenges to employment. Such research can lead to model demonstrations that can be replicated nationwide by State VR agencies. This emphasis on research, demonstrations, and evaluation should lead to higher quality employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Current NIDRR work includes cooperative traumatic brain injury (TBI) research with the Department of Veterans Affairs and support of the development of numerous accessibility guidelines, standards, and improved accessibility technologies that have resulted in increased access to the Web and computer content for millions of people with disabilities, particularly those with sensory impairments. This work directly supports and enables both workforce and community integration.

In closing, I wish to thank you for continuing to support the critical services and programs that have enabled millions of children and adults with disabilities to enjoy the same rights and freedoms all Americans have come to expect. Our culture and economy are stronger when the diverse talents of people with disabilities are developed through education and training and can then be used in the workforce.

Thank you. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.