



North Carolina
State Rehabilitation Council

REFLECTIONS
on a Mission

2015 ANNUAL REPORT

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**U.S. Rehabilitation
Services
Administration**



Self Employment



Job Growth



Public Forums



Customer Feedback



Advocacy



Lisa Ward-Ross, Chair
North Carolina State
Rehabilitation Council

Message from the Chair

In 2015, the North Carolina State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) continued to partner with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VR) to advocate for quality employment services for individuals with disabilities in our state. The SRC's activities this year, including quarterly council meetings and several public forums, enabled information-sharing and collaborative planning to address issues impacting consumer access to VR services.

We expanded our marketing and outreach efforts to increase participation in two public forums, held in the outlying eastern and western areas of North Carolina, and revised both the process and format of our Consumer Satisfaction Survey to increase response rates. The council established a Membership Recruitment committee and developed a Disability Resource guide for use in public forums and for new member orientation.

We continued to monitor VR program standards and indicators, as well as consumer satisfaction with VR services. We conducted reviews of proposed policy and rule changes, including those related to: community-based assessment and trial work experience; equipment repairs; personal need and client resources; school-to-work adjustment and transition; on-the-job training; time frame required for a comprehensive assessment; and brain injury support services.

We provided valuable input during the drafting of the Unified State Plan as required by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (the "Opportunity Act") and created customized, district-level data for each North Carolina legislator, highlighting the taxpayer return-on-investment value of effective rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities.

As we look forward to another successful year of partnership in 2016, I want to take this opportunity to thank VR staff for their unwavering efforts to assist persons with disabilities to obtain and maintain employment. I particularly want to acknowledge the work of recent retirees Elizabeth Bishop, Division Director, and Mac Britt, Chief of Policy, who were both strong supporters of the SRC and regular contributors to our meetings. I also want to thank council members for their hard work and dedication. The SRC could not perform our mandated duties and responsibilities without you all.

The Mission of the Council

To enhance the employment, independent living and equality of individuals with disabilities in the state of North Carolina.

The Purpose of the Council

To advise and work in partnership with the N.C. Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

To assist the Division in accomplishing its mission to promote employment and independence for people with disabilities through partnerships and community leadership.

To provide guidance, input and recommendations relative to the development and expansion of vocational rehabilitation services and programs in an effort to maximize employment opportunities and independence for individuals with disabilities.

To advocate for legislation that supports individuals with disabilities in making successful transitions into the workforce and the community.

To provide customers and stakeholders of vocational rehabilitation services with a formal mechanism to influence policy and the direction of the Division at the highest administrative level of the state.

The Year by the Numbers

VR assisted

6,317

North Carolinians
in achieving
successful
employment
outcomes

Of these,

**1,110
(17.6%)**

received supported
employment in an
integrated setting.

Independent Living
objectives were
achieved by

1,381

Independent
Living program
participants.

Assistive
Technology
provided

7,120

individuals with
equipment loans
or demonstrations.

Disability
Determination closed

208,629

cases involving Social
Security disability,
Supplemental Security
Income and Medicaid
disability benefits.

N.C. State Rehabilitation Council Objectives

1. To carry out the following, after consulting with the state's Workforce Development Board: review, analyze and advise the Designated State Agency (DSA) regarding the performance of the Designated State Unit (DSU) under Title IV of the Opportunity Act, particularly with responsibilities related to eligibility (including order of selection); extent, scope and effectiveness of the services provided; and functions performed by state agencies that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving outcomes under this Title.
2. To carry out the following in partnership with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DSU): develop, agree to, and review state goals, and provide in accordance with Section 101(a) (15) (C); evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program; and submit reports of progress to the Commissioner in accordance with Section 101(a) (15) (E).
3. To advise the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services (DSA) and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DSU) regarding activities authorized to be carried out under this Title and assist in the preparation of the State Plan and amendments to the Plan, applications, reports, needs assessments and evaluations required by this Title.
4. To the extent possible, conduct reviews and analysis of the effectiveness of and consumer satisfaction with the functions of the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services: the vocational rehabilitation services provided by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and other public and private entities responsible for providing services to individuals with disabilities under the Act; and the employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services under Act, including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with such employment outcomes.
5. To prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and the Commissioner of RSA on the status of the vocational rehabilitation programs operating within the state and to make this report available to the public.

6. To avoid duplication of efforts and to enhance the number of individuals served.
7. To coordinate with the activities of other councils within the state, including: the Statewide Independent Living Council; the advisory panel established under Section 612(a) (21) of the Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments of 1997; the state Council on Developmental Disabilities; the state Mental Health Planning Council; the state Workforce Investment Board; and other public and private organizations, groups and functions such as the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation, the National Rehabilitation Association, and the N.C. Rehabilitation Association.
8. To provide for coordination and to establish working relationships between the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services and the Statewide Independent Living Council and the centers for independent living in the state.
9. To perform other functions consistent with the purposes of this Title comparable to other functions performed by the council.

SRC Standing Committees

Executive Committee

The Executive Committee acts on behalf of the council consistent with the council's purpose as outlined in its bylaws. The committee is responsible for compiling the council's response to the State Plan and triennial Comprehensive Needs Assessment, preparing the annual report, establishing meeting agendas and setting the general direction of the council and its committees.

SRC's participation in the development of a Unified State Plan, as required by the Opportunity Act, continued in 2015. Through a series of meetings with the Division director, the Executive Committee promoted the incorporation of SRC goals within the Unified State Plan's "Goals, Priorities and Strategies" section. The committee, in conjunction with the Division's Planning and Evaluation staff, also provided updates on the Unified State Plan at each quarterly meeting, seeking input and approval from the full council.

The Executive Committee continues to work with the Planning and Evaluation Section on the development and implementation of the triennial Comprehensive Needs Assessment. The committee and section staff report back to the full council on the needs assessment during their quarterly meetings to gather feedback and approval. The Executive Committee also maintains responsibility for developing the agendas for the quarterly full council meetings.

In the spring of 2015, members supported using the same method for the Return-on-Investment project. Information packets sent to legislators included a cover letter, a customized return-on-investment report for each legislative district and consumer success stories. This is a continuing goal of the SRC's Strategic Plan for 2014-2016 to help inform North Carolina lawmakers about the positive economic impact of employing people with disabilities. During the NC Rehabilitation Association's annual C. Odell Tyndall Legislative Breakfast event, legislators heard personal testimonies from individuals with disabilities who persevered and attained their goals through the help of vocational rehabilitation and independent living programs and services.

The Executive Committee advocates for strong leadership on the council and, as part of the recruitment process, carefully reviews new member nominations and term lengths. To facilitate new member recruitment, the committee endorsed the formation of a Membership Committee. To provide balanced representation, all new members are encouraged to serve on designated SRC committees.

Finally, the Executive Committee published an annual report, in both printed and web-ready formats, that summarizes the council's work and highlights essential components of its mission.

Consumer Input and Public Outreach Committee

The Consumer Input and Public Outreach Committee reviews, analyzes and makes recommendations to the council regarding the effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services delivered by VR and other public and private agencies in the state.

The committee also gathers information using the consumer satisfaction survey, public forums, and feedback from the Client Assistance Program.

Telephonic surveys are a more efficient method of gauging consumer satisfaction, and any costs associated with increased use can be offset by diverting resources away from mailed surveys. Written or web-based surveys shall continue to be produced for deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers. The committee also discussed the use of a skip pattern to create a stratified sampling.

In addition to the ongoing consumer satisfaction survey, the Consumer Input and Public Outreach Committee reviewed the SRC Disability Resource Guide. This guide is to be used for new member orientations, at public input sessions and when members serve as representatives of the SRC at other events.

The committee, along with full council participation, focused on gathering input through public forums. The two public forums held in Elizabeth City (March 19) and Sylva (October 1) allowed consumers, family members, providers, employers, stakeholders and staff to express concerns and highlight how services have or have not met existing needs.

Council members were pleased by the positive comments from consumers about the dedication and passion of local staff members and unit managers. Members discussed ideas to boost attendance at the public forums, including the direct targeting of stakeholders by sending invitations to local Chambers of Commerce, the Department of Transportation, and public officials, including mayors, city managers and county commissioners. Other suggestions included redesigning and translating marketing materials for the public forum, as well as promoting the availability of interpreters for non-English speakers and those who use sign language. Council members were urged to promote future events to the public through local business and community contacts and to consumers through unit managers and counselors.

As part of the committee's responsibilities, applications and resumes of potential impartial hearing officers were reviewed. On October 26, 2015, the Division hosted an impartial hearing officer training. Three candidates attended the training and two of these candidates subsequently expressed interest in providing this service.

Policy and Rules Review Committee

The Policy and Rules Review Committee is charged with reviewing Division policies and procedures in order to make recommendations on any policy or procedure that affects the public, is subject to public rule-making hearings under the state Administrative Procedures Act and is required for compliance with the Opportunity Act.

Since implementation of the Opportunity Act on July 1, 2014, the Division has changed policies related to the development of an individualized employment plan (IPE) for a VR client, which must occur within 90 days of determination of eligibility, barring certain exceptions; clarification of the request for quote (RFQ) and purchasing process for durable medical and non-medical equipment purchases; equipment and vehicle repairs; invoice processing and sponsorship of prescription medication; sponsorship of vocational evaluations and community-based assessments for work adjustment and supported employment services; client financial need survey requirements; sponsorship of individual placement and supports (IPS) model supported employment; adjustment to the supervisory approval required for case service authorizations of \$500 or less; sponsorship of post-secondary academic training; required verification of client identity and employment eligibility prior to the development of an IPE; and revisions to the process for client self-employment evaluation, and direction setting.

Community Outreach, Advocacy, Member Development

The council's goal is to have greater impact on its mandates in the areas of community outreach, advocacy and SRC member development.

Liaison Activities

The council designates members to serve as SRC representatives to seven liaison groups as well as a number of special interest groups. To fulfill that mission, the council continues to focus on identifying candidates who can effectively liaise with these groups. Involvement is seen as a critical opportunity to partner with key stakeholders, as well as provide strategic paths for community outreach, advocacy, and SRC member development.

The seven groups are:

- ◆ Council on Education Services for Exceptional Children
- ◆ Mental Health Planning Council
- ◆ N.C. Substance Abuse Federation
- ◆ N.C. Council on Developmental Disabilities
- ◆ N.C. Statewide Independent Living Council
- ◆ N.C. Commission on Workforce Development
- ◆ Commission for Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Substance Abuse

The ongoing information exchange between stakeholder groups has helped to educate members within each sector. Members attended various conferences, including the annual Southeast Regional Institute on Deafness, which was held in Myrtle Beach, SC. An SRC member who attended the event shared information about changes occurring in the deaf community as well as the ongoing negative stigma often associated with deaf culture. Additionally, the North Carolina Rehabilitation Association's annual G.R.E.A.T. Conference, "Coming Full Circle" took place in November and was co-hosted by the Assistive Technology Program (NCATP) in Raleigh.

Public Forums

Beyond the consumer satisfaction survey and communication via the Division's website, the council conducted two public forums to seek input from consumers in the eastern and western regions of the state. During the March 19 forum at the Pasquotank County Library in Elizabeth City, among the biggest concerns were getting ready to work and access to benefits counselors. Transportation was highlighted as a significant barrier in rural areas and, although several industries use vans to transport workers to jobs on the coast, the median income remains one of the lowest in the region. The area requires significant economic development and the creation of stable employment opportunities and wages that cover expenses like high-quality childcare.

On October 1 at the Comfort Inn in Sylva, audience members spoke about being overqualified for available jobs. The jobs that exist are often short-term and transportation can be a barrier when families share a vehicle, reducing opportunities to seek work in other locations. One parent expressed concern for his son when he is no longer there to advocate for him, and stressed the importance of building assets for the future.

The public forums provide value to the council by expanding opportunities for public input and increasing awareness of the SRC's role as an advocate for consumers and the Division. In collaboration with VR staff, the council continues its efforts to identify viable solutions for the issues consumers face and implement those solutions statewide.

SRC Member Training

During full council meetings, members engaged in discussions with regional and local managers and guest speakers about the challenges of providing services and cultivating partnerships with community organizations and local businesses. Brenda Savage, Chief of Policy Development at Workforce Solutions and fellow council member, shared information about the Unified State Plan and requirements associated with the implementation of the Opportunity Act, including several new provisions that went into effect on July 1, 2015. The four-year Unified State Plan is job-driven, tied to North Carolina's economic base and focuses on career pathways to help workers acquire marketable skills and industry recognized credentials. The plan will have national performance measures and local standards.

Gwen Safriet, Rehabilitation Counselor, gave a presentation on the process of transitioning youth from school to work. Students develop independent living plans while learning skills that will help them integrate and be successful in their community and on the job. Transition planning requires collaboration with students, their families, community representatives and potential employers.

Stephanie Hanes, VR Program Specialist for Transition & Employment Services, updated the council on the expansion of Project SEARCH, which serves high-school students with significant intellectual and developmental disabilities. This unique program takes place over the course of a year and is facilitated through close partnerships between VR unit offices, county school systems and local employers. A combination of classroom instruction, career exploration and hands-on training provides real-life work experience

to help youth with significant disabilities make successful transitions from school to adult life. Fidelity to the Project SEARCH model is overseen by a steering committee.

The Director of the Cherokee Tribal VR Program and SRC member, Kimlyn Lambert, showed a video about the Cherokee Tribe. The Tribal VR program works closely with VR, often sharing cases. Federally funded every five years, the program addresses rates of disability as high as 25 percent, and challenges with drugs, diabetes, amputees, mental health and fetal alcohol syndrome.

In December, the full council met at the State Employees Association of North Carolina. The presenter, Ardis Watkins, emphasized the importance of constituent contact with state legislators to share life experiences, and spoke of our responsibility to educate lawmakers on vital issues, such as the impact of budget cuts and service privatization on consumers.

SRC Liaison/VR Client Appeals Coordinator Kim Schmidt reported on the FFY15 annual client appeal/due process cases. The number of appeal cases decreased from the previous year by almost half. Disputed issues involved determinations of ineligibility, the scope of consumer IPEs, cost of services or termination of services. Several cases were resolved through administrative reviews or an agreement reached prior to a hearing.

Review and Analysis of the Client Satisfaction Survey

The consumer satisfaction survey is mandated by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, which states that the State Rehabilitation Council shall conduct a review and analyze the effectiveness of client satisfaction with:

- ◆ the functions performed by the designated state agency;
- ◆ vocational rehabilitation services provided by state agencies and other public and private entities responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities under the act;
- ◆ and employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services under this title, including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with such employment outcomes.

Survey Process

The survey is conducted by the SRC in cooperation with VR staff. Council and staff share responsibility for analyzing and reporting the results.

The survey was sent to consumers whose cases were closed after receiving VR services. Three methods of communication were used to collect survey data: an email invitation with a link to an online version of the survey; a questionnaire with a self-return address and prepaid postage, and random telephone calls.

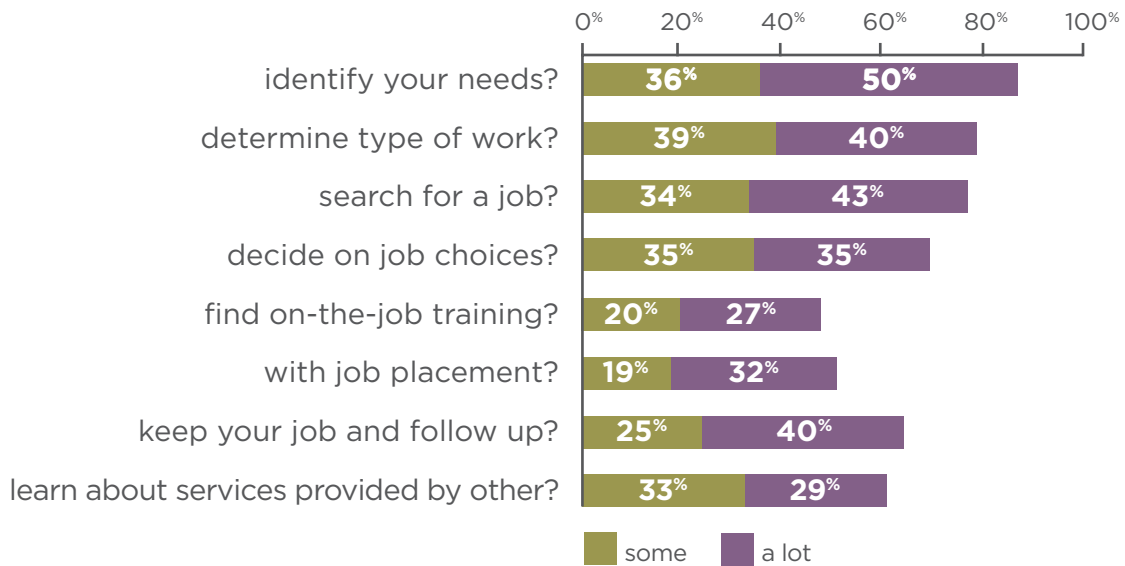
Of the 11,470 surveys distributed, a total of 1,180 were completed by former VR clients who received services under an individualized plan for employment (IPE) prior to case closure, including 70 web-based surveys, 542 telephonic surveys and 568 that were completed and returned by mail.

Overview of Survey

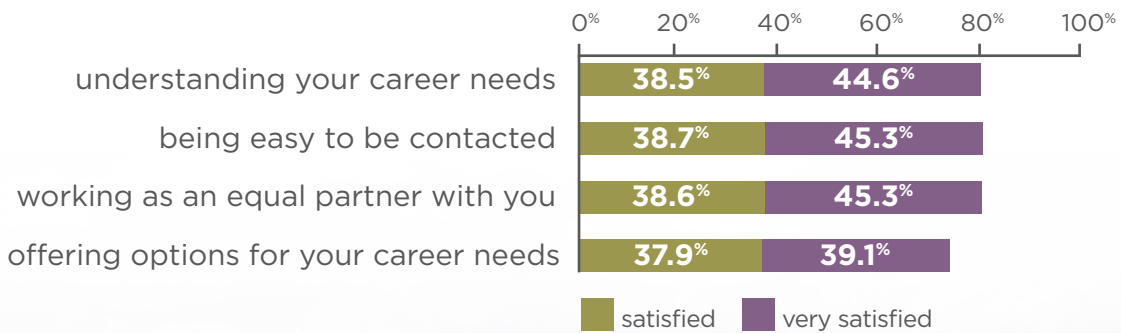
The questionnaire is comprised of seven items designed to: (1) identify who is completing the questionnaire and whether the consumer completed it with or without help from a family member or a caregiver; (2) measure the consumer's experience with the VR program; (3) determine whether the consumer received information about the Client Assistance Program and been informed of the right to appeal decisions; (4) measure consumer satisfaction with their rehabilitation counselor; (5) determine the consumer's level of involvement in their rehabilitation program; (6) determine what factors, if any, prevented the consumer from working; and (7) measure consumer satisfaction with response time and overall satisfaction with the VR program.

The following charts reflect measures of consumer satisfaction for FFY15

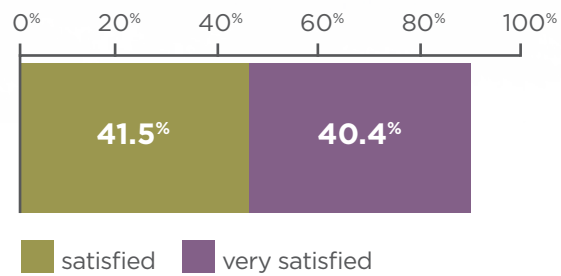
Did VR help you...



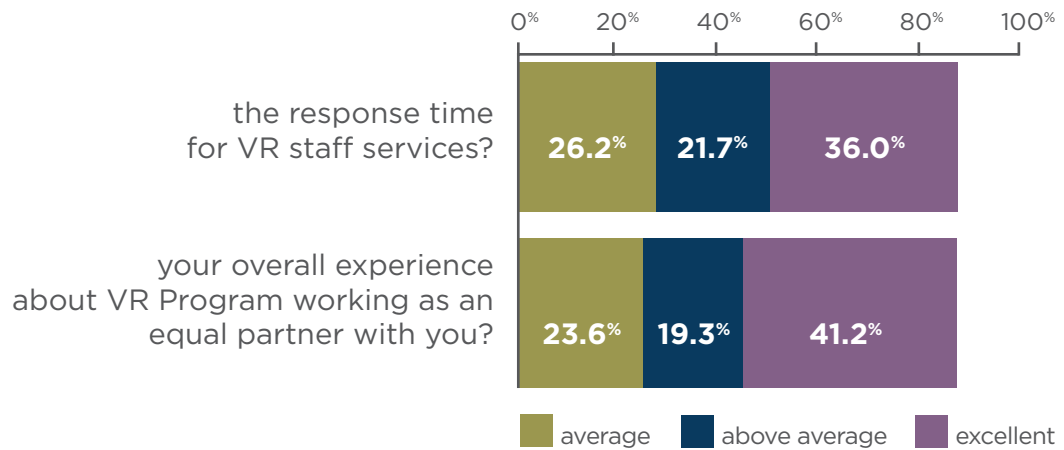
How satisfied were you with VR Counselor...



How satisfied were you with your level of involvement in your Rehabilitation Program?



How would you rate...



Council Recommendations

The Executive Committee provided the following recommendations to the Division regarding goals, priorities and strategies.

Recommendation 1:

In support of elements of the Strategic Plan pertaining to advocacy, the council again recommended that the Division prepare customized reports for each state legislator featuring the return-on-investment value to the economy of each district within North Carolina.

Recommendation 2:

Whereas the council recognizes that employment options are generally decreasing in rural North Carolina, and since many consumers cannot relocate to more urban areas due to their dependence on natural supports, the Division's self-employment option should remain a well-supported service option.

Recommendation 3:

The council recommended that all quarterly meetings contain a standing item for the Client Assistance Program to provide an activity update. Additionally, the council recommended that regional directors and unit managers be provided a standard set of questions and topics to use as framework for reporting on local developments, activities and/or concerns during quarterly council meetings.

Recommendation 4:

The council recommended that the jointly conducted public forums continue to be held twice annually to facilitate stakeholder participation and strongly encouraged VR staff attendance at these events when possible. The Division will continue to actively support these public forums by canvassing communities across the state to solicit input on how VR is addressing consumers' needs through the provision of programs and services.

Recommendation 5:

Whereas the council is concerned about providing responsive services to consumers and realizes the Division's abilities in this area are impeded when high vacancy rates occur within the Division, the council recommends that VR provide regular updates regarding key vacancies, including direct service positions such as counselors, so that the council may advocate appropriately as included within the current 2014-16 Strategic Plan.

Recommendation 6:

Whereas the council's Consumer Input and Public Outreach Committee acknowledged decreasing response rates on self-administered written questionnaires, the council recommends that VR shift half the funds expended on the written questionnaire to expanded use of the telephonic client satisfaction survey. Further, the council recommends extending the survey to clients in active status and employing a weighted sampling method to maintain costs and better ensure representation across disability types, minority status, age, and gender.

2015 Meeting Schedule

March 19-20	Elizabeth City
June 10-11	Raleigh
October 1-2	Sylva
December 10-11	Raleigh

The Members of the North Carolina State Rehabilitation Council: 2014-15

Lisa Ward-Ross, Chair
Representing Community
Rehabilitation Service Providers

John Marens, Vice-Chair
Representing Client Assistance
Program (CAP)

Doreen Byrd, Past Chair
Representing Parent Training
and Information Centers

Meg Ackley
Representing Regional Rehabilitation
Centers for the Physically Disabled

Stephen “Mark” Baker Representing
Disability Advocacy Groups

Quintin Boston
Representing Non-Division
Rehabilitation Counselors

Cindy Harrell
Representing Business
and Industry Sector

Wayne Giese
Representing Disability
Advocacy Groups

Robert Gilmore
Representing NCDVRS Consumers

Michael Hobbs
Representing Business
and Industry

Kimlyn Lambert
Representing Directors of
Projects under Section 121

Ping Miller
Representing N.C. Chamber
of Commerce

Laurie Ray
Representing State Education
Agency (IDEA)

Keith Renner
Representing Labor

Brenda Savage
Representing N.C. Department
of Commerce, Division of
Workforce Solutions

Vacant
Representing Disability Advocacy
Groups (two)

Vacant
Representing Statewide
Independent Living Council

Non-Voting Member

Elizabeth Bishop
N.C. Division of Vocational
Rehabilitation Services
Division Director



Vocational Rehabilitation Services
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

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