

## Rehabilitation Services Administration Commissioner Visits USF & Two CBCS Programs

**Tampa, Fla. (July 14, 2014)** - On July 9, 2014, Janet LaBreck, Commissioner of the [Rehabilitation Services Administration](#) (RSA), visited the University of South Florida, along with RSA Program Specialist Christyne Cavataio and Department of Education Chief of Staff Kathy Hebda. Accompanying Commissioner LaBreck were Aleisa McKinlay, Director of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Robert Doyle, Director of the Division of Blind Services, and John Howell, Area Director, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Three programs were showcased for their work in training and research for vocational rehabilitation. Among these were two College of Behavioral and Community Sciences programs: the [Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling](#) and the [Learning Academy and Employment Services](#), Department of Child and Family Studies.

For our USF programs, the importance of vocational rehabilitation for those with disabilities cannot be understated. “The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the Division of Blind Services provide support and assistance for individuals with disabilities to become independent and productive citizens,” says Dr. Tennyson Wright, Chair of the Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling. “These state agencies provide services based on individual abilities and interests that lead to gainful employment and successful careers. The mission of the Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling is to promote quality services for individuals with differences in abilities and to help the state meet its human service needs in the areas of rehabilitation and mental health through teaching, research and service.”

The visit focused on programs that support the RSA’s mission to establish a job-driven vocational rehabilitation technical assistance center to offer training and technical assistance to those with disabilities. The overarching goal to help provide skills and competencies to those with disabilities fits with these CBCS programs, as well as USF’s [Rehabilitation Engineering Program](#) and its [Center for Assistive, Rehabilitation & Robotics Technologies](#) (CARRT), which was also showcased for Commissioner LaBreck.

### Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling



The Department of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling trains students to work effectively with individuals with physical, mental, emotional, or chemical disabilities. Students in this program are offered instruction on refinement of personal adjustment counseling skills, as well as the social, medical and vocational aspects of disability. In addition to the traditional instruction on the philosophical and historical foundation for rehabilitation and mental health

**Faculty and staff from the Department of Mental Health Counseling and guests with Commissioner LaBreck (seated)**

counseling, an emphasis on job-related solutions for those with disabilities makes the program a perfect fit for the RSA's mission of vocational rehabilitation.

"Together, we form a partnership, along with the state agencies, to help individuals with disabilities achieve success," says Dr. Wright.

The program, which is one of the few rehabilitation counseling programs in Florida, works to offer students the best possible opportunities for experience while they are still in school and after graduation. Many of these occur with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) in the Florida Department of Education. Students often complete their internship and are hired at DVR or a similar organization.

At the meeting, Dr. William Kearns, Research Associate Professor presented an overview of his research linking movement variability to changes in cognition in individuals with dementia and traumatic brain injury. He demonstrated the Ubisense Smart Watch, which is capable of producing medication prompts for those with cognitive impairment and visual or auditory impairments based on time of day and location. Commissioner LaBreck noted the innovative design of the watch as one of the unique research approaches presented by these programs.



Dr. Tennyson Wright addresses the group.

"New technologies such as the Ubisense Smart Watch will allow greater freedom for persons with cognitive and physical impairments and help us to design more adaptive environments that more thoroughly meet their needs and desires," says Dr. Kearns.

Following the meeting, Dr. Tammy Jorgensen Smith, talked of the collaboration between DVR and USF with the guests and Commissioner LaBreck, which resulted in the development and implementation of a statewide certificate course in Discovery. This course is a customized employment strategy that trains community vendors to provide services for DVR consumers with complex disabilities who have not yet been employed through traditional DVR strategies.

Dr. Jorgensen Smith also noted that the employment strategies incorporated into the curriculum for master-level students in Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling, thus better preparing them to implement DVR strategies into their future careers.

Additionally, Dr. Tina Dillahunt-Aspillaga summarized her research in employment for individuals with traumatic brain injury (TBI). Her community integration research with the Center of Innovation for Disability and Rehabilitation Research includes studying measurement of unemployment for veterans with mild TBI.

Dr. Dillahunt-Aspillaga also covered her research with the Brain Injury Association of Florida, where she helped implement a two-year funded initiative with the Kessler Foundation and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to address the unemployment of individuals with TBI. The promising results of the program (overall, the model increased employment of individuals suffering from TBI by 44% as compared to the state's placement rate of 10%) help support the overall goals of the Rehabilitation Services Administration Commission.

## **Learning Academy and Employment Services**

The Learning Academy and Employment Services program helps provide individuals diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder with the skills needed to engage in competitive employment.

The academy offers a customized transition program that assists in preparing young adults diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder for employment. The Learning Academy provides services, supports and experiential opportunities that develop and enhance each student's independence in meeting personal career goals.

You can see [student success stories](#) at the center's main website.

"Our students engage in self-discovery and career exploration through classroom activities and real-life experiences such as internships and peer mentoring," said [Dr. Karen Berkman](#), Director of Learning Academy Services at USF. "We were proud to share that we have over a 60% success rate helping individuals meet their benchmarks for placement in their career choice, well above the Florida average of 28%."

In addition to sharing successes on the USF campus, a significant success for vocational rehabilitation and employment was celebrated in Washington D.C. where the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#) (WIOA) passed with overwhelming bipartisan support. The Act modernizes and improves existing federal workforce development programs, helps workers attain skills for 21st century jobs, provides supports to people with disabilities to enter and remain in competitive, integrated job settings, and fosters the modern workforce that evolving American businesses rely on to compete.

"We look forward to this updated bill providing better access to education, training, and employment services," said Dr. Berkman.



**Faculty and staff from the Learning Academy and Employment Services**

The program, which began with an Autismspeaks grant in 2007, offers a person-centered and customized approach towards vocational training and job-readiness. Staff and faculty work with individuals receiving services from the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and who choose the academy as their vendor of choice, as well as persons who choose to develop a payment arrangement. This allows the academy to serve more individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder looking for assistance in preparing for and finding employment.

### **About the RSA and LaBreck**



**Commissioner LaBreck experiences work from the Center for Assistive, Rehabilitation, and Robotics Technology**

The RSA, which operates inside the United States Department of Education, focuses on leadership and financial resources to assist state and local agencies that provide various types of rehabilitation, including vocational rehabilitation, independent living, and other services for those with disabilities. The administration supports this mission by offering formula and discretionary grant programs as authorized by the U.S. Congress; evaluating,

monitoring, and reporting on the effectiveness of related Federal policy and programs; and coordinating with Federal and State agencies, and

private sector and service providers.

Commissioner LaBreck, who lost her vision by the age of 10, served as an advocate for the blind community for more than 20 years. In 2007, she was appointed the Commissioner for the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind and became the ambassador for more than 30,000 blind citizens. LaBreck organized effective campaigns to increase employment opportunities for the blind, and the commission's award-winning program is reproduced throughout the country.

In August 2013, LaBreck was confirmed as the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration within the Department of Education.

“As an appointee of President Barack Obama, the Commissioner was able to promote the President's initiative on employment of persons with disabilities, and address the importance of dissemination of evidence based research, workforce training, training of rehabilitation counselors and other programs funded by RSA and the U. S. Department of Education,” says Dr. Wright.

“Her visit was important because it gave her the opportunity to learn firsthand about the outstanding teaching, research, and service that the faculty and staff are doing at the University of South Florida.”