Quarterly All State VR Agencies Call Transcript

February 1, 2022

Operator: Please stand by, we're about to begin. Good day, everyone, and welcome to the Quarterly All VR call. Today's call is being recorded. And now, at this time, I'd like to turn the call over to Robert Pfaff. Please go ahead.

Robert Pfaff: Thank you, and thanks for joining us. Good morning and/or good afternoon to everyone and thanks for joining the quarterly VR call. We have a lot of topics to discuss today and some good information to share briefly. I wanted to share two items of note with you.

First of all, we are in possession of a draft summary report for the Employment Summit that SSA held last November. We are currently reviewing the document and it will have to go through numerous channels of review, as you can imagine, before we go public with the document. But I would envision that the document will be released for everyone's review between now and the next quarterly call. I just wanted to put that on your radar.

The second item I wanted to share is regarding our collaboration with CSAVR and John Connelly. John has been doing some outreach to VRs that are in order of selection and facilitating discussions between SSA and the state VRs to help them develop a strategy or plans otherwise, for the folks that they have in their order of selection — the idea being that we could familiarize these VR agencies, set up meetings and so forth, with ENs that offer services, that the VR would find helpful. If they were interested — if those VRs are interested in having their clients that are waiting in order of selection to be made aware of these EN organizations — we're trying to build that relationship for meetings and so forth, to familiarize the VR with the ENs, whether it's in their immediate area or regionally, etc., and for those ENs that are providing services that the VR thinks would be helpful for their clients.

If you're interested in having those discussions, feel free to reach out to me directly and/or send an email to the Help Desk. I will forward that to John, and we will talk about setting up a meeting with your respective organizations. That's all I had. We're fortunate to have Mike Corso from Disabled Persons on the line. He's going to talk about the ACT 5 Academy training available. I will turn it over to Mike. Mike?

Mike Corso: Thanks, Rob. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to everybody today. Thanks. My name is Mike Corso. I'm with Disabled Persons, Inc., and I wanted to share an opportunity for VR and their consumers. We have started a partnership with CSAVR. Kathy West-Evans and I have been working diligently in building this ability to career versus technical versus academy. And what we did was, we talked to businesses, and we did research on employers in demand of sector facing to entry level tech position courses, so that we can get individuals in our community into these courses, get them trained in the courses, and then get them certified and to work. And I'll tell you the courses in a minute. But I just want to let you know also that we also partnered with Cielo Talent.

Robert Pfaff: Okay, sir.

Mike Corso: It's the largest recruitment processing, outsourcing company in the world. They're out of Indianapolis. And Cielo is going to take the individuals who complete the courses and get certified, take those individuals' resumes to their recruiters to place them. So, we're working diligently in getting this off the ground. We're at the point now where we're going to — we have started enrolling students. We have students from Employment Networks. We have students from VR. And we're here. I'm here today to say that we have a lot more licenses left. This pilot ends August 31, 2022, and we have 7 months. So, we have 7 months to go, and we want to get as many individuals as we can into the program. We are offering courses in digital literacy and Microsoft Office specialist, and all the certifications within Microsoft Office specialties with Microsoft Teams administrator, as your fundamentals CompTIAA plus, CompTIA Network plus, and CompTIA Security Plus.

The academy is going to go through a 3-year project. We are starting the students off in entry level. We're going to build with stackable credentials going forward. And so, the second year we're going to build things like — we're going to put a cybersecurity course in and we're going to put in programming courses. And these courses that are here now, although credentialed, they build on moving forward. And like I said, we're working with a number of different agencies. We've also partnered with the CompTIA organization. So, I'm here today to say, send us your clients. I'll give you my email address. You can reach out to me.

Last Thursday, we — Kathy and I spoke with a number of different states, about eight different states and we started getting students from the states. Virginia Blind Agency has already sent over like six or seven consumers. So, I'm open to questions. How do we get going? Just send me an email, and then we'll talk, and I'll get you going and get the students enrolled.

We also have a teacher's assistant. So let me explain how this works. The student will come into a learning management system called Go1. Go1, that's the platform. This is video-based, instructor-led learning, plus lectures, right? So, the individual who comes in, it's going to be self-paced, but there is somebody backing it up. We have a TA who will answer questions through Microsoft Teams and through the Microsoft Teams message board. If that's not enough, there will be one-on-one email for emailing back and forth. And if that's not enough, then we go to the video conferencing between the TA and the student. So, we do — we do offer help with that. The platform that we picked, we had tested by two agencies of the blind, the VR agencies of the blind. The platform passed according to these agencies. Are there some blips? Yes. We have spoken to the Go1 platform, and they said we go to them with issues on accessibility, they'll do their best to accommodate it. So, we're trying to work this all out. This is started by a call from Microsoft asking if we would do something like this and Microsoft is a partner — is a partner in this and we're just moving forward. So, if anybody has any questions — I don't want to take up a lot of time here, I know there's a lot to do – ask away.

Raquel Donaldson: Operator, if you'd like to open the line.

Operator: And if you'd like to ask a question, simply press the star key followed by the digit 1 on your telephone keypad. Also, if you're using a speakerphone, please make sure your mute function is turned off to allow your signal to reach our equipment. Once again, press star 1 at this time. We'll pause for a moment. Again, star 1 at this time. And we do have a caller, (Kailyn Wright). Please go ahead. (Kailyn), your line is open. Hearing no response, there are no further questions at this time.

Mike Corso: Okay, well, let me just state that you can send any questions that you have to Mike, M-I-K-E, at disabledperson.com. That's D-I-S-A-B-L-E-D-P-E-R-S-O-N dot com. This is a pilot program.

There is no charge to the consumer through August 31. This is a pilot program so it's free to the consumers through August 31. And they can complete — from now until August 31, they can complete probably two courses. So, if there's nothing else, I thank you and I thank Rob and SSA for this opportunity. Thank you.

Robert Pfaff: All right, thanks. Raquel, we'll turn it over to Jocelyn.

Raquel Donaldson: Yes.

Jocelyn Greenidge: Good afternoon and good morning. Thank you, Rob, and thank you, Raquel. My name is Jocelyn Greenidge, and I am the project director for the TPM contract that was previously under Maximus. I wanted to first introduce myself and my team as your new TPM contractor that will be working alongside SSA in the coming years to support this contract. I also like to introduce my team and the staff that will support the VR community. We have done a tremendous job working with SSA and Maximus, the previous contractor, to have a smooth transition, to oversee all aspects of the previous work. As some of you may or may not have heard, we were going through a transition, but the goal was to make sure that minimal disruption or interruption in your services, the experience that you've had over the past couple of months you will not notice. And now, our team and our lead for the program, Ms. Jennelle Bratcher. She's an experienced former SSA employee and an experienced federal government contractor as well in handling, working, and supporting SSA. And I'd like to introduce Jennelle and also her team who will be supporting the VR community in the coming years. Jennelle?

Jennelle Bratcher: Thank you, Jocelyn. Hi, and good afternoon, everyone. My name is Jennelle Bratcher. I am the new TPM Ticket Operations Manager, and it will be my job and my pleasure to oversee all Ticket operations regarding EN payments and also VR cost reimbursement. Just to speak a little bit about myself, I do have a 17-year background with Social Security Administration, working in various components in the agency, which also included my most recent position as the VR Branch Chief, where I left that position in 2020. It was a pleasure to serve the VR community as well as the public health sector, and it's an extreme pleasure to also serve you on the contract side for Cognosante. Thank you, guys, so much for the opportunity. I want to introduce my Deputy Ticket Operations Manager as well. Some of you will be familiar with her and others won't, but I would love for her to introduce herself. Debbra Tennessee.

Debbra Tennessee: Good afternoon, everybody. Yes, this is Debbra Tennessee speaking, and I'm the Deputy Manager for Ticket Operations. I worked with Maximus, the previous contractor, from 2008 and continued to work on the Ticket project up until now. Again, I'm the Deputy Operations Manager. In my prior role with Maximus, I was the Ticket Operations Manager. But then I was only working with EN payments and the Payment Help Desk and some other operations. However, this change to include VR payments in Operations is great. I like working with EN payments and all the other things I did with Maximus, but I like working with new issues and new projects. And for VR, this is new. It's challenging. I embrace it. I am looking so forward to working on the VR side. There are a couple of VRs that I have talked to. I've talked to Eugenia. I've talked to David Leon. But of course, it wasn't over VR payments, but there is some connection between EN and VR payments. As far as my background is concerned, I worked for Social Security for 31-plus years. The bulk of that time was working in the Office of Financial Policy and Operations. I was the Office Director, and I was responsible for making sure that the payment files that went to Treasury agreed with what's in our master records and we had to certify that information with Treasury. Treasury could not release any payments until we certified the accuracy of our payments file. I also worked with earnings, as far as making sure that we had an audit trail for all earnings that were posted to SSA's Master Earnings File, and these were earnings received from the IRS as well as from employers. And there was a lot of other good stuff that I did. I loved working for SSA. So, when this opportunity came up that this was an SSA program, I jumped on it. And this was after I retired from SSA. But I want to tell you I am so happy and excited to be working with the VR. We have a great team right now that is working with SSA. They're doing a great job. SSA is doing the training. And I know in the near future, I will be talking to most of you. Thank you.

Jocelyn Greenidge: Thank you. This is Greenidge again and I just want to echo, we're excited to work with you all. We're excited about the upcoming and future VR work in transition. And so, we have, like I said, experienced employees that worked with Maximus on the contract. So, you'll have expert hands, expert resources to help continue on the great work for the future and many, many years to come. Thank you.

Raquel Donaldson: Thank you. Now, we can go ahead and turn it over to Katie Striebinger.

Katie Striebinger: Hi, good afternoon, everyone. I just want to give an update on the backlog, so you'll know where we are. We're currently working on cases that were submitted in October of 2021. So, we're right there at the beginning of the fiscal year. I do point out that we do have cases in diary that are older than October of 2021. So, if you are looking at the fiscal year-to-date activity report that just went out, you may see that some of the numbers are lower than what you're showing in your pending. And that is because that report is set up based on the fiscal year-to-date, so that report starts with October 1 of 2021. That report you should have gotten in your inboxes this morning. And if you have any questions, you can definitely direct it and put it in an email and just send it out. And I believe that's all I have about that report.

I will want to add that there is a second tab in the report called definitions, and it does explain the column headers and the logic that is used to put it together. So, if you see something that doesn't quite match what you think you're seeing in the Portal, it could just be because of the logic we're using to put together the file. It is a snapshot of the fiscal year-to-date, starting with what was received from October 1 of 2021 up until yesterday. So, it is a snapshot report. If you want to check on the status of your claim in real time, I'm going to direct you to the Portal for that. And that is all I have, and I will be on the call for questions and answers at the end if anybody has any questions for me.

Raquel Donaldson: Thanks, Katie. Good afternoon, everyone. This is Raquel Donaldson. Happy New Year. I just have a few housekeeping reminders, I guess. The fiscal year '22 cost formula, a quick update on that. As you know, obviously, you would have received it by now, but because RSA has switched with forms that they're using currently for the fiscal year '22 we're in now — they're now using — or you all are now using the RSA-17. This document, the data on there is much more complicated than the data forms that we've used in the past. So, at this time, we are working on converting all that information to the cost formula worksheet. As soon as we've completed that and it's been approved, you will see it. Just to let you know, do not be concerned about any type of untimely filing. We obviously are aware that anything that will have to deal with fiscal year '22 will not get a 620 denial. And you'll have plenty of time, as usual, to submit it there. You have at least 6 months to submit. Majority of you all just don't take that long, but just do not worry or be concerned, you will have that time as we go on and we get closer to finishing, and of course, you'll hear from me via email in regard to that. Any other questions regarding the fiscal year '22 cost formula, please feel free to email me at the VR Help Desk.

Reconsiderations, just so everyone understands, when the technicians and the analysts are processing reconsiderations, we've always used the initial claim filing date. However, it still gets worked FIFO, first in first out. So even though you're submitting, you may be submitting a reconsideration from initial claim that was done 2019, it does not mean that it gets worked on before anything prior to that. So, if you submit it today, it's not going to get worked on until we're working the claims that were all uploaded in January. It doesn't get any priority. Just FYI, whatever the date of submittal is, we look at the same date for the initial claim, supplemental claim and the reconsideration.

Next, 650 is not on the agenda, but I just wanted to throw this in there. We're still having the system error so; you may see a 650 denial. If you did not get an email from me first and you receive the 650 denials, please continue to email the VR Help Desk. And I always automatically create the reconsideration right then and there once I look up and confirm that it was done by the system and not — basically not human error, and then I take care of everything there. So just continue to email me. Nothing has changed. You should not be getting a 650 denial unless you receive an email from me first.

Claims placed in diary: I just want to piggyback off of what Katie was saying in regard to the fiscal year-to-date via reimbursement report you received this morning. I went ahead and highlighted the 120 plus column for every VR. More than likely, those are claims that have been placed in diary for a year, 2 years, however long, and it's still been sitting there for whatever reason. When you go and pull your pending claims, if you have questions about why it's still sitting there, other than it says a system error or something internal to SSA, please feel free to reach out to the VR Help Desk and I'm more than happy to walk you through what we're still looking for. It could be a matter of it being a signed IPE. If you submitted a documentation and you submitted an IPE that does not have a signature on it, it will be denied. It needs to have the signature on there from the beneficiary and the counselor, the VR counselor as well as to have both signatures and dated. That's a quick FYI.

Lastly, the State VR Directory. It's time to get it corrected; basically, refreshed, since I know we've had a lot of retirements and people coming and going. So, I'm going to be sending the state VR Directory out to the nine regional or 10 regional coordinators, and asking them to send them out to you based on whatever your region is. If you have questions about who your regional coordinator is, email me as well. You will definitely need that information when you're submitting your cost form down the line. So, I'll be more than happy to give you that information, but the State VR Directory is going out to them. They will disseminate the information to you, correct it, send it back to me. Again, you'll have plenty of time to do it. I just want to make sure we have the right contact information when we're reaching out to you for calls or any other necessary items.

And that is all that I have. Thank you for your time and we can open this up for Q&A.

Operator: Thank you. Once again, if you would like to ask a question or make a comment, press star 1 at this time. Again, please make sure your mute function is turned off to allow your signal to reach our equipment. We'll pause for a moment. And we'll first hear from David Leon of DARS.

David Leon: Sorry about that. Two quick things, first, Jennelle, Debbra, welcome back and congratulations on your positions. My question is just a clarification related to the IPE signature. For some reason, I thought that electronic signatures had been allowed based on COVID and for instance, for us that are not providing face-to-face services. Can you clarify that for me?

Raquel Donaldson: Hi, David, it's Raquel. Yes, absolutely, electronic signatures are still allowed, definitely.

David Leon: Okay. All right. I think what I heard was just paper and pen, and I got worried.

Raquel Donaldson: No. What I was talking about earlier is just when it's submitted and there's just nothing there, whatsoever. But absolutely, electronic signatures, we are still allowing. Thank you for asking that.

Operator: And next, we'll hear from Eric Schmidt of Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services.

Eric Schmidt: Hello. Can you hear me, okay?

Raquel Donaldson: Hi, Eric. We can hear you.

Eric Schmidt: Okay, great. I just had a quick clarifying question and comment regarding – something that came out back in November of '21 from RSA, where they're replacing the DUNS number. Well, I guess all federal agencies are replacing the DUNS number with the new number called the Unique Entity Identifier (UEI). I asked back and it sounded like there wasn't going to be any impact from the cost reimbursement standpoint. I just wanted to clarify and make sure that that's still the case, just because we recently had an update from our case management provider, indicating that they're going to be shifting our systems over to that new number. I just want to make sure that that's not going to adversely impact in any way that cost reimbursement process.

Katie Striebinger: Hi, this is Katie. So, the transition should be seamless from a system standpoint. We're going to have a release on April 2, and we will switch over. Systems has been provided with everybody's — and will be provided with everybody's UEI and we're just going to load it into our system. And then when you log into the Portal the next day, or we start to process your payments on that Monday, it should be seamless. We're going to keep using that DUNS number as our key, as our reference number. We're just going to kind of tap on that new number behind the scenes to make sure payments go through correctly. So, it should really not cause any interruption unless there is some reason your UIE changes, then you'll have to inform us, so we'll know.

Eric Schmidt: Okay, sounds great. Thank you.

Operator: Again, star 1 if you'd like to ask a question or make a comment. We'll pause for a moment. And we'll hear from Eugenia Cox of State of Oregon.

Eugenia Cox: Can you hear me, okay?

Raquel Donaldson: Hi, Eugenia. We can hear you.

Eugenia Cox: Okay, welcome back, Jennelle and Debbra. It's good to know that we have some experience there. Two questions — one, do you want us to just keep submitting the claims for federal fiscal year 2022 and will they just stay on hold, or do you want us to hold off?

Raquel Donaldson: No, I definitely don't want you to hold off. I just definitely want you to continue to submit your claims even if they are for fiscal year 22. Absolutely.

Eugenia Cox: Okay. Okay, cool. And then the other question was — when we have inquiries on claims or questions with the Portal or anything like that, are we still sending all those requests and inquiries into the VR Help Desk?

Raquel Donaldson: Yes.

Eugenia Cox: Okay. And that's from now, forward, there will be a different place or anything like that?

Raquel Donaldson: Correct. Unless you hear differently, it's always going to be the VR Help Desk.

Eugenia Cox: Okay, thank you.

Raquel Donaldson: You're welcome.

Operator: And once again, as a final reminder, star 1 if you would like to ask a question or make a comment. We'll pause for a moment. And we'll hear from Brian Connors of California Department of Rehabilitation.

Brian Connors: Yes, hello. A couple questions, I'm just wondering if there any plans to — or solutions for improving the acquisition of BPQY either at the local or the national level.

Patrice McLean: This is Patrice. We understand that there are some delays processing BPQY. We have implemented a new system for processing BPQY, but it doesn't necessarily speed up the process. So, our recommendation, of course, would be to continue to work with your local field offices. In the event you do have an issue and there's been a dramatic delay in receiving BPQY, then if you can send that to the VR Help Desk, then we can try to get in touch with Operations. I do want to make sure that I mention that we can't create a new process of sending questions to the VR Help Desk for them, our peers and its operations. So, it's really only in extreme circumstances that we would ask you to send a message to the VR Help Desk so that we can reach out with our peers in Operations. And when I say extreme circumstances, I mean, you're unable to get a BPQY on a recurring basis, if you're not hearing anything back, or the responses are pending for more than 30 or 60 days. We understand that because of the shorter staffing in field offices due to the pandemic, there really are some delays. But we're hoping that those will start to get better within the next few weeks.

Brian Connors: Okay. Are there any discussions about adding the BPQY to my Social Security account?

Patrice McLean: Yes, there are discussions. They will have to go through a very high level. And one of the issues that we run into is *my* SSA is currently set up to provide information directly to the beneficiary, but not to third parties.

Brian Connors: Right.

Patrice McLean: So, it would take a really big distinct change to be able to have a VR or an EN or — with the organization, retrieve the BPQY through *my* SSA for our beneficiary. That's something that *my* SSA is not currently set up to do. So, it is — it is on our list. We are taking steps to see if that's something we can do. I don't want to give any hope at this time that we can get it done. And even if we can get it done, it would definitely take some time. It's a major overhaul on our system for sure.

Brian Connors: Okay, thank you. And one final question, maybe this is for Cognosante. I was just wondering if there any plans on bringing back the telephone automated Ticket status checking like it was previously the BASS line.

Jennelle Bratcher: We would have to defer that to SSA. This is Jennelle from Cognosante.

Robert Pfaff: This is Rob.

Brian Connors: All right, thank you very much.

Robert Pfaff: So, I'm not entirely sure if you're referring to our Help Line, which is public and forward-facing, where beneficiary can — or the public can call and ask questions about the Ticket Program. I believe that through our call center, we can check Ticket assignability status, although don't hold me to that and somebody else on the phone that probably knows more about that can correct me if I'm wrong. But the Help Line is still in place, that much I know. I'm not entirely sure if that's the same telephone-assisted service that you're referencing from back in the BASS era. But that's — I just wanted to give you that update. So, the call center is up and running, and it is staffed with the new contractor.

Debbra Tennessee: This is Debbra.

Brian Connors: Yes.

Debbra Tennessee: I have a question for the caller. What was — what's the purpose for checking? Is it just to check to see if the beneficiary's Ticket is assignable? What's the purpose?

Brian Connors: Yes. Before an IPE is approved, we always ask our counselors to check the Ticket status to make sure that the Ticket is assignable.

Debbra Tennessee: Okay, yes.

Brian Connors: And so, I guess about 5 or 6 years ago, there was this automated telephone system where a beneficiary could call in, put in their Social Security number and automatically — or get the Ticket status through this automated line.

Debbra Tennessee: Okay.

Brian Connors: Yes.

Debbra Tennessee: I believe for something like what you just said, we could do that. But the reason that you came up or that you explained to us make sense. However, the reason I asked is because there are some service providers and not necessarily VR, who call for a Ticket status. Because if the beneficiary is not current pay, sometimes they don't want to take a case, because they want to get milestone payments. We're not doing that. But you have a valid reason for checking and I believe at this point, it would be — I'm not sure if it will be — we will have to check to see whether it will be a call for the beneficiary Help Line or a provider. So, we have to go back and check on that.

Brian Connors: Okay. Well, thank you very much for that. I appreciate it.

Debbra Tennessee: You're welcome.

Operator: And we have a follow-up from Eugenia Cox.

Eugenia Cox: Hello again. I just wanted to ask too — it just came to my brain, for those few of us that do also Ticket to Work payments, as the VREN, do — is there a special place we request to send inquiries too instead the VR Help Desk, or do all Ticket and cost reimbursement payments go through the VR Help Desk?

Debbra Tennessee: This is Debbra again. We get questions on Provider Help Desk. If it's VR — I mean, if it's EN related, it comes to our Provider Help Desk, and we do receive inquiries at our Provider Help Desk for VR from VRENs because it's related to our EN payment or EN issue.

Eugenia Cox: Okay, so we just send everything to the VR Help Desk? Is that — from my understanding?

Debbra Tennessee: No, no, no. I said if you are a VREN, you should continue to contact the Provider Help Desk. If it's VR, total VR cost reimbursement, whatever, I think you should continue to go to the VR Help Desk if that's what you're doing now. It's only VRENs that should go to the Provider Help Desk.

Eugenia Cox: Okay. And that's the VR – the Ticket to Work payments?

Debbra Tennessee: Yes.

Eugenia Cox: I forgot what the email address was, but that's Ticket to Work payments?

Jennelle Bratcher: Yes. Hi, Eugenia. This is Jennelle. So good to hear your voice again.

Eugenia Cox: Yes.

Jennelle Bratcher: I want to let you know that the processes haven't changed. So, I want to make sure that we can avoid the confusion. But the processes are exactly the same. So, if it's 100% VR related, then by all means, you're going to use the same processes of the VR Help Desk. But if it's VREN or it's EN related, then we're still using the Provider Help Desk.

Eugenia Cox: Okay, all right. Perfect. Thank you.

Jennelle Bratcher: You're welcome.

Operator: And it appears there are no further questions at this time.

Robert Pfaff: Okay. Next item, I think we're — are we done with the agenda? And we have done the questions and answers. I think we can wrap up now. Raquel, would you like to bring us to conclusion?

Raquel Donaldson: Yes. Thanks, Rob. Just thank you, everyone, for taking the time to be on the call today. The second quarter all VR call should be, wow, April 12, 1:00 pm Eastern Standard Time. If that changes, of course, you will get notification via the delivery email. But until then, everyone, have a great day.

Operator: And that does conclude today's conference. Thank you all for your participation. You may now disconnect.