

One of the first duties assigned to me was the Strategic Plan. As a former VR Counselor and Supervisor for an agency serving the visually impaired, I understood the vision and mission of the agency. To develop the goals, strategies, objectives, and individual action steps I started by meeting individually with each program director. During these meetings we discussed how the director ran his/her individual program, what the various roles were of their team, what challenges they faced, and what goals would they like to accomplish over the next 1, 2, and 3 years. Once this was identified in each program I compiled the information and looked for common themes. From this we derived the 3 Goals in our current plan.

Once the goals were defined we used the same challenge and goals lists and prioritized to develop the strategies. Once the strategies were developed, we focused on actual objectives that would assist us in achieving the strategies and goals. From that came the action steps that identified what each program would do to assist the agency in reaching the identified goals.

Many of our programs perform similar action steps within their individual program. As an example, Training & Employment are constantly seeking partnerships across the state to assist in providing services to persons with visual impairments in underserved areas. Older Blind and Children's Services do the same, as does Independent Living and Vocational Rehabilitation. The action steps needed to reflect this and allow for tracking for each program in this area.

While creating the Strategic Plan it was also important for each program to be focusing on the unique needs of persons with visual impairments. Often a person with a visual impairment isolates and believes they can't do anything if they can't see. Each program within SCCB reaches out across the state to identify and assist the more than 65,000 people with serious visual impairments The Bureau of Labor and U.S. Census Department report living in South Carolina. The Strategic Plan is also built around the Federal Fiscal Year system. The reason for this is that the majority of our funding is derived from the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration Grant. This grant requires yearly reporting of much of the information measured and tracked on the Strategic plan and as it is a Federal Agency, the reporting must be done on the Federal Fiscal Year of October 1 through September 30.

The Senior Management Team developed 3 specific goals for the Strategic Plan.

- **Goal #1—Deliver quality, individualized vocational rehabilitation services that will assist Blind and Visually Impaired individuals in obtaining or maintain competitive employment.**
- *This was developed as a goal because one of the primary functions of the agency is Vocational Rehabilitation. Our primary funding is provided by the Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration. SCCB must provide services unique to the population we serve to include mobility training, home management training, braille instruction, and a heavy emphasis on technology training. There is also a great deal more public awareness work that occurs because employers are very hesitant to offer employment to someone with limited or no vision, regardless of their abilities. The team at SCCB works together to address individualized needs of each consumer based on their visual acuity, mobility skills, technology abilities, and transferable employment skills. Another very important aspect that is addressed is the consumer's acceptance of his/her impairment as it is difficult to assist a person who has not reached a level of accepting the impairment and understanding that it doesn't mean they have to isolate. Then*

there are those with severe visual impairments who do not desire employment or are too young to think about employment.

- **Goal #2—Provide adjustment to blindness and independent living skills training to Blind and visually impaired consumers.**
- *The reason for this goal is very often someone with a visual impairment doesn't fully accept their condition. They may have lost visual acuity slowly and never believed that they would permanently lose acuity enough to change their lives drastically. Others lose their sight suddenly due to accident, injury, or other medical conditions. In these cases, the person must process the stages of grief and move beyond the denial and anger to be open to the changes in how they now live their life. Therefore, not everyone is ready to focus on an employment goal when they first reach out to SCCB for help. Others are older and may have already retired but want to remain independent, and then there are the young children whose parents are seeking help so their child can learn the necessary skills for success without full sight.*
- **Goal #3—Provide the administrative leadership necessary to accomplish the agency mission.**
- *Creating a strong administrative team to lead the agency to success was selected as the 3rd goal. It is the belief of the Senior Management Team that working together, sharing resources, brainstorming partnerships within the agency, building strong, educated teams with a shared vision, was necessary to accomplish the agency mission of providing quality, individualized services to South Carolinians with severe visual impairments.*

Strategies

- **1.1—Increase the number of consumers served by the vocational rehabilitation program.**
- *The purpose of this objective is to reach as many South Carolinians with severe visual conditions who wish to obtain employment.*
- **1.2—Increase successful placements and closures in competitive, integrated employment for all consumers.**
- *Our Training & Employment and Vocational Rehabilitation programs are working together to educate employers on the benefits of hiring people with severe visual impairments as employment is the goal of all SCCB Vocational Rehabilitation consumers. This strategy is a large part of the first goal in providing quality services.*
- **2.1—Develop and maintain consistent and quality individualized service plans.**
- *Individualization is extremely important in working with the visually impaired. A counselor could have 5 people on the caseload that have the same diagnosis but each one has a different level of visual acuity. Therefore, each person will have different needs when receiving services specific to*

meeting their limitations. Each program requires counselors to complete an individual plan for each consumer to assist in meeting the goal of providing the appropriate services.

- **3.1—Create a diversified, highly qualified workforce with the administrative leadership necessary to ensure accountability, effectiveness, and efficiency.**
- *Rehabilitation is a specialized field, visual impairments and blindness is even more specialized. To meet the goal of creating a strong leadership it is important that SCCB is recruiting and hiring qualified professionals and providing ongoing training to maintain best practice service delivery to our consumers.*

Objectives

- **1.1.1—Increase public awareness of SCCB services to the unserved and underserved minorities and rural counties.**
- *This objective was developed to put focus on how we could reach out to the areas of South Carolina where people may not know about SCCB services or where people think we can't serve them because they are too far from one of our 8 district offices or the main campus in Columbia. The U.S. Census reports that there are approximately 65,000 South Carolinians with severe visual impairments yet SCCB serves less than 5% of that number so we know there are many people to reach. (Progress in this area is being made with public awareness radio spots, new brochures, a supervisor meeting with various Native American tribes, an increase in outreach work by counselors in every program. From February 1, 2016 to February 29, 2016 SCCB saw an increase of 15% in referrals for all programs over January 2016.)*
- **1.1.2—Expand outreach services to unserved and underserved rural counties.**
- *SCCB has entered into 3 MOU's with mobility instructors in different areas of the state. We have also revised 3 outreach positions to include job coaching as well as home management training to enable us to serve more consumers in the outlying areas. All of the counselors in each program, as well as the directors, are researching and contacting potential partners across the state. The VR director has also been very instrumental in the SCCB portion of the Unified State Plan and building partnerships with other state agencies to increase opportunities for our consumers.*
- **1.1.3—Develop a commensurate ratio of consumer to provider on all caseloads to ensure expediency of service in all areas.**
- *This objective was created after a high turnover among counselors last year. Program directors identified that the unequal size of caseloads could have contributed to this turnover. Restructuring the coverage areas for counselors, investigating options such as Skype to decrease travel time, filling vacancies, and increasing the number of counselors serving Transition age youth have all assisted in creating more balanced caseloads for all service providers.*
- **1.2.1—Provide adjustment to blindness, assistive technology, and job readiness training consistently at EBMRC and in outreach locations.**
- *To meet the second strategy of increasing placements it is important that all consumers are provided the necessary skills and tools for success. In the world of the severely visually impaired*

it is imperative that they receive adjustment to blindness counseling to assist them in accepting their conditions and realizing they still have many skills and abilities to be applied to employment. Along with acceptance and skill building, introducing and providing assistance through assistive technology can enable consumers to obtain employment in areas they thought were out of their reach once they lost vision. With screen readers, software that does speech to text, talking GPS, and too many more options to even list, a person with a visual impairment can do almost anything a sighted person can do with the appropriate accommodations.

- **1.2.2—Expand job search, development, and placement opportunities.**
- *SCCB has recently begun working with the WINTAC Technical Assistance Center to obtain access to an online system where counselors and consumers can investigate the labor market, complete online skill assessments, and search job vacancies by zip code and distance from their home. Employment counselors also are required to make a minimum of 10 business contacts each week to build opportunities for consumers.*
- **1.2.3—Increase successful placement rate for youth consumers aged 14 to 21 and consumers requiring supported employment services.**
- *SCCB has doubled the number of Transition Counselors and recently hired a new supervisor to oversee the program. Referrals have increased by 57% due to the aggressive outreach and diligent staff visits to schools across the state. A new Pre-Employment Work Skills curriculum has also been developed and introduced into several schools to assist this age group in preparing for employment. There are several other programs in process to assist in meeting this objective.*
- **1.2.4—Increase the number of successful case closures.**
- *A successful case closure occurs when a consumer achieves their plan goal. This could be employment in the VR program or self-sufficiency in the Older Blind or Independent Living program. This was selected as an objective as there are specific action steps that can be applied to ensure success in this area and it is easily measured to show progressive success.*
- **2.11—Increase community interaction through home visits and developing new referral sources in unserved and underserved rural counties.**
- *While counselors in all of our programs can and do meet with consumers in their home, this objective is especially prevalent in the older blind program and independent living program. Meeting consumers where they live is important as transportation in South Carolina for the visually impaired is limited. Also by meeting in the home the counselor can obtain an accurate picture of the consumer needs around home management and self-sufficiency. Counselors and directors are always looking for new community programs or businesses to bring awareness of SCCB into the many smaller communities across the state. This is done through visits, brochures, phone calls, and staff presentations.*
- **2.1.2—Collaborate with nonprofit, social and human service organizations to provide early intervention services.**
- *This objective applies exclusively to the Children’s Service program. Often parents do not know that SCCB can offer assistance to children as young as 3 years old who have been diagnosed with a severe visual impairment. Therefore it is very important that our counselors reach out to other programs across the state such as HeadStart, Babynet, preschools, and daycare centers to alert*

parents of our services and the importance of beginning early in providing their child with the skills for success.

- **3.1.1—Develop a process to attract highly qualified candidates and heighten employee satisfaction to increase retention.**
- *The Human Resource department at SCCB has been diligently working on providing new training, investigating salary ranges for comparable positions across the state, and maintaining high standards for all positions. They have also begun listing open positions on professional websites to attract candidates with the desired skill sets.*
- **3.1.2—Provide staff development training to improve employee’s skills and provide up to date information to consumers.**
- *Best practice methods in vision rehabilitation change just as they do in all fields. SCCB collaborates with other state agencies and programs such as the National Training Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired at Mississippi State University and Hadley School for the Blind to provide training on new practices that assist the visually impaired. It is imperative that counselors and service providers at SCCB are able to remain well informed to provide exemplary services to consumers.*
- **3.1.3—Strengthen the communication among the leadership team to create a consistent flow of information to staff.**
- *The leadership team at SCCB began having monthly meetings in October. Once per month the team meets to share what the individual programs are doing and to share progress on their Strategic Plan action steps. This has created stronger partnerships between programs and has resulted in more comprehensive services for consumers. It also has provided necessary information to all leadership at one time and they are able to take it back to their individual teams which also assists in meeting Goal #3 of accomplishing the agency mission.*

SCCB was asked to provide an assessment of the most potential negative impact that would result from the failure to meet our agency goals, strategies, and objectives. Specifically these negative impacts include:

- **Goal #1—Deliver quality, individualized vocational rehabilitation services that will assist Blind and Visually Impaired individuals in obtaining or maintain competitive employment.**
- *Congressional intent for the Blind Vocational Rehabilitation program is to support a culture of work, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, economic independence, and competitive integrated employment in the community. Historically, people who are blind and visually impaired who have not participated in vocational rehabilitation programs are more dependent upon public services such as disability benefits, housing assistance, food stamps, and non-governmental charitable organizations. Many have historically been unable to maximize their personal independence and have been dependent on family, friends, or strangers to meet their daily living needs. Many have historically been institutionalized at greater costs to taxpayers. The result has*

been sometimes overwhelming stress and strain on families, communities, public services, non-profit charitable programs, and limits the liberty and freedom of the individual themselves.

With the proper training and adjustment to blindness knowledge, skills, and abilities; as well as assistive technology and vocational training and supports, persons who are blind and visually impaired are able to engage in meaningful, competitive, integrated employment that maximizes their independence and freedom through self-reliance and self-sufficiency.

The strategies and goals outlined in SCCB's strategic plan and included in the Program Evaluation Report are essential to our work in helping South Carolinians who live with blindness and other visual impairments to engage in employment and independent community living.

It should also be noted that South Carolina's business community relies on a well-trained, highly motivated, dependable, and dedicated workforce. As part of South Carolina's workforce development system, SCCB partners with business and other state agencies to ensure that we are preparing the workforce of tomorrow including individuals who are blind or visually impaired as many national statistics indicate that these individuals are highly dependable, uniquely skilled, and promote a diverse workforce.

- **Goal #2—Provide adjustment to blindness and independent living skills training to Blind and visually impaired consumers.**
- *The most essential skills for individuals who are blind or visually impaired to maximize employment and independence include orientation and mobility skills, acceptance of blindness, daily living skills that include compensatory strategies and assistive technology use, Braille Literacy, among others. Research consistently shows that these core adjustment to blindness competencies are essential for employability and independence. Vocational training and skill sets are not enough in and of themselves to enable and empower individuals who are blind or visually impaired to engage in employment. The most negative impact associated with SCCB being unable to provide this rehabilitative service is that individuals will remain unable to engage in meaningful employment, will be socially and economically isolated and dependent, and will ultimately cost taxpayers through increased dependence on public assistance or as demonstrated historically through institutionalization.*
- **Goal #3—Provide the administrative leadership necessary to accomplish the agency mission.**
- *Through the strategies outlined in the SCCB strategic plan, the agency is committed to providing administrative leadership that maintains a diverse agency workforce of highly skilled, highly trained, highly effective and efficient staff of professionals dedicated and accountable for successful consumer outcomes in the areas of employment and independence. The most negative impacts associated with failure to reach this goal's strategies and objectives would be the provision of ineffective, inefficient, and costly services that do not contribute to our consumer's successful employment and independence. Failure to maintain staff diversity would*

impact our consumer's ability to form meaningful Counselor-Consumer working alliances because of difficulty relating to, or being mentored by staff. Failure to maintain and advance staff knowledge, skills, and abilities through comprehensive training and the application of innovative and research based best practices will not advance the agency's Congressional intent, Mission, Vision or Purpose. Finally, in today's world government programs must be accountable to decision makers and taxpayers by proving through data and information that the services provided are being provided as effectively and efficiently as possible to prevent waste.

To conclude my remarks I would like to thank the committee for the opportunity to present on behalf of Commissioner Kirby and the South Carolina Commission for the Blind.