DARS and DBS Chapter 1

Erin: “I’m Erin Wilder and I’m the transition specialist for DRS for the state.”
Kevin: “And my name is Kevin Markel and I’m the transition specialist for the Division Blind Services.” Erin: “The Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services or DARS is one of the departments under the Health and Human Service Commission. Within DARS, we represent two divisions, the Division for Rehabilitative Services, which is DRS, and the Division for Blind Services, which is DBS. In both divisions we have vocational rehabilitation programs that are intended to help people with disabilities go to work, prepare for work, maintain work, and other activities related to work. One of the primary differences is the population that we serve. DBS serves peoples whose primary disability is blindness or visual impairment, and DRS serves all the other disability groups.”

Erin: “VR services are intended to assist eligible individuals with disabilities to find, prepare for, and maintain work in the community. Services are considered on an individual basis, so you could have two people with seemingly similar situations who would end up receiving different services. And with some exceptions, counselors are given professional leeway to determine what is the most appropriate service for that individual.”

Erin: “The DARS counselors are responsible for caseloads serving students or adults or in some cases both. They are highly qualified, they are required to have a master’s degree, and most of them have training in vocational rehab, social work, counseling, or a related kind of field. Within the Division for Rehab Services, we have approximately 95 counselors across the state who serve just transition students. Their primary role is to be in the schools, they spend most of their time there, and they are assigned to the largest high schools first.” Kevin: “And with DBS, we have approximately 25 counselors across the state that serve in the capacity of a transition counselor.” Erin: “So I said earlier that we have approximately 95 transition counselors that are dedicated to transition across the state. We do, in addition to those 95; we also have just as many or more adult case load counselors who also serve schools. So the transition counselors are assigned to the largest schools first, and then for the schools not covered by the transition counselor in that unit, they are covered by other counselors.

To be eligible for vocational rehab services a person has to meet four criteria:
1. Consumer has physical or mental impairment
2. The impairment constitutes a substantial impediment to employment
3. Require VR services to prepare for, engage in, retain gainful employment or a number of other activities related to work
4. They are capable of working”

Kevin: “And DBS has an additional requirement. The eligibility criteria for DBS are exactly the same with the exception of the first criterion. So at DBS because we serve a primary disability of visual impairment, we defined that the individual must meet a visual impairment criterion of:
1. Best acuity of 20/70 or worse in the better eye, or field restriction of 30 degrees or worse in the better eye.”
Erin: “Many times students will come to us and they have testing that’s been done in the schools, and what we’re looking at is a little different than what the school will be looking at. They’re generally looking at how that disability affects a student in terms of their education, and we’re looking at it in terms of work. So sometimes there’s a lot of overlap and sometimes there’s not. We also see records a lot where there’s been a Reevaluation of Existing Data, or REED, and so the testing may actually be pretty old, but they’ve just been requalified for special ed. So in those cases, depending on how old the testing is, what the disability is, and how like it is to change over that period of time, we may do an additional evaluation. And when we do that, we pay for it; it’s at no cost to the individual. And sometimes having both really rounds out our understanding of that person’s situation.”

Kevin: “Most of the consumers with whom we work, we would expect that there would be some evaluations provided by the school district, especially if they are involved in special education, but as Erin mentioned, those are going to come from the perspective of education. And so in order to obtain more vocational implications there may be a number of different evaluations or assessments that we may either provide or purchase to help design the most appropriate plan of services for the consumer.”

Erin: “It is very individualized, so there’s not a list of services that we can or cannot provide, but as long as the service is reasonable and necessary to help that person reach the agreed upon vocational goal, there are very few things we cannot provide. There are a handful of things we are forbidden to provide by law, but it’s just a handful of things. Need is determined on an individual basis, as I said, and the counselor and the consumer will work together to determine what the appropriate goal is and what the services to support that goal are. Some of the more common services for transition age consumers are:

- Career exploration- many times they come to us and they’re not sure what they want to do
- Counseling and Guidance
- Individual Counseling
- Medical Equipment- sometimes we provide wheelchairs, prosthetics or those kinds of things, or even lower tech things like hearing aids or glasses
- Assistance with different types of training to prepare for work- sometimes that college, sometimes it’s a vocational program or a certificate
- Soft skills development- gain a better sense of what it means to be an employee”

Kevin: “At DBS, because blindness and visual impairment is kind of a unique niche with some unique nuisances, we identify six core areas that we evaluate consumers on and then subsequently provide services around those six particular areas. And they include:

1. Adjustment to blindness or vision loss
2. Independent Living skills
3. Independent travel skills
4. Communication skills (including things like Braille, assistive technology, etc.)
5. Support system
6. Development of vocational skills”
Kevin: “So as Erin alluded to some of the services that are typical to transition services, we have those as well, in addition because some of the nuisances are unique to kids who are blind/visually impaired. We can also assist in things like specific independent living skills training, orientation mobility training, and certain types of assistive technology. And we also do a number of workshops and seminars that address a number of things along the line of adjustment to blindness or the development of prevocational/vocational skills.”