

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**Rehabilitation Training: Rehabilitation Long-Term Training**

AGENCY: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Education.

ACTION: Notice of proposed priority for fiscal year 1999 and subsequent fiscal years.

SUMMARY: The Secretary proposes a funding priority for fiscal year 1999 and subsequent fiscal years under the Rehabilitation Training: Rehabilitation Long-Term Training program. The Secretary takes this action in order to assist State vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies in carrying out their Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) plans.

DATES: Comments must be received by the Department on or before July 13, 1998.

ADDRESSES: All comments concerning this proposed priority should be addressed to Beverly Steburg, U.S. Department of Education, 61 Forsyth Street, S.W., Room 18T91, Atlanta, Georgia 30303. Telephone: (404) 562-6336. Individuals who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) may call the TDD number at (404) 562-6347. Comments may also be sent through the Internet to:

Beverly__Steburg@ed.gov

You must include the term "Rehabilitation Long-Term Training Program" in the subject line of your electronic message.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Beverly Steburg. Telephone: (404) 562-6336. Individuals who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) may call the TDD number at (404) 562-6347.

Individuals with disabilities may obtain this document in an alternate format (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, or computer diskette) on request to the contact person listed in the preceding paragraph.

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Note: The official version of this document is the document published in the **Federal Register**.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: One of the emphases in the 1992 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (the Amendments) is the need for qualified personnel in the VR program. This is evidenced in both the statutory language and legislative history, including the report of the Senate Committee, which indicates that trained, qualified VR personnel often make the difference between success and failure in facilitating the achievement of quality employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. Accordingly, the Amendments introduced into the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (the Act) the provisions of section 101(a)(7) related to the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development. One of the key CSPD provisions, section 101(a)(7)(B) of the Act, requires designated State units (DSUs) to establish and maintain personnel standards for rehabilitation personnel, including VR counselors.

The regulations in 34 CFR 361.18(c) implement the CSPD statutory requirements with respect to the development and maintenance of DSU personnel standards. These provisions require, in part, that DSUs establish personnel standards "that are consistent with any national or State-approved or -recognized certification, licensing, or registration requirements * * *" applicable to a particular profession. In addition, those standards must be based on the "highest requirements in the State"—defined in the regulations to mean the highest entry-level academic degree needed for any national or State-approved or -recognized certification, licensing, registration * * *."

Based on the preceding requirements, if a State has not adopted certification, licensing, or registration requirements for rehabilitation counselors, State VR agency counselors must meet personnel standards that are consistent with the national standard for VR counselors—Certification for Rehabilitation Counselors—meaning that counselors must have a masters degree in rehabilitation counseling or a closely related field. An informal survey by the

Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation estimates that approximately 45 percent of the current 11,000 counselors nationwide have a masters degree. Some State agencies have very few counselors who meet this standard. To the extent that is the case, VR agencies are required to develop and implement a plan (referred to as the State's CSPD plan) for retraining or hiring counselors that meet the highest requirements in the State.

The proposed priority would support creative, innovative approaches for assisting State agencies to meet the previously-described statutory and regulatory personnel requirements for VR counselors and to carry out their CSPD plans. Distance learning and virtual training arenas are among the potential approaches that can reach counselors conveniently, including counselors who do not live or work near an academic training institution. Degree-granting programs that include competency-based components also would be appropriate under this priority. Those programs would allow for consideration of the past experiences of counselors, yet require rigorous assessment of skills and knowledge to ensure competency in core areas. Generally, training approaches proposed by applicants must address the unique learning needs of currently employed VR counselors, reflect their learning styles and professional experiences, and be accessible at a time and in a place that would maximize participation.

In an effort to maximize benefit to the VR program while minimizing costs, potential applicants may wish to consider collaborative models with, for example, community rehabilitation programs, other public agencies, or private entities.

The Secretary notes that the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) funds only training programs that are accredited. For purposes of this priority, RSA may fund programs that are in the process of applying for accreditation. However, a funded project must be accredited by the time its first graduates complete the program. The Council on Rehabilitation Education is the current body that accredits programs that train rehabilitation counselors.

The Secretary will announce the final priority in a notice in the **Federal Register**. The final priority will be determined by responses to this notice, available funds, and other considerations of the Department. Funding of particular projects depends on the availability of funds, the nature of the final priority, and the quality of the applications received. The

publication of this proposed priority does not preclude the Secretary from proposing additional priorities, nor does it limit the Secretary to funding only this priority, subject to meeting applicable rulemaking requirements.

Note: This notice of proposed priority does not solicit applications. In any year in which the Secretary chooses to use this proposed priority, the Secretary invites applications through a notice published in the **Federal Register**. A notice inviting applications under this competition will be published in the **Federal Register** concurrent with or following publication of the notice of final priority.

Priority

Under 34 CFR 75.105(c)(3) and section 302(a)(1) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, the Secretary proposes to give an absolute preference to applications that meet the following priority. The Secretary proposes to fund under this competition only applications that meet this absolute priority:

Projects shall—

(1) Provide training to current vocational rehabilitation counselors, including counselors with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those from diverse backgrounds, toward meeting DSU personnel standards required under section 101(a)(7) of the Act, commonly referred to as the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD);

(2) Address the training needs specified in the CSPD plans of those States with which the project will be working; and

(3) Develop innovative approaches (e.g., distance learning, competency-based programs, and other methods) that would maximize participation in, and the effectiveness of, project training.

Multi-State projects and projects that involve consortia of institutions and agencies are also authorized, although other projects will be considered.

The regulations in 34 CFR 386.31(b) require that a minimum of 75 percent of project funds be used to support student scholarships and stipends. The regulations also provide for a waiver of this requirement under certain circumstances, including for new training programs.

Finally, the Secretary intends to approve a wide range of approaches for providing training and different levels of funding, based on the quality of individual projects. The Secretary takes these factors into account in making grants under this priority.

Goals 2000: Educate America Act

The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Goals 2000) focuses the Nation's education reform efforts on the eight National Education Goals and provides a framework for meeting them. Goals 2000 promotes new partnerships to strengthen schools and expands the Department's capacities for helping communities to exchange ideas and obtain information needed to achieve the goals.

This proposed priority would address the National Education Goal that every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. The proposed priority furthers the objectives of this Goal by focusing available funds on projects that improve the counseling skills of vocational rehabilitation counselors of State VR agencies, which will improve the responsiveness of the VR system to adults with disabilities and their vocational pursuits.

Intergovernmental Review

This program is subject to the requirements of Executive Order 12372 and the regulations in 34 CFR Part 79. The objective of the Executive order is to foster an intergovernmental

partnership and a strengthened federalism by relying on processes developed by State and local governments for coordination and review of proposed Federal financial assistance.

In accordance with the order, this document is intended to provide early notification of the Department's specific plans and actions for this program.

Invitation To Comment

Interested persons are invited to submit comments and recommendations regarding this proposed priority. All comments submitted in response to this proposed priority will be available for public inspection, during and after the comment period, in Room 18T91, 61 Forsyth Street, S.W., Atlanta, Georgia, between the hours of 8:30 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday of each week except Federal holidays.

On request the Department supplies an appropriate aid, such as a reader or print magnifier, to an individual with a disability who needs assistance to review the comments or other documents in the public rulemaking docket for this proposed priority. An individual with a disability who wants to schedule an appointment for this type of aid may call (202) 205-8113 or (202) 260-9895. An individual who uses a TDD may call the Federal Information Relay Service at 1-800-877-8339 between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m., Eastern time, Monday through Friday.

Program Authority: 29 U.S.C. 721 (b) and (e) and 796(e).

(Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number 84.129, Rehabilitation Long-Term Training)

Dated: June 8, 1998.

Curtis L. Richards,

Acting Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

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