

HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE**SENATE BILL 859****State Department of Education—Division of Rehabilitation Services--Funding****March 20, 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 SB 859, which is the Senate equivalent to House Bill 1163, which passed in the House on March 13th with identical language.

Like HB 1163, SB 859 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. As DRM has previously noted, 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. DRM agreed with the Commission's recommendation that the State statutorily ensure the provision of general funds necessary to meet the federal match and would note that the Commission's full recommendation about budgetary investment also noted a need to "statutorily ensure the addition of at least 74 new full-time employment State PINs to eliminate the waitlist, reduce caseload levels of VR Counselors and expand training and services in community-based settings."

While serving on the Commission, 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. Recognizing that funding is essential but not the sole answer to remedying the shortcomings that historically have hampered the effectiveness of DORS, both DRM and the full Commission made additional recommendations as well. DRM in particular recommended that DORS disseminate transitioning information for youth ages 14-21, including 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 DDA 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 and DRM made additional recommendations about how this information could be provided to stakeholders so it would be meaningful.

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 youth navigating the transition from school to employment and to 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 Jones at meganc@disabilityrightsmd.org.