

JUN 06 2014



TEXAS HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION

KYLE L. JANEK, M.D.
EXECUTIVE COMMISSIONER

June 6, 2014

Mr. Ken Levine
Director
Sunset Advisory Commission
1501 North Congress, 6th Floor
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Mr. Levine:

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for the exceptional job you have done during this review process. Sunset staff were thorough and comprehensive in their assessment of the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitation Services (DARS) and we appreciate the hard work.

Attached you will find our response to the Sunset Staff Report. The report raises concerns with the agency's approach to oversight and ensuring accountability, while acknowledging the recent steps taken to make improvements in these areas. We are supportive of the intent of these recommendations, and are prepared to work with the Sunset Commission and Legislature to implement needed changes.

We look forward to discussing these recommendations at further length with the Sunset Commission later this month, and to working with you throughout the continued review of the health and human services system as a whole.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Kyle L. Janek in black ink.

Kyle L. Janek, M.D.
Executive Commissioner, HHSC

Handwritten signature of Veronda L. Durden in blue ink.

Veronda L. Durden
Commissioner, DARS

Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services

Response to Issue 1

The Separation Between DARS' Divisions for Blind Services and Rehabilitation Services Causes Unnecessary Duplication and Impedes Access to Services.

Change in Statute

1.1 Require DARS to integrate administration, management, and oversight of the divisions for blind services and rehabilitation services to eliminate duplication and better serve consumers.

DARS supports efforts to integrate and consolidate administration, management, and oversight of the divisions for blind services and rehabilitation services. The agency is committed to aligning its regional boundaries with the Health and Human Services Commission; co-locating office space; consolidating operational support and quality assurance functions; and aligning rules, policies, and training staff to address the comprehensive needs of every consumer. These changes will result in cost savings, greater efficiencies, and improved consumers' access to services. DARS also supports enhanced tracking and reporting of consumer services to better ensure accountability and pinpoint process inefficiencies. Consumers who are blind or have visual impairments have specific needs, and DARS believes any integration of services should maintain distinct, easy-to-access services for those consumers.

Management Action

1.2 DARS should develop a transition plan for the integration of the administration, management, and oversight of the divisions for blind services and rehabilitation services, no later than March 1, 2016.

DARS supports completion of a transition plan for co-locating office locations, consolidating operational support and quality assurance functions, and aligning rules, policies, training, and reporting requirements. Strategic planning of such efforts will better ensure a successful transition.

1.3 Direct DARS to take immediate steps to ensure access to services for people with multiple disabilities, no matter which division offers the services.

DARS supports this recommendation. A comprehensive policy outlining steps to serve this population would foster cooperation and ensure people with multiple disabilities receive seamless services.

DARS Lacks Case Oversight to Control Spending and Ensure Effective Delivery of Services.

Change in Statute

2.1 Require DARS to create clear, validated guidelines for case workers to ensure better decision making for successful, cost-effective outcomes.

DARS supports this recommendation. Creating clear guidelines for counselors, based on research and best practices, will promote and ensure successful and cost-effective employment outcomes.

2.2 Require the agency to create a robust and consistent case review system for all direct services programs.

DARS supports this recommendation. A comprehensive and research-based review system will increase counselor accountability and ensure consistency across caseloads.

2.3 Require DARS to designate staff to monitor performance across programs and regions.

DARS supports creation of a separate monitoring function outside the individual program areas and regional structure to analyze and track statewide performance. The agency is evaluating available resources to form a new group versus expanding the role of existing groups.

DARS Offers Many Independent Living Services Consumers Could Easily Access Through Local Centers for Independent Living.

Change in Statute

3.1 Define DARS' role in the provision of independent living services as supporting and monitoring the network of centers for independent living.

DARS supports this recommendation. As part of a statewide, independent living services provider network, opportunities exist to reduce or eliminate duplication of services and to further bolster the network of centers for independent living (CIL).

Agency Modification

1. Amend Recommendation 3.1 to authorize DARS to provide direct services as a last resort should no CIL or other nonprofit organization be able or willing to fulfill obligations.

Management Action

3.2 DARS should evaluate independent living services available in communities throughout the state.

DARS supports analyzing capacity of the current independent living services system. This analysis would allow the agency to comprehensively plan for service delivery to ensure the system is organized effectively.

DARS' Unfocused Approach to Employer Relations and Transition Services Hinders Its Ability to Increase Consumers' Job Opportunities.

Change in Statute

4.1 Require DARS to build and maintain close coordination with the Texas workforce system and employers to increase job opportunities for people with disabilities.

DARS supports the recommendation to strengthen the agency's coordination with the Texas workforce system. A focused, statewide strategy for engaging employers increases successful consumer outcomes.

4.2 Require DARS to partner with the Texas Education Agency to develop a mechanism to target schools with the highest need for transition services, and to develop policies to ensure it provides a consistent, minimum level of service.

DARS agrees with the recommendation to develop a partnership with the Texas Education Agency. Such a partnership will create a mechanism to identify areas of the state with the highest transition needs and develop uniform, statewide policies to address those needs. A robust approach to transition services benefits Texas students by improving access to DARS services, ensuring schools are aware of the services DARS provides, and increasing student employment outcomes.

Management Action

4.3 Direct DARS to consolidate its employer relations staff and give them responsibility over workforce system coordination and employer initiatives.

DARS agrees with the recommendation to consolidate employer relations staff and effectively maximize outreach to employers, increasing consumer employment. By consolidating this function and allowing staff to focus on employer relations, the agency can target its efforts, build stronger business relations, and improve employment outcomes for consumers.

4.4 Direct DARS to develop a strategy for assisting federal contractors to hire individuals with disabilities, and to task its employer relations staff with researching and anticipating similar federal or state initiatives in the future.

DARS agrees with the recommendation to develop strategies that leverage resources and engage federal contractors in reaching the goal of employing more people with disabilities. Such a strategy could greatly increase employment opportunities for consumers.

Response to Issue 5

DARS Lacks Mechanisms for Effectively Integrating, Directing, and Overseeing Its Programs.

Management Action

5.1 Direct DARS to develop mechanisms to more effectively plan for, track, and evaluate the performance of its programs and staff.

DARS supports the recommendation to develop formal mechanisms to evaluate program and staff performance. While the agency is currently engaged in multiple performance improvement activities and cross-agency initiatives that address areas of improvement; a formal tracking process will assist agency management, ensure accountability at each step in the process, and effectively communicate expectations to all staff involved with the activities.

Response to Issue 6

Texas Has a Continuing Need for DARS' Services, but Decisions on Its Structure Await Sunset's Analysis of the HHS System Overall.

Recommendation

6.1 While DARS' services remain needed, delay decisions on continuation of the agency's structure until completion of the Sunset review of the health and human services system overall.

The agency agrees that there is a continuing need for DARS' services.