

population let alone requiring that those mentors have a condition that the Department of Education would define as a disability.

*Discussion:* We believe that mentors with whom students can identify, and who have shared interests, can play a vital role in eliminating barriers to autonomy, community integration, and achievement. Connecting individuals with mentors who have disabilities and who possess practical knowledge and firsthand experience in achieving high-quality employment and independence will greatly assist those individuals to make positive and accurate choices regarding their programs and their lives. Mentors not only offer critical guidance and information, but also serve as positive role models of independence and success. We are currently reviewing the applications we received under this competition for this year and intend to assess the response to this definition of mentor, and other issues on which we received comments, in determining whether changes are needed in future competitions.

*Changes:* None.

*Comment:* One commenter suggested that the term "consumer-controlled" organization be revised to "consumer-focused" organization and that the requirement that a majority of the officers and members of the board of directors be individuals with disabilities be deleted.

*Discussion:* Consumer-controlled organizations are an invaluable resource for State VR agencies in empowering persons with disabilities to achieve their employment and independent living goals. Consumer-controlled organizations represent the collective voice and experiences of their members (individuals with disabilities) who have practical knowledge and firsthand experience in achieving high-quality employment and independence. These organizations are a concentrated source of successful individuals with disabilities who are committed to assisting other consumers to achieve their personal and professional goals, specializing in empowering individuals with disabilities to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. By requiring that a majority of the officers and members of the board of directors be individuals with disabilities, we ensure that the organization is truly consumer-controlled and vests power and authority in individuals with disabilities themselves. As stated earlier, we will assess the proposals we received to determine whether the model and definitions reflected in the priority are workable and yield an

adequate number of high quality applications.

*Changes:* None.

*Comment:* Two commenters expressed concern about limiting the eligibility under this competition to VR agencies, and one further objected to the requirement to involve consumer-controlled organizations. One commenter stated that consumer organizations, by design, are more capable of matching mentees with appropriate mentors, and that these organizations should be the grantee, not the VR agency. The other commenter also objected to limiting eligibility to VR agencies and believes that the Department should not require the involvement of consumer-controlled organizations but should focus on reaching out to include institutions of higher education, chambers of commerce, community and faith-based organizations and State and local workforce boards. The active involvement of State and local workforce boards as well as chambers of commerce is critical because of their strong ties to business and industry.

*Discussion:* We have limited eligibility under this competition to State VR agencies in order to create systemic change in the VR system. The goal of these demonstrations is to improve services to consumers of VR services through the development of models that can be implemented by State VR agencies. The priority requires that VR agencies clearly describe how the project will collaborate with consumer-controlled organizations that have in-depth knowledge of the rehabilitation process, the outreach methods used to select project participants, and the criteria by which individuals with disabilities will be recruited as mentors by the consumer-controlled organizations. We asked for specific comment on the requirement to collaborate with a consumer-controlled organization, and we will assess the response to this requirement in conjunction with our review of the applications that were received under this competition for this year.

*Change:* None.

*Comment:* One commenter suggested that this priority should not be limited to serving youth with disabilities, but should include youth who do not have disabilities for integration purposes.

*Discussion:* While we see the importance of integrated settings and initiatives, we are restricted legislatively to serving individuals with disabilities. The Act, which is the Federal law and basis for this priority, is meant to serve and empower individuals with disabilities so that they may maximize

employment, economic self-sufficiency, independence, and inclusion and integration into society. Funds authorized for grant funding under the Act must be used for the benefit of individuals with disabilities.

*Changes:* None.

*Comment:* One commenter suggested that the priority allow for the expenditure of funds for the purpose of enabling transition-age youth and young adults with disabilities to access information such as newspapers, computers, Braille, note taking devices, etc. The commenter stated that statistics show that people who have daily access to current events, social activities, and economic changes have a better chance to achieve a high employment outcome.

*Discussion:* The purpose of this priority is to establish mentoring models that provide appropriate supports for transition-age youth and young adults with disabilities. Since transition-age youth and young adults with disabilities to be served under these demonstrations will be VR consumers, mentors working with VR counselors could, if appropriate for the consumer, identify the need to access information as a service within the consumer's Individualized Plan for Employment. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) would view this expense as allowable and would assess the merits of all expenses and activities identified within an application submitted for funding under this priority.

*Changes:* None.

**Note:** This notice does *not* solicit applications. In any year in which we choose to use this priority, definitions, and application requirements, we invite applications through a notice in the **Federal Register**. When inviting applications we designate the priority, definitions, and application requirements as absolute, competitive preference, or invitational. The effect of each type of priority follows:

*Absolute priority:* Under an absolute priority we consider only applications that meet the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(3)).

*Competitive preference priority:* Under a competitive preference priority we give competitive preference to an application by either (1) awarding additional points, depending on how well or the extent to which the application meets the competitive priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(2)(i)); or (2) selecting an application that meets the competitive priority over an application of comparable merit that does not meet the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(2)(ii)).

*Invitational priority:* Under an invitational priority we are particularly interested in applications that meet the invitational priority. However, we do not give an application that meets the invitational priority a competitive or absolute preference over other applications (34 CFR 75.105(c)(1)).