



CENTERS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING
COMPLIANCE REVIEW REPORT

Volar Center for Independent Living, Inc.

Grant Award Number: H132A930048

REVIEW DATES: June 20 – 22, 2012

Draft Report: July 24, 2012
CIL Response: September 13, 2012
Final Report: September 24, 2012

REHABILITATION SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

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I. PURPOSE OF THE ON-SITE MONITORING REVIEW

Sections 706(c) and 722 of the *Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended* (Rehabilitation Act) mandate that the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) conduct on-site reviews of centers for independent living (CILs) funded under Title VII, Part C, Section 722. The objectives of on-site reviews are to:

- assess compliance with the requirements of Section 725(b) and (c)(3) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 CFR 366.60-366.63;
- study program operations, organizational structure and administration of the CIL under Section 725(c)(1), (2), (5) and (6) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 CFR 366.2 and 366.50;
- review documentation sufficient to verify the accuracy of the information submitted in the most recent 704 Annual Performance Report;
- verify that the CIL is managed in accordance with federal requirements in the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR);
- assess CIL conformance with its work plan, developed in accordance with Section 725(c)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act and 34 CFR 366.50(d)(2), conditions of the CIL's approved application, and consistency with the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL);
- identify areas of suggested or necessary improvements in the CIL's programmatic and fiscal operation and provide technical assistance resources available on the local, state, regional and national level;
- identify areas of exemplary work, projects and coordination efforts and make this information available to the larger CIL community; and
- provide an opportunity to share information with experienced nonfederal individuals involved in the operations of CILs and make available technical assistance to enhance CIL operations or to minimize or to eliminate problem areas.

II. METHODOLOGY

The on-site review of the Volar Center for Independent Living, Inc. (Volar) in El Paso, Texas, was conducted from June 20-22, 2012. The program review covered the independent living (IL) operations and activities and the financial review examined the center's participation in Title VII, Part C, of the Rehabilitation Act. RSA used the On-Site Review Guide (ORG) to conduct the on-site review. During the review, interviews were conducted with Volar's management, staff, consumers, and members of the board of directors. In addition to the interviews, program and financial documents were reviewed in accordance with the protocol required by RSA's ORG, including written policies and procedures, a sample of consumer service records (CSRs), and other documents that verified compliance with standards and indicators. CSRs were selected for review on a random basis. The review team conducted an exit conference at the conclusion of the review to provide feedback on initial impressions from the review.

The RSA review team included the following individuals:

- Elizabeth Akinola, RSA program specialist;
- Mitch Granger, nonfederal reviewer; and

- Gerry Price and Ed Estrada, DSU representatives (Texas Department of Assistive & Rehabilitative Services).

III. MISSION AND DESCRIPTION

Volar was started by a group of individuals with disabilities in 1981 as a grassroots organization. Originally named the El Paso Opportunity Center for the Handicapped (EPOCH), the center received 501 (c)(3) federal income tax status and was incorporated on July 9, 1986, under the name Disabled Ability Resource Environment (DARE). Ten years later, in 1996, the organization was renamed Volar Center for Independent Living Inc., taking its name from the Spanish word “volar” which means “to fly” and symbolizes achieving independence. Volar’s mission is to advocate for human and civil rights, community options, and empower people to live the lives they choose. Volar provides IL services in the city of El Paso under its Part C grant and to the broader area of West Texas using state and other funds.

In addition to providing the four IL core services, Volar is involved in the programs and projects described below on behalf of individuals with significant disabilities.

- **Children’s Advocacy and Transition Program:** This program focuses on preparing youth with disabilities and their families for independence. Emphasis is on providing services in the smaller rural school districts of El Paso County where students have limited or no access to other kinds of support services. Many of the parents and families of these students speak only Spanish or limited English. Often, they are not familiar with their rights under state and federal law and are often afraid to challenge authority figures, such as teachers, principals or administrators, because they are afraid of retaliation against their children and of losing all services. The transition program also provides independent living skills training and peer support in the school setting. Skills include career and education exploration, self-help skills, time and money management, self-advocacy and ways to enhance self-esteem.
- **Specialized Telecommunications Assistance Program:** This program provides communication devices to individuals whose deafness, hard of hearing, or other disability impedes the use of regular phones.
- **ADA Technical Consultation:** This program provides information on assistive technology, job accommodations, barrier removal, and tax credits for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act for both the public and private sectors.
- **Lending Closet:** This program provides medical equipment to individuals with disabilities. Items are on loan for as long as they are needed and then are returned for use by others. All medical equipment donations are tax deductible.
- **Transportation Services:** This program is sponsored by the Texas Department of Transportation and Sun Metro and provides assistance to persons applying for transportation services from Sun Metro Lift and the Project Amistad/New Freedom Program. Training is available for individuals interested in learning how to use city fixed-route bus systems as an alternative to para-transit services.
- **Home Buy Choice Program:** This is a collaborative effort between the Texas Association of Centers for Independent Living (TACIL), the Health & Human Services Commission (HHSC), the Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS), Texas CILs, and other

state agencies to assist people with disabilities who want to move from nursing facilities to community based settings. The project works with state agencies, community organizations and advocacy groups who serve children, adults, and elderly individuals with all types of disabilities. DADS provides vital supports to qualified participants, including nursing services, attendant care, case management, unlimited prescriptions, medical equipment, and supplies.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL STRENGTHS AND EMERGING PRACTICES

- **Our Lives - Disabilities and Service Providers Expo:** This is a Volar-coordinated all day annual event started in 2001 to maximize the center's outreach efforts. Participants include the target population of persons with disabilities, their families and friends, as well as professionals in the community that work in the related fields of rehabilitation, social and medical services, social work and governmental agencies. The agenda is developed based on community needs and interests obtained through surveys. Vendors and service providers are invited to participate as exhibitors. This educational and motivational event is a means of outreach and empowerment for many El Pasoans living with disabilities who are still unaware of their rights and opportunities to live in an integrated community of their choice. The service provider's expo component conference provides participants the opportunity to become familiar with available resources, services and products that may enhance independent living.
- **Volunteer Peer Counseling Program:** The goal of this program is to help consumers cultivate independence, competence, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Peer counselors are volunteers, and mostly individuals with disabilities who serve as mentors to others. In addition to having personal experience living with their varying disabling conditions, peer counselors have successfully dealt with many issues associated with living with a disability and are able to share their experiences with others. This program is coordinated and supervised by a designated Volar staff coordinator who is responsible for identifying and training potential volunteer peer counselors. Peer counselors are trained on such topics as IL philosophy, advocacy, community resources, and active listening. They are then assigned to nursing homes, rehabilitation facilities, and hospitals. They generally visit patients/residents, and specific individuals and their families who may need support in dealing with specific issues related to living with a disability either in their homes or in gaining and improving access to their communities. The peer counseling coordinator meets monthly with the peer counselors to discuss their activities and progress made regarding specific assignments. These meetings allow the volunteers to discuss any issues or concerns, and to receive support in addressing these. Volunteer peer counselors register with the CIL and follow established Volar protocols related to IL service provision, including the confidentiality requirements.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During its review activities, RSA identified the observations below and made recommendations that Volar CIL may consider.

1. CSR Management

Observation: RSA randomly selected and reviewed 25 active Consumer Service Records (CSRs), and five inactive CSRs at Volar CIL. All CSRs reviewed contained the basic information required in the regulations at 34 CFR 364.53. However, the CSR information and accompanying narratives were not always consistent in format and quality. For example, there was no uniformity in documenting consumer responsibilities for achieving their IL goals and CIL's facilitation to achieve those goals. Some CSRs included this information in the contact notes; others did not include it at all. Also, IL staff complete a needs assessment form for each consumer but there is no documentation in the goal sheet or the contact notes indicating that IL services were provided to help the consumer address the identified needs. Additionally, once a consumer verbally expresses satisfaction with CIL services when staff contact them to discuss the need for any additional services after a goal has been achieved, the staff documents the contact, and the CSR is closed. None of the five inactive CSRs reviewed contained evidence that the consumers made the decision to stop receiving IL services or to have their cases closed even though each CSR contained a form closure letter indicating that consumers must make this decision.

Recommendation: RSA recommends that Volar:

1.1 review and revise its training, supervision and quality assurance procedures related to case management and CSR documentation.

Technical Assistance: The review team provided the technical assistance below on maintaining CSRs:

- CSRs should contain the same level of detailed information about the consumer's roles and responsibilities for achieving their IL goals as well as evidence of the CIL's facilitation in achieving those goals, and there should be uniformity in where this information is documented in the CSRs.
- When IL staff complete a needs assessment form, they should work with consumers to develop pertinent goals to address the needs identified in the form, and outline the IL services that the CIL will provide to enable the consumer achieve those goals. The goals should be documented on the goal sheet, and the contact notes should reflect the steps taken by both the consumer and the IL staff to achieve those goals.
- Staff should send a closure letter to consumers to allow them make the decision to either continue receiving services, or to have their cases closed after a goal has been achieved. A copy of the closure letter signed by the staff and sent to the consumer, as well as any response received from the consumer should be placed in each CSR if the response is in writing, or documented in the contact notes if provided verbally for proper documentation of evidence that the consumer made this decision.
- Staff should consider completing the online CSR tutorial at:
<http://ilru.org/html/training/rapidCourses/index.html>.
This module, the first in a three-part series, is offered by the Independent Living Resource Utilization and covers the CSRs and ILPs, fundamental federal requirements for record keeping and reporting, the importance of CSRs in meeting the reporting

requirements for the annual federal 704 Report of services and activities, and useful practices for gathering consumer information, developing ILPs, and maintaining complete and accurate records. The primary audience is front line workers in CILs and it is designed to be used in orientation and training for new CIL staff and as a refresher for existing staff.

Volar CIL Response: Volar CIL management is aware of the importance of consistency in documentation and we understand that CSRs should contain the same level of detailed information about the consumer's roles and responsibilities when achieving their IL goals. We are also aware that we must provide consistence evidence of our facilitation in achieving goals, we understand that there should be uniformity in where and how this information is documented in the CSRs. Volar CIL management will verify that training is provided to all new and existing personnel. Evidence of that training will be placed in each employee's personnel file.

After a Volar CIL Coordinator completes a needs assessment form, they understand the need to work with consumers to develop goals to address the needs identified and outlined that Volar CIL will provide to enable the consumer to achieve these goals. The goals will be documented on the goal sheet, and the contact notes will outline the steps taken by both the consumer and Volar CIL staff to achieve these goals.

Volar CIL Board and Staff has implemented a Policy and Procedure which will allow consumers to make the decision to either continue receiving services, or to have their cases closed after each goal is achieved. A copy of this closure letter will be signed by the responsible Coordinator and a copy handed or sent to the consumer, as well as any response received from the consumer will be placed in each CSR if the response is in writing, or documented in the contact notes if provided verbally for proper documentation of evidence that the consumer made this decision.

Volar CIL personnel will complete the online CSR tutorial annually located here on: [the ILRU website](#).

2. IL Goal Definition and Development

Observation: RSA observed that Volar IL specialists do not demonstrate a clear understanding of the distinction between an IL goal and the IL services provided to consumers to achieve an IL goal. For example, obtaining specialized telecommunications devices was the predominant IL consumer goal in the 30 active and inactive CSRs reviewed by the team. In over half of the CSRs reviewed, the goals did not address the broader goals or significant life areas (educational, employment, community based living, etc.) that the services were intended to help the consumers reach. The CSRs focused on the means (obtaining specialized telecommunications devices) rather than the ends (life goals related to independent living and community integration).

The staff also indicated the need for clearer understanding of goal categories and service definition. For example, a consumer requesting a shower chair was documented to have an assistive technology goal, and mobility service was identified as the means to achieve this goal. In this example, the CIL provided assistive technology services to the consumer, a means to obtaining the shower chair, which can be categorized as a durable medical equipment that would enable the consumer attain her goal of increased independence in taking a shower, a significant

life area. Unless this consumer intends to use the shower chair as a mobility device, the identified service category is incorrect.

Recommendation: RSA recommends that Volar:

- 2.1 increase staff time devoted to assist consumers in identifying their independent living and community integration goals, rather than focusing only on specialized telecommunications devices;
- 2.2 improve its documentation related to consumers' independent living and community integration goals and its provision of the IL core services in support of those goals
- 2.3 provide relevant training to IL staff to improve their understanding of IL goal definitions and the types of services that may be provided to achieve those goals; and
- 2.3 review and revise its service provision manuals, publicity materials and staff training procedures to better reflect the four IL core services and individual and community integration goal-setting.

Volar CIL response: The Specialized Telecommunications Assistance Program (STAP) has as purpose, to provide communications devices to those consumers who qualify for the program to be more independent by providing free-of-charge telecommunication equipment. After the initial consumer introduction to other Volar CIL programs and services the goal is to educate our consumers of our services and to assist in any IL service area of need. We will continue to work on the development of the education and presentation of Volar IL services.

VI. TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

During its review, RSA provided additional technical assistance regarding the need for Volar to develop and implement a formal training for board members focused on board roles and responsibilities. Volar could consider including such topics as CIL board roles and responsibilities, nonprofit governance, IL philosophy and history, program development and evaluation, as well as fundraising and resource development. As part of its training and development process, Volar can utilize the training and technical assistance resources offered by the Independent Living and Resource Utilization, IL-NET. Information about upcoming training can be obtained via its on-demand training link which can be found at: [the ILRU website](#).