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SENATE BUDGET AND TAXATION COMMITTEE

SENATE BILL 859

State Department of Education—Division of Rehabilitation Services--Funding

February 21, 2024

POSITION: SUPPORT

Disability Rights Maryland (DRM) is the protection and advocacy organization for the state of Maryland; the mission of the organization, part of a national network of similar agencies, is to advocate for the legal rights of people with disabilities throughout the state. Over the years, DRM has dedicated significant resources to representation of children and youth with disabilities in special education matters, both individual and systemic, and to educational policy work. In part, this work has focused on advocating for youth with disabilities who are transitioning out of the school system and moving on to higher education, employment, or community programs. For many of these students who are aging out of the special education services they have received for so many years, the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DORS) is an essential partner in the transition process and beyond, providing services and supports to enable these young adults to obtain jobs and to be as independent as possible. DRM supports Senate Bill 859, which allows the Governor to include in the annual budget bill an increase in the general fund appropriation to ensure that the state match amount for the Division of Rehabilitation Services is met. With that funding comes the need for accountability and the assurance that DORS will improve the quality of the services it provides.

As a member of the Commission to Study the Division of Rehabilitation Services, created by the passage of House Bill 660 in 2022, DRM provided feedback regarding the recommendations of the Commission. Agreeing with the Commission's recommendation that DORS disseminate transitioning information, DRM recommended that the disseminated information include information about DORS and its services and about Pre-Employment Transition Services. Among its other recommendations, DRM suggested that specific information be gathered from the individuals seeking DORS services and that DORS and the Developmental Disabilities Administration meet regularly to target the locations and populations of people in need of greater education and outreach.

Addressing accountability, the Commission recommended that DORS provide performance information to all stakeholders and other agencies. DRM made additional recommendations about how this information could be provided to stakeholders so it would be meaningful.

Additionally, DRM made recommendations aimed at ensuring that people could access DORS services more quickly, that DORS staff would turn over less frequently, thereby increasing the quality of service to consumers, and that the Client Assistance Program, the office designated

to receive and investigate complaints about DORS, be moved out of DORS, where it is housed, and re-designated so it can be independent of the state agency it is mandated to hold accountable.

DRM fully supports Senate Bill 859's purpose of ensuring that all available funding be allocated to DORS. It is essential, however, that the funding be used to provide meaningful, effective and high quality services to transitioning youth and adults with disabilities to enable them to live as independently as possible and to obtain the higher education and employment of their choice.

For more information or if questions, please contact Megan Marie Jones at 443-692-2508 or meganc@disabilityrightsmd.org .