

Transcript

VR 100 Series Webinar: Innovative Strategies from Vocational Rehabilitation During the COVID-19 Pandemic (ID200001)

>> Hello, everyone. This is Mark Schultz, acting assistant secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services and the commissioner of the rehabilitation services administration at the US Department of Education. I want to thank you all for joining us today. We have over 2000 that are signing in right now and more will continue to hop on. So, welcome. I know this is a difficult and challenging time for everyone. None of us thought we'd be facing such an unprecedented time with the coronavirus pandemic. We were anticipating celebrations, events, and activities for the 100th anniversary of the VR program. Instead, every single vocational rehabilitation state agency, your partners, and the individuals you serve are facing unexpected challenges to operations and services. This situation became all too real for all of us last week when we lost a valued member of the RSA team. I'd like to take a moment for silent reflection in memory of Brian Miller who lost his battle with the coronavirus one week ago today. Please join me in a moment of silence to remember Brian. And in support of those who are experiencing the impact and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you. We continue our celebration in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the VR program with this special webinar today. The spinning of this month's VR 100 topic is innovation. Throughout its 100-year existence, the vocational rehabilitation program has continually adapted and evolved to meet the changing public needs to innovated strategies and a commitment to the individuals we serve. VR has adapted to significant changes in who we serve as when the program shifted from serving individuals with physical disabilities to serving individuals with all disabilities, including individuals with intellectual and psychiatric disabilities. And recently we do customer approach with an extension of VR services to businesses. VR has made significant changes in how services are delivered from adding specific services such as rehabilitation engineering to broad changes in approach, including transition and pre-employment transition services. VR has also evolved in how we work with individuals with disabilities from the medical model approach to one of the informed choice and consumer involvement. So, partnering and sharing governance through the state rehabilitation council. This innovative spirit is again on display across the nation today. The state VR agencies and partners respond to the need to provide services in new ways in order to deal with the rapidly shifting service provision and employment landscape triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. More than ever, this is the time that we must be innovative and creative in how we deliver our services. And connect students, youth, and adults to the services that can assist them to take advantage of the jobs and programs that continue to exist. Here our services in VR say, we try to demonstrate flexibility and innovative solutions and the information and guidance that we've provided to the states at the time when almost all of us are teleworking. Most recently, our state shared that we have postponed all monitoring visits. We've also issued an FAQ document on WIOA performance measures and negotiations. We're hoping to release in the very near future additional guidance on fiscal and programmatic issues due to COVID-19. During this time, we've published notices of proposed priorities for technical assistance centers and quality management and quality employment as well as a technical assistance center for independent living services for older individuals who are blind. We've published notices and inviting applications for American Indian VR Services projects and long-term training. Just as the current situation has resulted in RSA conducting its work remotely, we know VR programs that faced even greater challenges. As the coronavirus pandemic has resulted in limitations on the way VR programs can provide services. With social distancing and stay

at home policies in effect in many areas of the country, state VR programs are experiencing challenges that they have different capabilities in regard to remote service provision. That's why it's so critical that we share among RSA, state VR agencies, and our service delivery partners, and the employer community what's working successfully so we can accelerate our learning and maximize our ability to effectively serve individuals with disabilities, including students, youth, and our business partners. As this current situation evolves, we're prepared to continue to work with you to resolve issues and concerns and to remain flexible wherever we're prompted already to do so. In the spirit of sharing, you will now hear from the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center or WINTAC and state VR agencies about what they're doing to be innovative and meeting the needs of their customers, individuals with disabilities, and businesses during this challenging time. But first, a special thank you to the WINTAC and the five state VR agencies for sharing their innovative strategies and flexibilities today. So, thank you to Tim Gaines with Missouri General, Cheryl Fuller, from Texas Combined, Libby Stone-Sterling with Maine General, David D'Arcangelo with Massachusetts Blind, Lawanda Heart with Mississippi Combined. After you've heard from the states, there will be a question and answer chat session for participants facilitated by the WINTAC. Once again, thank you for joining us today. Take care, be safe, stay creative. We will get through this together. I'm now going to turn it over to Chaz Compton, a project director for the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center. Chaz?

>> Thank you, Mark. Hi, everyone. And I am from the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center or the WINTAC. And our role is that we are a technical assistance center funded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration or RSA to provide technical assistance to VR programs and their partners on how to effectively implement their requirements in WIOA. As a result of the current crisis, we had a number of state agencies that we work with. State VR programs and their partners contact us asking us to help them with the information provided on how to operate the VR program by distance, how to provide services by distance, or what are some best practices to provide services by distance. And so, we asked RSA to review and allow us to revise our technical assistance delivery to include information about best practices or effective practices in the delivery of telework or providing services by distance to individuals with disabilities. RSA approved that request and so we modified our technical assistance to include information about COVID-19 and the resources specifically geared towards individuals with disabilities and where they might be able to get services or get resources to help them during this time. And also, created a page on distance service delivery that addressed some effective practices to help the programs share with each other and across the nation on telework and how that could be done effectively. Consequently, we have two of those resource pages up. And if you go on to wintac.org website, you'll be able to see those resources and address those pages plus we developed a discussion forum that can be shared across topics for VR programs and their partners who want to share information or ask questions or just kind of get it back and forth going about how they can get information or what they could do differently to operate the programs during this particularly difficult time. We had to modify our delivery of technical assistance as a whole and deliver information by distance or address technical assistance and training by distance. So, you'll see that we've created quite a number of training that are available on the website to assist VR programs. We've done a lot of the work that we were doing face to face now by distance. And we have been trying to respond to all of the questions that have come through by state agency staff and their partners related to this particularly difficult period. As of the last check, we had nearly 30 state agencies who have contacted us with

innumerable requests across a wide range of areas. But I wanted to share with you today one of the more pressing areas that we've received requests from around pre-employment transitions services. So, I'm going to go ahead and hand the presentation off to Carol Pankow from Career Employment Transition Services team. And Carol will talk to you a little bit about the requests that WINTAC has been getting and how her team responded to those requests. So, Carol.

>> Thanks, Chaz. The Pre-employment Transition Services team has been super busy responding to the needs of states as fast as we can. Over the past five weeks, we've personally interacted with over 40 programs. Here's what we've done in response to the questions and ideas we've heard from you. Our first step was to assist Chaz in building out the website so we could be responsive to your needs. This was up in two days after RSA gave us the go-ahead to add these pages to help all of you. There are over two dozen resources people are using every day for the provision of remote service delivery. Explore Work is a resource that our team developed and has a curriculum for the five required activities. Since the start of the pandemic, we went from 7000 unique views in February to over 30,000 unique views in the last four weeks. Our contractor had to also upgrade the server capacity to handle the increased traffic for this application. Twice a day we make additions to both new pages on our website with new content that is sent in by you. For the second step, we heard from you that you wanted to hear from other people. And what better way than to put together some targeted webinars. Since March 2006, we've held six different webinars and two are on deck for this week. Topics included general questions and answers and an overview of resources in the website, working with providers in the pandemic, virtual work-based learning experiences, strategies for students with complex support needs, and COVID-19 public benefits and the CARES act. Over 10,000 people have participated in these events. We have two additional webinars for this week including using social media and peer-to-peer interactions tomorrow and providing Pre-ETS on the pandemic on Thursday. We're planning on developing four more webinars to cover the remaining Pre-ETS required topics and we are working with states who are developing some really terrific virtual programs. Our third step is partnering with others. And this step is really intertwined with our step two. And we've been really fortunate to partner with NTACTION, Cornell, and the YTAC in delivery of some of our webinars. Timing has been amazing. You have brought ideas to us and we've been able to deliver quickly. We're also partnering with both CSAVR and NCSAB for communications. And we've talked with the CSAVR team about developing some additional resources for virtual work-based learning opportunities. We've also collaborated with CSAVR and the center for innovative training about ideas on short YouTube videos with states presenting on how you're keeping their staff and customers engaged. We also had so many wonderful things happening in the blind agencies that we've reached out to our colleagues at ICI and their community of practice for blind agencies to share what we admired. They have what they call the 14 dedicated to the action blind agencies have taken in response to COVID-19. It was extremely well-attended and had a load of useful information. I do have to give a shoutout to the programs that are presented in our webinars and contributed information to post on the website and given us ideas to share with others. Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida General, Georgia, Idaho General, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts Blind, Michigan Blind, Mississippi, Missouri, Minnesota Blind and General, Nebraska Blind and General, New Hampshire, New Jersey Blind, North Carolina Blind, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, Washington Blind and General, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. And also, a special shoutout to both Rosanne Ashbee and Susan Mitchel for the resources specific to the deaf population. So, please keep your ideas and

resources coming. We're really connecting people from different programs together every single day. And so, thanks for the opportunity to serve you. Back to you, Chaz.

>> Okay. Thank you, Carol. Just to remind our folks, at the end of the presentation, we're going to be taking your questions and answers in the chatbox. And so, please use the chatbox for those questions and answers as we go along through this presentation. And we're very pleased to have with you today four or five different state directors from programs across the nation sharing innovative practices. And we're going to begin that presentation now with David D'Arcangelo, the commissioner for Massachusetts Blind. So, David, on to you.

>> David?

>> Thanks, Chaz. And thank you to Assistant Secretary Schultz for your leadership. Thank you to the WINTAC for your coordination. And thanks to everyone on the call for the work you all do to promote employment opportunities to people with disabilities. I'm very pleased to be here. It's David D'Arcangelo, commissioner of the Mass Commission for Blind, representing my staff of about 138 and working with our colleagues at the Massachusetts rehab commission as well. In Massachusetts, we're really trying our best to not miss a beat here during this crisis. So, you know, when I first spoke with Carol Pankow about this and asked for the opportunity to be on, I wanted to emphasize that when we left our offices on March 13th, we didn't know if we were coming back in a week, or two weeks, or a month, or, you know, now I think we're five or six weeks in whatever it is. You know, we really haven't missed much of a beat. I've got to tell you, we were up and running and ready for business. The following Monday morning at 9 a.m. And that's really thanks to the leadership of our governor and our secretary and really our entire team for being prepared. I think MCB has been positioned well to be able to really deal with the time like this because our counselors and the way we have our systems and processes set up anyways are pretty well-adapted to working remotely. Our VR counselors are all assigned laptops with MiFi and they're really ready to go and work remotely on a daily basis just as we've done over the past several years. So, I think we're a little uniquely positioned maybe or positioned well amongst VR agencies really to kind of keep going during these challenging times. Go to the next slide. So, leveraging things like Zoom and, you know, some of the other activities that are being done online here that are now second nature to a lot of people of where is access remotely and our central registry, all of that work can be done remotely. So, we've continued to register consumers and really keep all of the main processes of our agency going. And our staff has really been trained quickly. So, whether it be the Zoom or these other Microsoft Teams or Skype or, you know, all of the other programs that really allow us to work remotely. We gave trainings early on and our people are very well ingrained in it at this point. And, you know, I'm very pleased because our agency is one of the leaders in state government Massachusetts and maybe across the country where we have quite a few people with disabilities who work for our organization. As a matter of fact, I think the latest metric we have is somewhere around 35% of our employees are people with disabilities. So, it's great to see that the adaptation that our staff has been able to make and, you know, even making sure that the remote learning and remote tools that we're using are accessible and they have, you know, been available to

our people. So, that's really important. We've worked to get the message out. So, we've used our talking information network, we call it TIC and our affiliates, the radio reading network to be able to get the message out to our community. We've used our social media as well as the resources we have, our emails, and all of the other phone numbers and information that we have on our consumers to try to engage with them. So, really early on in this crisis, we started interacting as much as we could with our consumers, and our council really immediately took to the phones and started going through their cases and talking to people and we really had such a great response to that. And I think that's really helped and been effective in allaying some of the concerns that some of our consumers have had. So, our assistive technology unit continues to provide assistive technology although they're doing remotely, we are having drop-offs as well where we're observing the social distancing and getting devices plug and play, ready. So, really all that we have to do is leave them at the door and literally, sometimes our counselors are in the car walking them through it while they're still there. So, if they need to leave it back on their porch to be like reconfigured or press a button or something, we can do that. So, assistive technology is an important piece that keeps going on. We've got some great stories, success stories that have happened as a result that are on the screen now. But really, there are dozens of these that have happened. So, it's encouraging to know that businesses have kept hiring in certain areas. Obviously, other areas have been impacted. And to address that, last week we put out a survey and we're crunching those results. As soon as those results are done, we'll make those available to the group. But really, we're trying to assess how many of our consumers have been impacted employment-wise by COVID-19 and the coronavirus. So, we're working to try to get that. But there are such good stories here of resiliency that our consumers really as you all know, display every day on a day-to-day base. So, now is no different and the great work that our counselors and consumers keep engaging in, it continues to go on. So, I'm very pleased to take any questions and really look forward to engaging with the whole community here. We're open for business, we continue to function albeit remotely. I think we're getting the job done. Our consumers are continuing to be served. And we look forward to the next round of challenges now with this greater economy and the challenges that are going to be placed on it for our consumers. Many of you have heard me speak before. You know, how I talk about with nearly two-thirds of working-age people with disabilities not in the labor force. Really that's one of the things that I'm passionate about is trying to get more of our consumers into the labor force. And I think now more than ever we face that challenge to do. But I think we'll be able to meet it, especially if we all work together, share resources whether it be the WINTAC, CSAVR, and CSAB, RSA, and all of the other organizations involved. We want to work together with you. Please reach out and contact us. We're available at any time. We want to share whatever best practices we have. And also, learn from you all on this call with the great work that you're doing. So, I thank everybody for the opportunity. I look forward to a larger dialogue. We're open and ready for business here in Massachusetts. And our consumers are doing well and I hope that's the same for your consumers across the country. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

>> Thank you so much, David. We sure appreciate that. Next up, we have Missouri General, with Tim Gaines and Chris Clause.

>> Greetings, everyone. This is Tim Gaines from the great state of Missouri, the home of the world champion Kansas City Chiefs and St. Louis Blues. I'm delighted to be able to visit with you today about some of the innovative ways that we're supporting our staff and serving our clients through this pandemic. And since we only have a few minutes, I'm going to get right to it. Missouri Vocation Rehabilitation is housed within the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education which really has been incredibly supportive and responsive to us during this crisis. And our VR management team is organized with a fairly flat structure which is really made us nimble and well-equipped to handle the ever-changing, rapidly changing situations. And all of our client services, our workforce managers, business outreach teams, fiscal teams, etc. have worked hand in hand together to support our staff. And as many of you would agree, the health and safety of our staff is always been our number one priority. And all of our offices have been closed to the public for over a month now. And our district supervisors really quickly developed effective telework plans for their offices to carry out those essential duties and nearly all VR staff are effectively teleworking at this time from their homes. The Missouri VR has always had a strong culture of trust which has been absolutely critical during this time. Our telework plans were developed with trust and flexibility for staff. And like other staff that you have, they're dealing with all kinds of issues as school closures, daycare closures, financial issues in addition with all of their other work responsibilities. So, the flexibility I think is key and has been and will be for our staff. Our supervisors, our counselors already like David said have iPads, and iPhones which made the transition to telework pretty easy, fairly easy. Our support staff, however, mostly have desktop computers which did make it a challenge. And we're working right now with our department's IT unit to furnish laptops, hotspots, and iPhones for our support staff. And so far, most of our support staff have already received the necessary equipment and ability to access work from home. And right now, we made a decision to transition away from desktop computers to laptops for all staff including support staff. And while we're teleworking, it's a great opportunity to encourage all staff to take advantage of the myriad of professional development resources and videos through LinkedIn Learning, Bridge, and a number of other virtual learning tools that we have. But perhaps the most important thing that we've done during this pandemic is not rocket science but really is to have a very regular and daily communication plan with our teams. And I really don't believe that you can have too much communication during this time. You know, it really is -- it'd be easy for staff to feel isolated and detached and uninformed at this time. And I know our management team have been reaching out. I've personally called every single one of our district supervisors, regional managers in all four of our programs to let them know how much we value them and appreciate their patience and commitment through all of this pandemic. Our district supervisors and management teams have had regular WebEx conference calls with their staff to provide information and answer questions and we've had several statewide conference calls. We have another one scheduled next week with all of our managers and staff. And providing up to date information and opportunities for staff to ask questions and voice concerns. We've also recently reached out to all field staff asking them to share innovative practices for serving clients remotely. We were blown away by the response that we got with over 60 pages of information that we have. And another part of our communication is CRPs, our Community Rehabilitation Programs are also a vital part of our work family. And their ability to provide services and sustain service delivery is absolutely crucial. And so, we've been communicating regularly with the CRP directors in the state and our CRPVR steering team and also their Missouri association. Missouri VR recently, we had an invitation for all CRP directors and managers to have an interactive live webinar to listen to their concerns and communicate flexible strategies for remote services and discuss temporary adjustments to milestone payments. And Chris is going to go into

little more detail on this. And throughout all of our constant changes, rapid changes, executive orders, building closures, etc., etc., we have kept in constant communication with our department, Missouri's Office of Administration and the governor's office. As I mentioned, keeping our management team and staff informed with current information has been essential and kept Missouri VR proactive and way ahead of the curve. So, at this time, I'm going to hand the baton over to Mr. Chris Clause, our VR coordinator for performance management for more information on the coordination of services that we are working with our CRPs and also our pre-employment transition services. So, Chris?

>> All right. Well, thank you, Tim. I appreciate the opportunity. As Tim said, my name is Chris Clause and I'm excited to share with you about how we've made some adjustments, particularly in how we support the delivery of CRP-based services and Pre-employment Transition services in response to the COVID-19 crisis here in Missouri. Within a week of our offices being closed to the public, VR leaders together with our CRP partners were able to quickly get together as Tim mentioned and identify what those major priorities and challenges were involving the continued delivery of CRP-based services. And together, we developed three specific solutions which we implemented immediately. First of all, we have had some historical internal practices here in Missouri which limited the amount of support employment job coaching that can be conducted off-site as well as some thresholds for pervading of those services. So, we added some temporary flexibilities to both the on-site and the off-site support employment job coaching rules that we had established here in Missouri in order to promote our participants' ability to continue to receive those important services despite the CRPs limited ability to provide some of those services in person. Secondly, we also temporarily increased milestone payments for assessments, job development plans, job placement, and supported employment and job coaching services. We heard loud and clear from our CRP partners that they were investing in new technology in order to adapt. And so, the milestone payment increases were based on their increased cost in doing business remotely. And lastly, we've acknowledged that the labor market is quickly changing. And so, we internally changed some of our practices to allow for the payment of job placement milestones for jobs that are considered temporary during the crisis. In turn, our CRPs are starting to deliver services with increased flexibility, things like using remote technology to conduct informational interviews as well as mock interviews and job interviews. Development of virtual classrooms for soft skills and other job-specific skill training programs. Conducting community-based discovery activities via video and other remote access technology. And also, providing on and off-site job coaching support through video platforms. For participants that don't have a smartphone, tablet, or computer access, we've even heard that some of our CRPs have created paper packets which they've delivered to the homes of those individuals. And then have been spending time reviewing and completing that information over the phone. I'm also going to talk here for just a couple of minutes about pre-employment transition services. Here in Missouri, every public high school has an assigned VR counselor. And at a very basic level, we know how important maintaining contact is nowadays. And so, in the spirit of continued partnership, we have just simply -- one of the things we've expected is that our counselor just continues to stay in touch with their schools and be a resource. We've also developed an internal guide to provide multiple options for strategies and resources for the delivery of pre-employment transition services. This is a document that we keep on our internal share point site and it provides multiple ideas for our VRCs to provide pre-employment transition service options, delivery options within each of those five required areas. VR also has a contract with the University of Missouri for the delivery of pre-employment transition services to

potentially eligible students across Missouri. Those Pre-ETS specialists are doing creative things as well such as simple things like sending their phone number home to teachers who might be delivering meals to students' homes. Or using Facebook Messenger or texting just to reach out to families. And as a result, we've heard that from our pre-employment transition specialists that families have been responding very favorably and they're actually having more contact with families than ever before. Some of those Pre-ETS specialists have also created some instructional YouTube videos that they're able to share with families which are designed around the five required areas, Pre-ETS areas and students and families can view those at their leisure at home. And lastly, we are being told that our Pre-ETS specialists are using a curriculum called Next Up, which is a proprietary curriculum that lends itself to virtual instructions, provides some customizable tools, enhances the classroom experience as well as streamlining the IET process and helps students achieve employment. It also provides access to an online forum for collaboration and other transition educators. And that's called Next Up, they've we spoke very highly of that curriculum. Lastly, our summer work experience program in Missouri is something that we're very proud of. We're gearing up for the sixth year this summer. It's been one of our most popular and engaging services and we are still determined to push forward as best we can. Right now, we know over 900 students who have expressed an interest in participating. And through our CRP network, we're hopeful to accommodate those students. At least until last week we still had more than 200 employers who said they were committed as of today to provide that service. And while we know more employers will back out, and we don't know what this summer looks like, we're going to plan to push forward today but realize we need to be flexible as we move forward. Our CRP partners are working hard to make the summer work experience continue and are looking for opportunities with employers that may not be as directly impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions as some of our employers have in the past. And we are developing some contingency plans should we encounter a significant change in employers' ability to support those efforts because we do believe in the power of the summer work experience and we want to provide it in some capacity for those students over the summer. That's all I have from Missouri. I'm going to transition back to Chaz.

>> Okay. Thank you so much, Tim and Chris. We appreciate that. Just a real quick message to folks. We're going to switch to the questions and answer for the question function at the end of the presentation just to ensure that our captioner can capture the information correctly. So, thank you for that. We will be switching from chat to the question and answer function. Next up we have Libby Stone-Sterling, the director from Maine General. Libby?

>> Hello, everybody. Thank you very much for inviting me to join you today in this presentation. It's been a challenging time but I'm very proud of our staff and I'm happy to be able to share some of their good work with you today. Maine, as you know, is a rural state and we're a small state population-wise but we're used to the challenges that are faced by not all of our folks having access because of transportation or because of technology. And so, we're used to being creative. And that's really helped us in this time. We're located in the department of labor and we've had tremendous planning in advance. We were one of the latest states to be hit with the virus. And so, we've had the opportunity to really do some planning with our Department of Labor partners. We've become, of course, acutely aware of the impact for unemployment right now. But we're working together and I'm really proud of

how we're doing that here in Maine. We've also been working extremely closely with our partners in the division for the blind and visually impaired and how we can share resources at this time. We've put a focus, of course, as you all have on meeting client needs. One of the first things we did was once we went to telework to move to virtual meetings. So, we're doing intakes over the telephone. We're having meetings with our clients by phone, by a number of different platforms including Microsoft Teams and Skype and Zoom. We're mailing packages out via the good old US Postal Service for folks who don't have access to computers. And we're really taking the time as we always have but even now more than ever to do individualized targeted vocational guidance and counseling. We have the time to get to know our clients even better to understand their needs and to really look at the opportunities because there are certainly many people who are being impacted by job loss. But we're also seeing some tremendous opportunities. And we want to make sure that our clients have opportunities to be able to move forward with those opportunities as well. One of the most exciting things that I've seen though in our staff has been really the development of the new virtual curriculum. And we've taken some tools that we've had and we've been very successful with like a two-day transition career exploration workshop or a career exploration workshop for the adult population. And we've turned those into virtual delivery which has been really exciting to see. It's been challenging for our staff but we've used tools like the Virtual Job Shadow, we've expanded our contract so we could have more seats that are open for our clients. And next week, we will be offering for the first time our career exploration workshop virtually to 19 clients and we'll be able to continue on across the state and offer to more clients. And we're excited about that. So, individuals are going to be able to continue moving forward and practice. We're also doing a lot of work with our school partners. And even though school buildings are closed, many schools continue to have online classes. And we've had our VR counselors go in and be able to join those classes, be able to deliver Pre-ETS activities like mock interviews. And I know the division for the blind and visually impaired has also done a number of activities virtually for school students. And this has been a way to continue to be engaged with young people even at this challenging time. We've had online job clubs for school students and more things that are coming up. And we're really looking at the resources of NACT and WINTAC to be able to help us in those areas. We've also continued to offer, of course, client assistance program services to our clients. And those have been delivered virtually. And I've heard that that's been going very well for those who needed to access them. And, of course, we've had interpreters, cards, and other accessibility resources available so that we can continue to offer those services to our clients. In terms of our staff, we were very well poised to move to telework. We were lucky that we had policies and practices in place already for telework so that we were able to just activate them and move forward. We use the Aware Case Management system which is online. And all of our staff have laptops and cell phones with the exception of some support staff, as we've heard other states mentioned. That's been a little bit more of a challenge but I'm pleased to say that many of our support staff are now able to work remotely. We have many things that are going on to keep our staff connected, including virtual staff meetings. And I know one of our teams every morning the staff do a quick check-in with each other to just say how are things going, how are you doing. And really putting their focus. And we've seen the need particularly at this time to make sure that the individuals are checking in that the folks are feeling connected to each other. And that's been really positive. And as others have mentioned, we've also put a strong priority on professional development. And some of that is around technical work and how do we actually deliver these services in this time. But some of it has also been around learning new skills and around understanding disabilities or other resources in new ways and we've been so pleased with the resources that they made available through WINTAC, NACT,

and other resources as well. And we've really focused on how we can continue to share information between agencies and new ways of working together so that an office in the southern part of the state and an office in the northern part of the state who maybe never have done much work together are now able to collaborate in new ways to deliver training and technical assistance to each other which is really exciting. And I think those are changes that we're going to see continue on well after this pandemic. And then, of course, we're working very closely to meet our partner and employer needs. We have a dual customer focus and we're doing a number of professional development opportunities that are made available for community rehab providers and others in the community as well. We've been offering a weekly stakeholder call and that's been a way to get information out about new things that are going on. And also, to answer questions. And we've also been working very closely with our partners in their career centers to offer virtual job fairs, share information, labor market information, and other resources that we're really working across bureaus to meet our customer needs the best that we can. We've joined in with other departments' calls to share information. And working with our parent organization as well and we'll be later on this month also offering a webinar targeted towards parents and how we can work together. So, in closing, I'm very pleased with the work that our staff have been doing. I've been really excited about the innovations. And even though this has been a challenging time, I'm hopeful about our ability to continue to serve clients as we have and that our new innovative practices will carry on even past this time. So, Chaz, I turn it back to you. Thank you.

>> Thank you so much, Libby. We appreciate you and your work. Next up we have Cheryl Fuller, the director of Texas Combined. Cheryl?

>> Well, good afternoon, everyone. I, first of all, would like to join my colleagues in thanking WINTAC and RSA for supporting and encouraging our work as we all respond quickly and creatively to make sure we can continue to serve our customers. It's a pleasure to join you today to share some of the things we've done here in Texas to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in a way that protects our staff and our customers and maintains continuity of services to the greatest degree possible. You know, we have much in common with the co-presenters who have already spoken before in terms of what we've done and how we've done it. But what I'd like to share with you today is what we've done in two parts. First is our transition to remote work and second to remote service delivery. I would like to say at the onset that this is very much a learning process. My staff have heard me say several times there is no playbook for VR in the pandemic but we are going to write one together. And I'm very grateful that as we write our playbook here in Texas, we can also learn from everything that our sister states are doing as well. You know, we were and are very mindful that our customers are depending on us. So, early on, we've recognized that we needed to be quick but don't hurry as John Whitman would say. And that meant that we worked quickly and carefully and creatively to make good decisions and develop strategies and then we've got them out there so that we could maintain our operations. It also means that we are continually reviewing and revising and expanding what we're doing as we see how those changes are working, where they need to be tweaked, and how we can be more innovative and responsive moving forward. So, with regards to remote work and in the spirit of putting your mask on before helping others, we really focused on making sure that our staff were positioned to continue to serve customers. We have very proactive leadership from our agency executive director and commissioner. So, we began

implementing telework for seven more staff in early March. And by March 17th, we were moving many more staff into telework as our offices closed to in-person access by the public are remained open for remote access. Eighty percent of our staff were in telework status by March 24th and today that percentage is 99.6. So, that's 1610 staff which is up from the number I reported on the slide there because we've hired a couple of folks in the last few days. You know, this was made possible in large part because our managers, program specialists, and counselors were already equipped with laptops and hotspots that already had access through our RVPM. So, we were in good shape to start. But our rehabilitation assistance and some other staff were still using desktops. So, we had to implement several strategies to address this. And first, our managers jumped to it. And when we have a vacant position, we're going to assign a laptop, it was repurposed to somebody that needed it. Our IT department quickly provided additional laptops and hotspots where they had those. And also, our staff with personal computers and internet access at home were able to securely access their systems back at the office. No data was transmitted this way, just that remote access allowed them to view on their home PC what was happening on the screen at work. And finally, our staff didn't have a home PC and we didn't have an agency laptop to issue. Our IT department assisted us with guidance to allow the remaining staff to take their work, issue desktops, and monitors at home. Now we have the government version of Microsoft Office 365 so our staff is able to securely access email, Microsoft Teams, and SharePoint files without the need to log into our VPN, our virtual private network. Of course, they do log in to access network drives, case management system purchasing, and timekeeping systems. You know, as Libby mentioned a few minutes ago, we're using Microsoft Teams. And it is a fantastic tool. In fact, I haven't missed a meeting since we've gone into telework. And I'm pretty sure I'm having more FaceTime with some of my colleagues and staff than I did when we were all in the office together. It's been a really helpful tool for our managers to use to keep their staff engaged and have regular check-ins with their teams. And it's also a tool that our counselors and rehabilitation assistants can use to stay in touch in addition to email and phone. Even the staff that don't have a laptop or a desktop with a webcam can still participate in a team's meeting on audio or chat. We've also increased the frequency of our communication at every level. Our executive director communicates with all staff every week. In VR, our monthly all-manager calls have become weekly calls. Our deputy division directors and I meet twice a day. Our field chief meets with regional directors every day. And we're communicating to everyone more frequently. It's also been important for us to continue some of our other critical activities as we work remotely. For example, every year we have an all-managers meeting called Statewide Managers Meeting. This year we did it using WConnect and a teleconference bridge and we were able to have much of the same interaction we have when we are in person. We quickly changed the whole focus of the meeting to remote work and remote service delivery. And we were able to carry it off without a hitch. And I think our managers, quite a few of them, have said that was their favorite meeting. We're also working to remotely hire and onboard new staff with our HR department putting in place processes to enable that. In fact, I've just hired a new deputy division director last week, all remotely. Our training and development department is also implementing in May versions of our new counselor and new rehabilitation assistance training and it is going to be delivered interactively using Microsoft Teams so that our training for our new counselors can continue. I think when we return to whatever the next informal is we'll find that we'll retain some of these strategies because they're more efficient than what we were doing. With regard to remote service delivery, as with remote work, increased frequency of communication is critical for both customers and providers. We've posted information for both on our website. Our agency has been great about using social media to communicate to our customers that

we're still here and they can access us. We give our counselors a letter to send their customers on their case list so we can reach out to every customer. And we're also encouraging our counselors to contact their customers for face-to-face meetings using teams which will enable -- which you can do with someone external to that agency. We're exploring the use of Zoom as well if that can be done securely. We've also communicated several times with our providers and stakeholders using GovDelivery and those notices are posted on our website. We adapted some of our work processes early on to accommodate remote service delivery. For example, processes to electronically issue service authorizations, receive invoices and reports from providers, a lot of it using Adobe Acrobat, and electronic signatures there. Processes for receiving and sending mail and deliveries where we need to continue to do that. And also, processes that are encrypted to obtain electronic approval from our customers. On March 30th, we've issued exceptions to our standards for providers' manual and VR services manual. That detailed some of these adapted work processes but also allow for some temporary delays in services where that couldn't be delivered safely or remotely. And provide some temporary exceptions to enable and encourage continued service delivery using distance learning methods, interactive platforms, remote communication methods, and teleservice options. This is particularly important for our students with disabilities so that we can continue to provide those pre-employment transition services and encourage our providers to do the same using those remote strategies. We have a case note type that we've added to our case management system to document the use of these exceptions so that we can keep track of those. I would also like to state that our residential training center for VR customers who are blind or visually impaired has done a great job of adapting as well. They had to send customers home in March as we implemented safety measures. But two weeks ago, our physical rehabilitation center staff resumed group and individual training classes using Zoom. They publish a schedule of the courses for the week and they are conducting both group and individual sessions every day and adding new classes each week. And on the good news side, one of the customers they trained recently has been hired by AppleCare. And so, we're continuing to see the success stories too. Finally, as we move forward, we're continuing to explore additional strategies for contact-free service delivery. We think we will need this for some time to come in some form. And we'll probably learn that some of what we're doing is better this way. And so, we look forward to continue to grow and we look forward to collaborating with our workforce colleagues here in the workforce commission and the boards to participate in those virtual job fairs and other opportunities to ensure that our customers can access those job openings as they come up and we get everyone back to work. So, with that, that's my overview and I'll turn it back over to Chaz.

>> Thank you, Cheryl, we appreciate that very much. Our final presenters today are from Mississippi Combined and it includes Chris Howard, executive director of Rehabilitation Services, Lawanda Heart, director of VOC Rehab, and Dorothy Young, director of the VR for the blind. So, take it away, Mississippi.

>> Mr. Howard, are you on?

>> Lawanda, maybe you could take it away until Mr. Howard gets on.

>> Good afternoon, everyone. First off, I want on behalf of Mr. Howard who hopefully we'll get on in a minute, and Dorothy Young who is our VRB director, we want to thank WINTAC and all of the teams in WINTAC who have helped us over the last several years. And I would like to think we wouldn't even be prepared for dealing with COVID-19, specifically dealing with just in our state last month assisting us with measurable skill guide. When we look back over our last 100 years, we look at historic information and our experience. We see the diversity that individuals with disabilities have always overcome. And COVID-19 was just another thing that we had to overcome. Vocation Rehabilitation Counseling profession has always been there even prior to COVID-19. But that's our stuff to rethink VR, to rethink the VR counseling and guidance profession and ultimate responsibility to counsel and guide our clients and to give them hope. Certainly, we've put a lot of things in place as other states did to ensure that our staff would be able to telework that Mr. Howard will talk about. And all of our divisions in this agency who helped to make that possible. One thing in our foundation that we wanted to make sure that our staff that to give them hope, the hope that Vocation Rehabilitation has always been able to give individuals with a disability, that they have the strength and assets that they can try and compete for occupations, the same as individuals without disabilities, even during COVID-19. We knew that communication is a very important characteristic of the success of our clients. And if we don't have communication, our clients will lose that hope and we don't have a relationship with them. I would like to go back to think, we started our innovative strategies around in 2018. As we began to look at tools that our counseling staff could use to help with communication. It would not take the place of their role in the counseling relationship and contact hours with their clients. But Mississippi being a rural state, we are working with more youth and students with disabilities, working with more adults as well as those who have more technical savviness than they had ever before. We were trying to be proactive and work to the future of what WIA wanted us to do. And so, happened COVID-19 happened. With taking close assistance from WINTAC who assisted us and provided recommendations especially for providing pre-employment transition services remotely. Recommendations on ways to get clients signatures and working with our clients from various disabilities. In 2018, we purchased not a system but what we call here SARA as ways, an intelligent interface between our clients, staff, and our case management system aids. This communication would help our staff to document their cases, be innovative, and working with younger people and students. And even though those are adults that have that savviness for technical capabilities. It prepared us for COVID-19. Because during that time when our staff went officially on to telework, we saw a 74% spike in our cases from our clients who had direct contact from their counselor to the clients. We would like to think without SARA we would not have been able to make that significant impact. And began to contact our clients and telework and give them innovative strategies, recommendations that we receive from WINTAC on how to do pre-employment transition service remotely, how to get signatures, work with our MS department to ensure at that time all of our counselors had laptops, had touchscreen laptops where they can begin to give e-signatures as well as MAFA and even portable printers. Dorothy is going to come now. She's going to give a few updates on the strategies and innovative things for working with our blind clients.

>> One of the things that Ms. Heart and Mr. Howard spoke on when he comes on the call is about how we have to meet, communicate, and make decisions. And then that last step is that we have to collaborate with our core partners to assist our clients. As Mark pointed out earlier today when he

began our call, he talked about the unexpected challenges. Well, in our office of vocational rehab for the blind, our Randolph-Sheppard Program faced an unexpected challenge. We have 38 blind vendors in our state that were working every day. And with COVID-19, only two now are working, currently working. Those individuals would normally -- would not have been able to apply for unemployment insurance. But because of COVID-19, they have -- the federal government has passed legislation to provide relief for small businesses and independent workers and this included our 36 vendors that are unemployed at this time. Because of our collaboration with our core partners, with Mississippi Employment Security and our relationship with the executive director there, we're working on our combined state plan. We've reached out to them with our committee of blind vendors and told them about the unexpected challenges of our vendors not being able to go online and sign up for unemployment benefits. As of today, you guys, we have a direct team that's working with our core partners at Mississippi Employment Security and that team reaches out to our blind vendors and set them up with unemployed benefits. As of Friday, we had a conference call with that team at Mississippi Employment Security, with our blind vendors to introduce them to blind vendors. And on Sunday, they were making phone calls signing up our vendors. Since we're in a combined agency, our director of vocational rehab services, our director Lawanda had clients that needed the same services for unemployment benefits. So, we shared those resources and we were able to, not only sign up individuals that were blind, we also are signing up any person in our state with the disability for unemployment benefits. And that's only because of that collaboration with that we are all partners. Mr. Howard is now on the call and he is going to talk now about some of the things and innovative strategies that we used during this period of time. Mr. Howard?

>> Hi! Can you all hear me?

>> Yes.

>> Can you hear me? Hello!

>> Yes, we can hear you.

>> Okay. Great. Hi. Sorry about that. I hit the wrong button. First of all, I do want to thank WINTAC and those who are providing us to speak today. I think it is great to have, you know, different states talk about some of the things we're doing in regards to this crazy pandemic. I mean, who would have thought that we would be where we are right now. You know, in Mississippi, our first confirmed case was March the 11th. After that time, I've got our executive team together and we would meet every morning at 10 o'clock. We started in a conference room and then we moved to a training room so we could social distance. And then a few days after that, we started doing it by the telephone. So, we're currently doing that every morning by phone. But I tell you, it's extremely important that we do meet every morning to get information out about what's going on in the state, what's going on across the country, how we're serving our clients and taking care of our staff. The really great thing we're also

doing is after we have our call, our directors like Lawanda and Dorothy are having calls with their district managers or regional managers, facility managers to talk about what we've talked about. But also get input from them. So, you know, we have found, not only is communication great down the chain but it's also fantastic up the chain as well. One thing I did say on the managers was we have a 24-hour turnaround time in providing answers to questions if it's something we can do right off the bat. Because again, you know, we have 900 employees statewide between our four major programs. And as questions arise, you know, we want to make sure we're responding as quickly as possible so that again, we're taking care of our staff and the people we serve. Starting March 16th, you know, we closed our offices to the public. So, like I said the first confirmed case was March the 11th. On Friday, March the 13th, we closed one office which is where that case was. And then we came back on Monday and closed all of our offices to the public. So, that was a crazy week. But I will say this, we are still maintaining one to two employees in each of our main district offices. The reason being is we want to make sure that we're fully accessible to the public. We want to make sure we're there to open the mail, answer phones, and anything else that needs to be done. So, by having one to two people in the district offices, you know, we were able to accomplish that. But then we're also letting everyone else work from home, to make use of those two-in-one laptops. We bought all essential staff laptops last fall not knowing this was going to happen. But luckily, we had them ready. Our counselors were used to using them. So, when all this happened, we were able to let them work from home. We use Aware so they can access the case maintenance system remotely and also access their emails. So, you know, I feel like we're doing a good job, working with our counselors to ensure that clients continue to get served from their home as opposed to the normal setting in an office. We're also allowing, you know, essential staff to come into the office but that's due to the coordination of our district managers. You know, we've got to make sure that we limit the number of people in our offices but also have social distancing. So even though we have one to two people who are required to be in there every day, we understand that there are times other counselors need to get in there as well and they are supposed to be coordinating that with their respective district managers. So, we are continuing to serve, you know, individuals doing it through the home as, you know, well as, you know, through our district office. Like I said, the laptops have been great for us, the counselors are able to use them, our finance and HR staff have them. The state accounting system is web-based. So, our finance folks can actually process things remotely. So, you know, it is good to know that our vendors are getting paid, authorizations are getting processed, payrolls are being run as they should. So, that's been really beneficial knowing that our finance staff can take their laptops home so we can maintain our social distancing, maintain a limited crew in the state office but still getting information processed timely. So, that's been good for us as well. Just so another off note. We did increase our cleaning contracts. We have a vendor who cleans in accordance with CDC requirements, swiping down door handles, and things like that. So, we expanded their contract so they are going into every office, every day wiping that down to ensure that the stuff that are in the office are kept as safe as possible. And then just the final thing I want to note was one really great thing to come out of this for us is being in the exposure to our office of deaf and hard of hearing. Of course, we have an interpreter who interprets with the governor. And that has really gotten a lot of attention from various media sources. So, we've had two reporters do stories for the news. We've had a couple of radio shows have us call in and a couple of newspapers. So, we really are getting a lot of good exposure for our offices of deaf and hard of hearing and the great job our interpreters are doing across the state. So, that's something that we're excited about that really showed the public, you know, how we conserve all Mississippians even though they're deaf and hard of hearing through our office of deaf and hard of

hearing. So, that's really what I had. If somebody said it first before I turned it on and got on. But I apologize, I was having trouble with my phone. But thank you all again for having us all. We're glad to be on. We appreciate the other four states who have talked about some ideas. I wrote some stuff down that we can use too. So, this call has been very beneficial to us. And hopefully to everyone else out there. So, thank you all so much.

>> Okay. Thank you very much, Mississippi Combined. We appreciate that. So, we're going to enter into the question and answer period now. We appreciate you guys being patient with us as we adapt here a little bit to make sure our captioning is clear and working well. We will be taking questions for the questions and answers function. This presentation will be available with captioning on the WINTAC website next week. So, please check back for that if you're interested. And now I'm going to turn over the question and answer period to be facilitated by Chip Kenney the co-project director for the WINTAC. Chip?

>> Thank you, Chaz. As you can imagine, we have a lot of questions that generally fall into three categories or four categories. Questions for RSA, questions for the state directors as a group, we've got a lot of Pre-ETS questions, and then there's some specific questions too. So, I'm going to hopefully take a representative sample of these questions because we don't have time to get to all of them. But we will record all of these and try to get answers back somehow. I'll post them on the WINTAC website or find other ways to address them. So, the first question is, commissioner for RSA, has there been any changes to the 15% required spending for Pre-ETS for the 2019th grant, an extension period or change in percentage required?

>> So, there has been no change at this point. Any change is going to require congressional action because the 15% mandated expenditure satisfied in statutes. So, that's something Congress will need to take up at some point.

>> Thank you. Second question, has there been any discussion regarding extending the 60-day eligibility and 90-day plan to develop requirements due to difficulty in reaching consumers and extra time needed to complete evaluations and plans?

>> So, there has been discussion, yes. But I would remind everyone that that opportunity exists now. So, working with the individuals and in particular, in given circumstances of COVID-19, that opportunity exists to extend those timelines by mutual agreement. So, I would recommend to work together on that. And I think, you know, it's reasonable to expect that it would occur given the situation we're all facing right now.

>> Okay. And then, the last question, for now, is there any federal or state guidance for providing equipment or internet access for clients in training, schools, colleges, and Pre-ETS activities, etc.?

>> So, there's been guidance in the past, I guess, specifically for COVID-19 but I can share is we have guidances coming out in a number of areas. I saw some of the other questions that will be imposed. And I believe some of those areas will be covered in the Q&A documents that we're hoping to put out very soon around fiscal and programmatic issues.

>> Okay. Great. Thank you so much. So, these are questions for the panelists. So, feel free to chime in. The first question is related to the one that the commissioner just answered. How are you dealing with clients who do not have high-speed internet access in their community? There is no cable, no cell service. Does anybody want to take that one?

>> Hi, this is David from Massachusetts Blind, the commissioner. Generally, our clients that have had a poor internet connection or they just don't use the internet for whatever reason, we just find an alternative method. So, whether it'd be US Mail, whether it'd be phone calls or a visit to their house. Obviously, visits to their house now is going to be difficult. But perhaps there are ways that it could be done with still respecting the social distancing. So, you know, ways to problem-solve around that maybe if you could call them ahead of time or send them a letter ahead of time and let them know, "Hey, you know, we're going to be out front and literally have a dialogue that way." Or I have a dialogue over the mail. I mean, as long as you can assure confidentiality, I think you need to make sure that whatever communication is happening obviously, you need to make sure it's just between you and the consumer. I would just problem-solve around that.

>> This is Lawanda in Mississippi. SARA has helped us with our communication with our clients that may not have internet access. What we found that most of them have cell phones. And we can utilize that to try to communicate with them. That's how I think some of our -- and the usage of our counselors communicating with our clients rolls up to 74% and some of the counselors reaching out to the clients through SARA.

>> This is Tim Gaines. I also agree with what David was saying. But we also -- our CRPs have developed packets for those individuals that don't have internet access and actually have taken them by their house, their residence, you know, for to read or sign.

>> And this is Cheryl. And where we have customers who may not have computer or internet access. In most instances, they have something similar to what my colleagues have described. But we have a process where we have designated staff members in each region that will receive documents or applications from other counselors that need to be printed and mailed to a customer and we can include

a self-addressed stamped envelope in that. So, we have a designated person in every region that's handling that function. And then we have developed some alternative processes for how we will arrange for the pickup and the processing of mail. And that helps us where we absolutely have to use the postal service.

>> Next question for the states. Can some state presenters address how they modified or changed their intake procedures for new applicants, are they seeing any changes in the number of applicants? So, two questions there.

>> Well, this is Libby. And we haven't seen changes yet in the number of applicants although I think we're very much expecting that we will see an increase in applications shortly. And as people are getting ready to go back to work or thinking about what jobs are lost or what jobs will be retained. In terms of our practices, yes, we are using more releases that are done online and being able to direct people to more computer-based resources as a way to not have to put as much in the mail going back and forth and changing app. Certainly, as I mentioned earlier, using the phone for intakes which isn't something that we typically did before.

>> Other comments on intake?

>> This is Mississippi again. I think overall when you first start teleworking and doing a lot of things that we did see a decline in some of the applications in the process of it, not so much of individuals wanting to apply. But I think even doing this, it has really helped and we hope that number will go up as our staff get more accustomed to doing a lot of things virtually that they were not accustomed to, that they have the tools and resources. And our clients also will become more accustomed to it where you may not have to be there physically but throughout these other platforms that you can do intakes and different things like that.

>> So, the next question that's popped up several times for the state panelists, how are you getting signatures for documents, and are you using specific software for that.

>> This is Mississippi again. MIS department helped us with that because one thing as Mr. Howard spoke about that we have equipped our counsels with the two-in-one laptops that those are really effective in trying to get e-signatures, they've developed a document and they went out to our staff on about two or three different ways. WINTAC also gave us a recommendation on how to get client signatures. We can get to the client the document then how do you get the signature. Our blind division, Dorothy, they use a pin process because some of those despite how many other alternative ways you may have to electronically do signatures, the visually impaired may still require a person to see it. So, they use a pin process that also went out to all counselors just so they have probably about three or four different

mechanisms to obtain signatures as well as the old standard way, mail it to them and they send it back in the mail.

>> Chip, this is Chaz. If I could also mention I did get permission from Shelley Hendren, the director for Nevada Combined that they recently received approval to use DocuSign to get clients signatures. So, a shout out to them for getting that through the process and helping that work for consumers right now.

>> All right. Thanks. Any other comments around electronic signatures? So, we've had providers on this as well. One of the questions is how can VR help them, meaning the providers, retain their value employment specialists when service outcomes are being negatively impacted. I don't know if there is an easy answer to that question but maybe a little bit of discussion on what you all are doing to assist providers.

>> This is Cheryl in Texas. And I think what we have focused on that we can do first and best is making sure that we're providing some exceptions to the requirements we have for our providers so that they can continue to deliver services. And that is encouraging them to use remote options or interactive platforms to continue to provide services and hopefully be able to keep their staff moving forward but also keep our customer services moving forward. And we'll continue to get feedback from providers to determine what other exceptions may be necessary to enable that. But our focus is on helping them continue to serve our customers to the greatest degree that it is safe and effective.

>> And this is Libby in Maine. And I think really one of the things we've done is just to think about the conversation in terms of what is the modality for delivering the service. And now that the services won't happen or now that we're not able to move forward working with our CRPs but let's think more creatively about the modality. And so, you know, can you have a virtual informational interview, can you have Virtual Job Shadow, all of these pieces can we think about them. So, that CRPs are able to continue to provide some of those services but just not in the way that they may have traditionally.

>> So, one more question for the panelists in general. What's being done about providing personal protection equipment to staff who are still working at offices and for consumers who might be working and need that equipment as well?

>> This is Dorothy, Mississippi Combined. And one of the things that our executive director Chris Howard implemented here was protective gear for all staff and an agency that sanitizes, there are gloves and there are masks for all staff that's coming in. Remotely I suggest he mentioned. But one of the good things that he also implemented was in our Randolph-Sheppard program so that those vendors that may be going in part-time out to their jobs, he implemented protective gear for all of our blind vendors. So, they were given the same opportunity to have protective gear when going out to their jobs.

>> This is Cheryl in Texas. So, we have our staff in remote work right now. So, at 99.6%, pretty much everybody is working from home. But what we are beginning to discuss is what kind of protective gear and what kind of cleaning supplies should we have available for our staff as we begin to return to the office in whatever form or phase that looks like. So, we're beginning to think about that now as we plan forward.

>> All right. So, if we could move on to the Pre-ETS category. And again, this is for the panelists and Carol too, please feel free to chime in on this. Are there Pre-ETS services for summer employment that may provide virtual work experience?

>> So, this is Carol. I have been sending out the link to folks to our website to show there was last week a webinar about the work-based learning opportunities and having them be virtual. So, folks can access that link on our wintac.org website. And we have had several resources put out under resources for distance service delivery. And there's just -- I can't even think about how many things have been put out there. Folks are going to want to take a look through what the different states are doing in that particular area. And then if someone has a particular question and they want to email me directly, they can at cnpankow@gwu.edu.

>> Thank you, Carol. Other thoughts on that? Next question regarding Pre-ETS. How accessible are Pre-ETS activities to deaf and hard of hearing students? There are many technologies out there, does anyone have any particular models that they're working and using now to provide Pre-ETS virtually with this population?

>> So, we do have -- this is Carol again. We do have our resources for distance service delivery. Transition tendency curriculum database has a sortable program that does allow you to drill down into students who are blind or visually impaired or deaf and hard of hearing so that you can find the best resources that would work for those students.

>> And this is Libby from Maine. And last week I had the opportunity to work with our division for the deaf and hard of hearing and they're planning an exciting eight-week virtual program for students across the state with deaf and hard of hearing. And we'll be happy to share that as soon as it's put together as well.

>> Great. So, a couple of questions for the panelists, specifically for Missouri, Chris and Tim, the question was what is your backup plan for the summer WET. And you probably know what that acronym is.

>> This is Chris. I'm actually very interested to follow up on what Carol just shared because, at this point, we are still learning how we might be able to deliver those actual work experiences virtually. I did reference that we were looking to identify some backup plans and at this point, some of the things we've considered are some of the other ways that we've delivered pre-employment transition services here in Missouri in the past. For the last five or six years we've had -- we've worked with our community for an independent living -- I'm sorry our centers for independent living here in Missouri. And they have -- this goes way before the COVID-19 situation. They've provided some very innovative and creative ways to deliver many of the -- any and all of the five different required activities, both in person and some that can be adapted remotely. So, we're basically looking for flexibility in terms of ensuring those students that they may not be able to have work experience still are having access to quality pre-employment transition services. But we are going to be shifting gears here as we start to see more concerns emerge from employers about how we may be able to deliver those actual work-based learning experiences remotely. So, I appreciate Carol's comments and we'll be looking to that. So, the short answer is that our plan right now would be to look at just delivering quality pre-employment transition services to those students as best we can.

>> Thank you, Chris. So, this is a general question again, not a Pre-ETS question for the panelists or any states. Increasing their focus on business services to be ready for when the economy opens up so people with disabilities are able to fill jobs at a similar rate to non-disabled peers.

>> Hi, this is Cheryl in Texas. And what we are working on right now is how to make sure we're partnering with our 28 workforce boards and their business services staff at the board level and contractor level as they begin to plan and engage the business community to get those job openings available to their customers as well as our customers. And the Virtual Job Fair Guidance that was recently published by our workforce division colleagues is something that we anticipate we'll be able to partner with the boards on very successfully. So, that's what we're looking forward to doing. And also looking at other strategies that will help us prepare so that we're ready when businesses begin to hire.

>> Hi, this is David in Massachusetts. I think it's up to all of us though to make sure we're putting the best case forward to employ our people. And really, you know, the pitch to employers is the resilience that's been displayed by our consumers during this time. Really, it's evident all the time to them. Who do you want on your team? Well, I want the people on my team that are used to adversity, that are used to perseverance and really have that gusto. Those are the people employers want to hire. And our people have that intuitively by the nature of their disability. So, I think making the best pitch for all of our people as we reemerge from this. I see an opportunity during this time for all people with disabilities in terms of employment.

>> Thank you, David. And thank all the panelists and commissioner and Carol for your thoughtful responses. There's a ton of more questions, we will organize them and get answers back to you as soon as we can. And with that, I will hand it back to Chaz.

>> Okay. Thank you, Chip. And thank you, everyone, for participating. Thanks especially to commissioner Schultz for arranging of this and his introduction and to all the state directors for your participation. As Chip mentioned, we will get all of this information out to you. We will post it on the wintac.org website. It will be available next week. So, if you missed something, come back to the site after Monday of next week and we'll have it up for you. Thanks, everybody. Take care and be safe and be well. Bye.