**Blind Field Services Program Report**

**First Quarter 2022-23**

**July 1, 2022 – September 30, 2022**

Pursuant to Senate Bill (SB) 105, Chapter 1102, Statutes of 2002, the California Department of Rehabilitation’s (DOR's) Specialized Services Division (SSD) and Blind Field Services (BFS) were established in July 2003 to provide improved specialized, and comprehensive services to people with vision loss. It is the vision of BFS to increase the number of successful employment outcomes for consumers seeking competitive employment and ensure that every blind and visually impaired Californian who wants to work, obtains employment; and every blind and visually impaired Californian who may not believe they can work, is provided the necessary counseling and guidance to overcome their individual barriers to employment.

**BFS Service Delivery**

All DOR offices are open full time. BFS Applicants and consumers can choose whether they want to come into the office to meet face to face or have a video or phone appointment. BFS has seen an increase in requests for appointments in person during recent months. Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and private vendors serving BFS consumers also continue to provide services through this hybrid approach of both in person and remote services.

**BFS Staffing**

BFS has a current allocation of 108 permanent staff positions. 106 of these are filled or in the process of being filled and include:

1 Regional Director, 1 District Administrator, 9 Field Team managers, 1 Operations Team Manager, 1 Operations Team Lead Analyst, 1 Contract Administrator, 1 Regional Business Specialist, 43 Counselors, 17 Service Coordinators, 4 Procurement Analysts, 20 Office Technicians and 2 Account Technicians. 1 new Analyst position in the process of being hired will be split between the BFS Operations Team and the Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) program. 2 BFS Counselor positions were temporarily loaned to the other DOR districts due to extremely high caseloads in some of those districts. The BFS Operations Team Lead Analyst has continued to be redirected by other DOR departments to projects outside BFS such as VR Connections and the Demand Side Employment Initiative (DSEI) grant. Due to the ongoing need for those important DOR projects, BFS is analyzing how to best address the need due to this loss.

BFS was recently allocated 5 new Limited Term positions for up to 2 years. These positions are required to focus at least 50% of their time on Student Services. Three of these positions are for paid Graduate Student Assistants (GSA). These positions will be advertised to target graduate students working on their Masters in Rehabilitation. The 7 BFS interns currently working on their Masters in Rehabilitation will be able to apply for these positions. The other 2 Limited Term positions are paid Student Assistant (SA) positions and will be open to those working on their undergraduate degrees in various fields. 1 SA will work with the BFS Regional Business Specialist and the 4 Business Specialists assisting with the process of obtaining paid Work Experience with students and adults. The second SA will be working with the Operations Team assisting them with the large volume of complex authorizations BFS continues to generate.

**Training**

BFS is excited to announce that it has rescheduled the next in-person SB 105 training on Wednesday July 12 through Friday July 14, 2023, at the Orientation Center for the Blind (OCB). This will be the 20th anniversary of SB 105 taking affect. We felt it was appropriate to celebrate that fact by having this training at a venue that was an important part of this legislation. This training will focus on BFS Counselors and Team Managers. Managers will meet the afternoon of Wednesday July 12. All staff and other participants will attend the all-day training session on Thursday July 14. Friday July 15 will be an open house at OCB with tables having information related to BFS services, tours of OCB, Assistive Technology vendors who want to present and other items to be determined.

BFS is changing the traditional SB 105 mandated training from a conference once a year for all staff to an ongoing training model throughout the year as needed. Training plans are also being refocused on the requirements set forth in the SB 105 law which states:

1. Develop and implement mandatory orientation training programs for new Rehabilitation Counselors for the blind.

2. Develop and implement ongoing mandatory training for Rehabilitation Supervisors of blind-designated units.

3. Establish minimum professional competencies for Rehabilitation Counselors for the Blind.

4. Provide continuing in-service education to Rehabilitation Counselors for the Blind.

5. Establish and maintain, within the department's Internet Website, a communications system for staff serving blind and visually impaired consumers for the purpose of sharing resource information, effective practices, and problem solving.

Some of the BFS training plans include standards and materials created through the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC). We are also working with a Low Vision Optometrist in California on the development of a series of basic trainings related to various eye diseases, various types of vision loss and resulting impact and a live Question and Answer session with the Optometrist.

Other BFS staff not attending this SB 105 training at OCB or other similar training focused on Counselors and Managers will also continue to have ongoing training as needed.

**Electronic Records of Services (eROS) for Vocational Rehabilitation Services**

DOR staff has now transitioned to a paperless electronic records of services management system. As of July 1, 2022, records of services for all new applications or requests for services are being opened and maintained in Aware with no hardcopy folder. This is a big change for the DOR and ongoing efforts are being made to make sure blind and visually impaired BFS staff and consumers can take advantage of this new way of doing business and that all documents and processes are accessible.

**Changes in Post-Employment Services**

As previously reported to the BAC, RSA has recently clarified that Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies must now provide Post-Employment services through an amended Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) after an individual achieves an employment outcome, but while the individual still meets the definition of a “participant”. All BFS consumers served under the old Post-Employment Services (PES) status have been closed. Training has been given to BFS staff to quickly open cases where individuals are working and need to maintain their employment.

**BFS Statistics for State Fiscal Year to Date (SFYTD) 2022 – 2023 as of 9/30/2022**

Applications this SFYTD; 373

Applications as of the same date in 2021; 224

Applications as of the same date in 2020; 161

Applications as of the same date in 2019; 237

Successful closures current SFYTD; 62

Successful closures as of the same date in 2021; 69

Successful closures as of the same date in 2020; 50

Successful closures as of the same date in 2019; 75

**Services to Students with a Disability (SWD)**

The term “student with a disability” means an individual who is not younger than 16 and is not older than 21 years of age.

Apps for current SFYTD; 49 or 13% of total apps.

Apps from the same date in 2021; 197 or 43 % of total apps.

Apps from the same date in 2020; 122 or 76% of total apps.

Apps from the same date in 2019; 39 or 16 % of total apps.

BFS currently has 4,023 open cases. Of that number 654 are ages 16 – 21 or 16%. WIOA requires that the DOR spend 15% of its funds on Student Services. Although BFS has 16% of its cases with students 16-21, BFS has not spent 15% of its budget on Student Services. BFS is making its best efforts in reaching that goal through more available services such as paid Work Experience.

**Hourly and Median Wage Information**

* Comparing all 14 DOR districts, BFS has the second highest average hourly wages at employment at $27.07 per hour. The statewide average is $20.50.
* BFS has the second highest average weekly wage of $ $845.73 with an average of 32 hours worked per week. The statewide weekly average was $675.27 with an average of 32 hours per week.

**BFS Contract Participation**

Students in Transition Partnership Programs (TPP); 29

Students in other student services contracts including the Foundation of California Community Colleges (FCCC), the American Job Centers of California (AJCC), Student Transition Experience Program (STEP) and other private vendors; 34

Students in We Can Work (WCW); 6

Student in College to Career (C2C); 1

Individuals in Workability III; 30

Individuals in Workability IV;12

Individuals in Mental Health Contracts; 2

**Apprenticeship**

Blind Institute of Technology (BIT) – 1 consumer recently finished the Salesforce Administrator Certification preparation in October

Massage Therapist - BFS has entered an arrangement with two other partners to provide a Massage Therapy apprenticeship pilot program in the Orange County/Los Angeles area. These partners are hoping to have a minimum of 6 interested consumers apply and if possible, up to 10. They want to start as soon as possible and are ready to proceed with a facility and trainer already in place. The anticipated start date is the end of November 2022. BFS was approached by this team who specifically wanted this program just for blind consumers. BFS provided 8 interested consumers so far who will be interviewed to determine if they are a good fit for the program. This is an excellent option for BFS consumers interested in this vocational goal as they are paid while training. The other key is that everyone in the program is connected to an employer while in the program and working for that employer while training. It is expected that the employer will continue to employ the therapist once the training is complete. BFS currently has over 50 consumers in Massage Therapy plans. This new program is open to have people transfer from other programs they are currently in, take new applicants or provide additional training to massage therapists who have already completed their training but have been unable to obtain a job with an employer.

**Adult Work Experience**

4 individuals have started Adult Work Experience. Three more will be starting very soon. One is just finishing up 300 hours which is the maximum under this service currently, but BFS is requesting additional hours which would be beneficial to this consumer as well as others in the future.

**Student Work Experience**

BFS was allocated 2,200 hours of paid Student Work Experience this fiscal year. This service is provided through FCCC. To date, BFS has 4 students who have already utilized 1,100 hours of this service which is well ahead of schedule in terms of BFS fully utilizing these dollars for the year. BFS will likely be requesting additional hours for this very important service. Whether that request will be granted remains to be seen.

**VR Connections (Portal) Updates**

Current Features – Available Now

* Contact Request
* Request for Services
* Multi-Factor Authentication (MFA) for Vendors
* Payment Status for Vendors
* Expedited Authorizations
* Electronic Review/Approval Process for IPEs
* Consumer Verification of Goods and Services

Features that will be released in the coming months:

* Document Upload for Consumers
* Vendor Invoice Upload
* Path to Career Planning
* Welcome Guide
* Career Profiler, Occupational Research and Resume Builder Tools

As of October 2022:

* Over 190,100 Authorizations have been expedited through the Portal
* Over 1,300 vendors have created a Portal account
* Over 33,700 IPEs have been sent for review and electronic approval through the Portal
* Over 10,450 interested individuals have used the online Request for Services or Contact Request; about 55 new requests are received each business day and 12 per weekend day

**DOR staff member quote:**

“My partner, who is also blind and is about as low tech as you get, used the Portal to sign his IPE. It took him about 2 minutes, and he was impressed with how seamless it was. That is a true testament to the Portal’s success. The VRC team should be proud.”

**Authorizations processed by BFS Operations Team**

BFS will no longer be reporting activity due processing to the BAC as activity dues do not accurately reflect the amount of work being completed by the Operations Team. Instead BFS will be reporting the actual number of authorizations processed by the BFS Operations Team each quarter. This does not include authorizations that are completed by the Office Technicians in the field such as schoolbooks, clothing, and other simpler purchases.

Authorizations for Assistive Devices; 326

Authorizations for Vision services including low vision aids; 602

Authorizations for Personal computers; 481

Authorizations for non-CRP AT training; 91

Authorizations non-CRP AT assessments/eval; 231

Total number of complex authorizations is 1,731 or an average of 577 authorizations per month.

**Department of Rehabilitation’s Excellence in Customer Service Awards 2022**

“Exceptional customer service means genuinely caring about your customers, going above and beyond what the customer expects, taking that extra step to make them feel that you understand what they are going through and wanting this to be the best experience they have ever had.”

DOR specifically recognized five staff across the State for their exceptional commitment to service. These staff were among fourteen incredible employees nominated by their Managers for their commitment to meeting our customers’ needs with proactive communication, prompt follow-through, attentiveness, respect, and a consistently positive attitude.

One of the winners this year was Mitchell Ham who is a service coordinator with Blind Field Services in TM Jessica Hatcher’s unit in the Orange County area. We are proud of Mitchell and grateful for his excellent service to our BFS consumers.