



MINNESOTA STATE
REHABILITATION COUNCIL-GENERAL

ANNUAL REPORT

PROGRAM YEAR 2019
JULY 1, 2019 - JUNE 30, 2020



VRS • SSB Celebration
June 2, 2020



*Providing services in challenging times.
Resilience of the agency and the program,
particularly counselors' ability to adapt and be nimble
and the clients' ability to thrive during times of challenge*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Overview of what VRS Is and Does	4
VR Program Celebrates 100 Years	5-8
Who VR Serves in Minnesota	9-11
Pre-Employment Transition Services (PRE-ETS).....	12-13
Story of Inspiration: Omar Velazquez.....	14
Primary Disability Groups	15
Individual Placement and Support (IPS)	16-17
Story of Inspiration: Amanda Cummings	18
Demographic Trends	19
VR outcomes	20-22
Story of Inspiration: Erich Hoffmann.....	23
Story of Inspiration: Josue Martinez.....	24
A Message from the Director	25-26
A Message from the SRC Chair	26
About the State Rehabilitation Council	27



TYLER SADEK

SRC BUSINESS, INDUSTRY AND LABOR REPRESENTATIVE

INTRODUCTION

2020 has been a challenging year for many. The threat of the Coronavirus epidemic continues, civil unrest in response to systemic racism has burst across the country – especially here in Minnesota – and we are experiencing a time of unprecedented divisiveness. Despite all of this, there are many stories of strength and success in this time of strife. Thanks to the tenacity and resilience of VR staff and the clients they support, Minnesota’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program is one of those positive stories.

2020 was also a year for celebration! Not only was it the 30th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but it also marks the 100-year anniversary of the creation of the public VR program. What started as a program serving disabled veterans as they return from war has transformed into an inclusive program serving individuals of all disabilities and all backgrounds.

Although 2020 has been a challenge, VR staff and the clients they serve are no strangers to overcoming challenges in creative and innovative ways. Contained in this report are not only that data and outcomes of Minnesota’s VR program, but also stories from individuals who have demonstrated resilience in finding and retaining employment, even in the face of such a challenging year.

“
... THROUGH OUR STRENGTH
AND RESILIENCY, MINNESOTA VR
WILL CONTINUE TO LEAD THE WAY
AND CHANGE LIVES ONE AT A TIME.”

There will always be more challenges to come, but through our strength and resiliency, Minnesota VR will continue to lead the way and change lives one at a time.

Here’s to the next 100 years!

INTRODUCTION TO VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

Vocational Rehabilitation Services, a division of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, empowers Minnesotans with disabilities to achieve their goals for competitive, integrated employment and career development.

The division administers several programs and projects, the largest of which is the **Vocational Rehabilitation** program, with an annual budget of nearly \$60 million and more than 300 staff. The VR program provides specialized, one-on-one employment services for individuals with disabilities such as job counseling, job search assistance, training, and job placement services.

The VR Program is a federal-state partnership, with most of the funding coming through a federal grant that requires a state match. In federal fiscal year 2020, Minnesota received \$42,740,250, about 75 percent of its total funding, through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The state match is a \$14.3 million appropriation from the State of Minnesota.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (PRE-ETS) is an important sub-category of the VR program, mandated by the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014. The act requires the state VR program to reserve at least 15 percent of its federal appropriation for the provision of services to students age 14-21. In federal fiscal year 2020, the total amount of federal grant funds used for these services is \$6,374,138 and the state match appropriation is \$1,725,148, for a total just shy of \$8.1 million.

WIOA requires the VR program to provide early career preparation for students with disabilities who are potentially eligible for the VR services. The law prescribes a narrowly defined set of services for a population that has traditionally not received these services from the VR program. The services are Job Exploration, Work Readiness Training, Work Experience, Training or College Exploration, and Self-Advocacy Training. In 2019, VRS created 23 new staff positions dedicated solely to the provision of Pre-ETS to students in every Minnesota school.

The **State Rehabilitation Council** is a citizen council whose members provide counsel and guidance to the VR program. Council members play an active role in making program performance and policy decisions. They collaborate with VR leadership and staff to shape priorities, assess needs, convene public forums, measure customer satisfaction, and produce this annual report on the status of the VR program.



VRS • SSB Celebration

VR PROGRAM CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

One century ago, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Smith-Fess Act of 1920, also known as the Industrial Rehabilitation Act and referred to as “The National Civilian Vocational Rehabilitation Act.” June 2, 2020 marked the 100th anniversary of the public Vocational Rehabilitation program, which in Minnesota includes the programs and services provided by Vocational Rehabilitation Services and State Services for the Blind. Over 10 decades, the program has grown into a national partnership in all states and territories, with both federal and state funding, and is the only publicly funded program that is committed exclusively to providing employment services – counseling, training, placement services, and job supports – to citizens with disabilities.

Here’s a link to some great national VR history that you might want to check out when you have a minute. It’s a nicely done timeline from the VR program’s national professional organization. www.csavr.org/vr-100-timeline



Early Days

In the years before passage of the Smith-Fess Act six states, including Minnesota, had already created some form of state-funded vocational rehabilitation program. Massachusetts was the first in May 1918, followed closely by Nevada, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and California. Six other states had also authorized such programs but had not yet made them operational.

The Minnesota Legislature passed the Minnesota Re-education Act in 1919, creating Minnesota’s first state-funded VR program. It was called the Division of Re-education and Placement of Disabled Persons, administered by the state Department of Education, and operated from a single room in the State Capitol. There were three staff: a director, a placement specialist, and a secretary.

There had been some earlier antecedents – perhaps most notably in the 1890s, when Dr. Arthur J. Gillette pioneered medical care and treatment for children with physical disabilities. In 1897 the Minnesota Legislature, on a vote of 80-3, passed legislation that led to the creation of the State Hospital for Indigent Crippled and Deformed Children in St. Paul.

VR PROGRAM CELEBRATES 100 YEARS

and appointed Dr. Gillette as its director. In 1925, four years after Dr. Gillette's death, the hospital was renamed the Gillette State Hospital for Crippled Children – and is now known as Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare.

In 1915 the Legislature authorized the state's first special education schools for "deaf, blind, defective speech, and mentally subnormal children." By 1920 there were 16 state-funded hospitals, schools, and institutions operating in Minnesota that provided residential, custodial care – but very little in the way of rehabilitative services.

The few rehabilitative services offered in Minnesota and around the nation at that time existed primarily for injured soldiers returning from two recent wars: the Spanish-American War and World War I. But other factors also led to the creation of vocational rehabilitation programs. One was a tremendous increase in the number of workplace accidents in rapidly industrializing national economy. Another was a steep rise in non-industrial accidents, especially crashes by the inexperienced drivers of newly available automobiles, often resulting in permanent physical disability. Over a period of 10 years the number of such accidents increased dramatically in Minnesota, from about 8,000 in 1910 to nearly 33,000 in 1920.

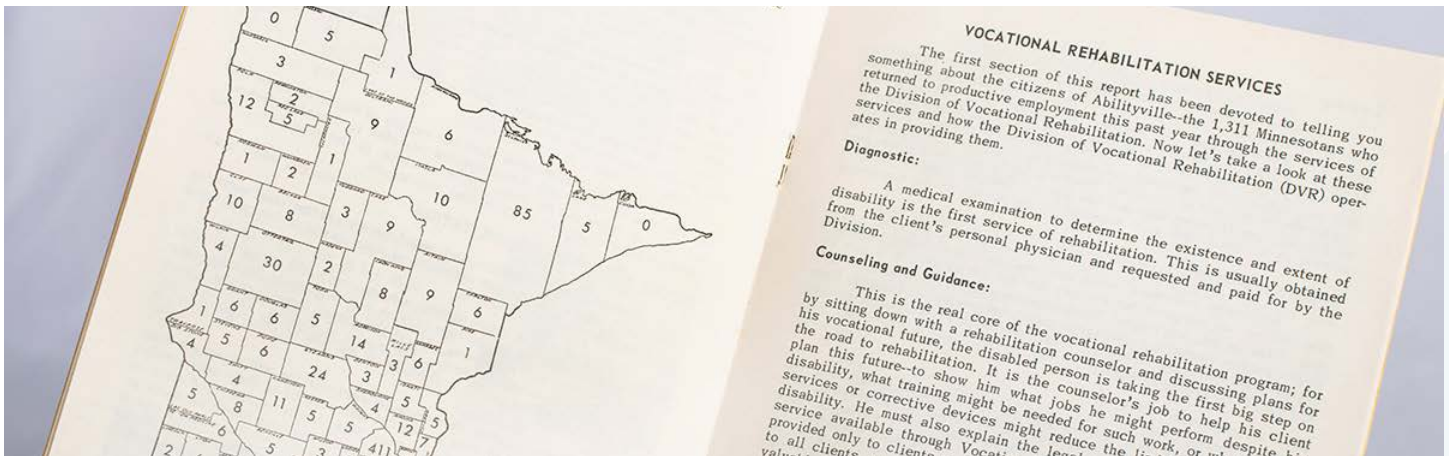


For its first 15 years the public VR program was considered "experimental" and federal funding was precarious at best, subject to periodic reauthorization by a Congress that was occasionally hostile: "This bill is a misdirected measure of charity. It is an effort of scintillating decay. It marks the decadence of social institutions," said one senator. Others characterized the program as an "invasion of states' rights," and a "bolshevist" plot. Finally, in 1935, Congress passed the Social Security Act, which included permanent federal funding for VR, with annual increases in appropriations.

Expansion and Evolution

From the beginning the VR program was designed mainly to provide services to people with physical disabilities. That would begin to change in 1943 with the passage of the Barden-LaFollette Act, which expanded the nature of services, extended eligibility to people with intellectual and mental health disabilities and for the first time created agencies to serve people who are blind (which, in Minnesota, became State Services for the Blind). The VR program was further expanded in 1954, increasing services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and mental health conditions. In the 1950s, VR emphasized its importance in addressing the needs of disadvantaged individuals and broadened the definition of rehabilitation to emphasize individualized planning.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1974 brought sweeping changes to the VR program, including prioritizing serving people with the most significant disabilities and emphasizing evaluation and research as well as staff training. For the first time, the



legislation tied disability to major life functions, signifying a shift away from the “medical model” of providing services. Over the next 40 years, two more significant pieces of legislation brought the VR program to its current state.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 amended the Rehabilitation Act and increased collaboration between VR and other federal employment and training programs. It mandated equal access to all state and local workforce services for individuals with disabilities, strengthened consumer involvement, and integrated citizen-led Rehabilitation Councils into VR agency planning.

And in 2014, President Barack Obama signed into law the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) which once again amended the Rehabilitation Act to affirm VR’s role as a core component of the nation’s public workforce system. And it included a specific focus on improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities, with a special emphasis on providing pre-employment transition services for youth and emphasized VR’s role in serving businesses.

Meanwhile in Minnesota

Minnesota’s VR program expanded and evolved in tandem with the national program, making tweaks and improvements along the way. At its creation in 1920 the program was called the Division of Re-education and Placement of Disabled Persons. By 1935 the name was changed to something a little less jarring: the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and continued to operate as a division of the state’s Department of Education. Over the years there had been recurring discussions about where Vocational Rehabilitation best fit within the structure of state government. More out of inertia than anything else the program stayed at Education until 1976, when DVR became a stand-alone agency and rechristened as the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation.

That didn’t last long. Just one year later, in 1977, DVR became a division again and was moved into the Department of

VR PROGRAM CELEBRATES 100 YEARS



Economic Security, where the program stayed until 2004, when the Department of Economic Security merged with the Department of Trade and Economic Development to become what is now the Department of Employment and Economic Development.

Celebrating 100 Years

Minnesota's Vocational Rehabilitation Services and State Services for the Blind had planned to convene their first-ever joint event on June 2 to celebrate 100 years of VR. But because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were unable to have the large in-person gathering they had hoped for. Instead they produced a series of three online video events throughout the summer to commemorate the occasion. The sessions were recorded and are available for viewing here:



The first featured Mark Schultz, current commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xoUy2FjTvx8&feature=youtu.be



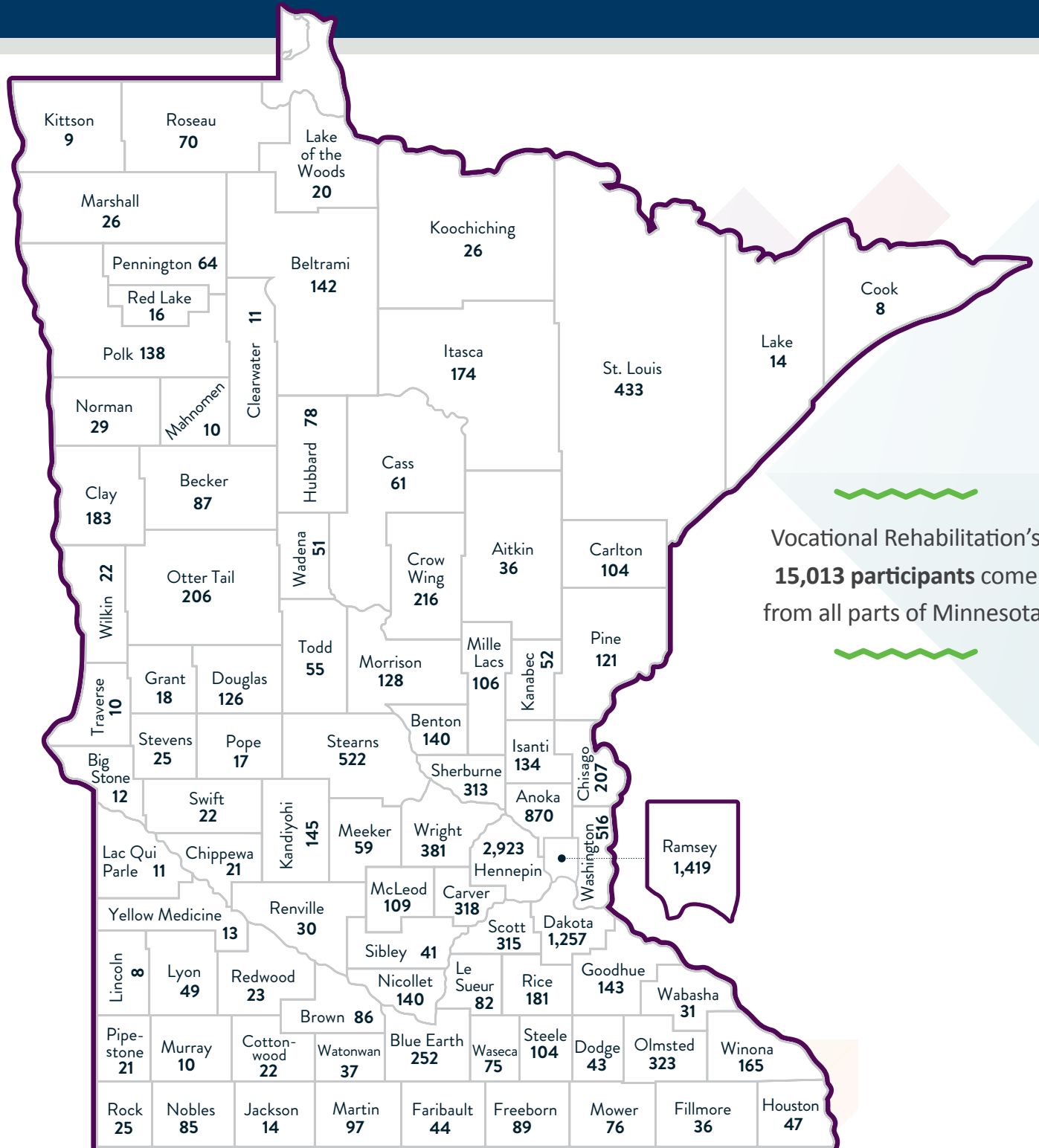
The second featured Fred Schroeder, former commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration during the Clinton administration: www.youtube.be/P6GwKeFTxSo



The grand finale featured Kevin Kling, a Twin Cities story-teller, author, playwright and disability advocate, with an inspiring message for us all: www.youtube.be/MUPElbrhzwQ

Note: the historical narrative about the early days of Minnesota's VR program relies heavily on **History of the Minnesota Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (1919-1935)**, by Ronald D. Hanson in 1979. The report was written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science from the Rehabilitation Counseling Department at what was then Mankato State University. Much of the national narrative is gleaned from reports and documents prepared by the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR).

WHO VR SERVES IN MINNESOTA



Vocational Rehabilitation's
15,013 participants come
from all parts of Minnesota.

To find the Vocational Rehabilitation Services office nearest you, go to
mn.gov/deed/job-seekers/disabilities/find-vrs or call 1-800-328-9095.

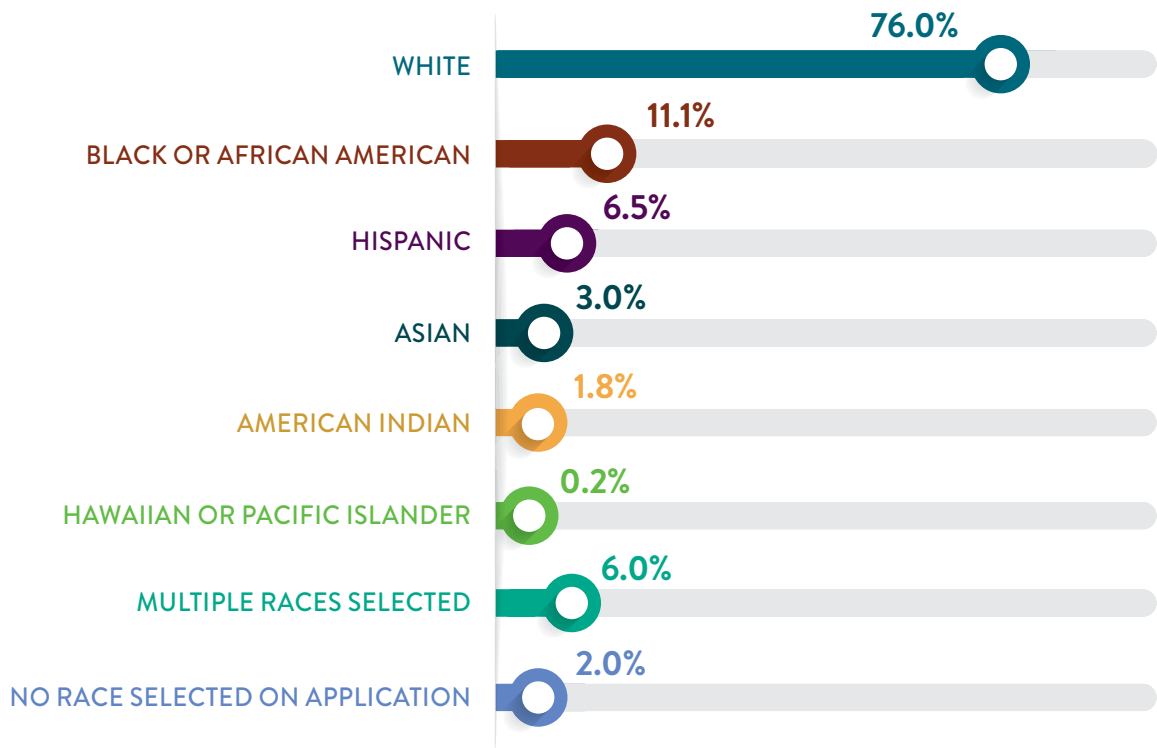
Out of State 35

State Total 15,013

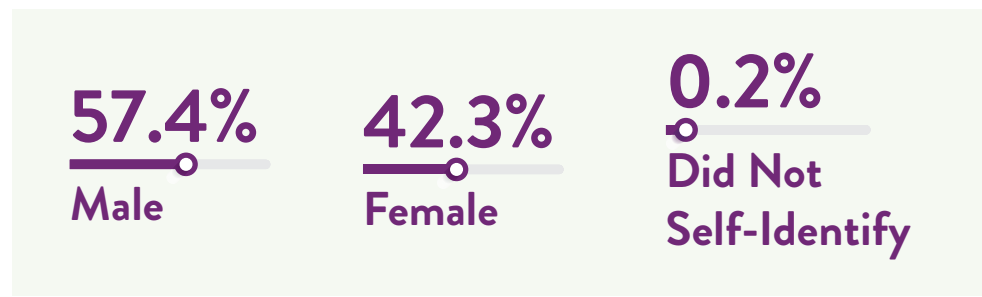
WHO VR SERVES IN MINNESOTA

Reporting period is Federal Program Year (PY), July 1 of Program Year-June 30 of following year

RACE & ETHNICITY

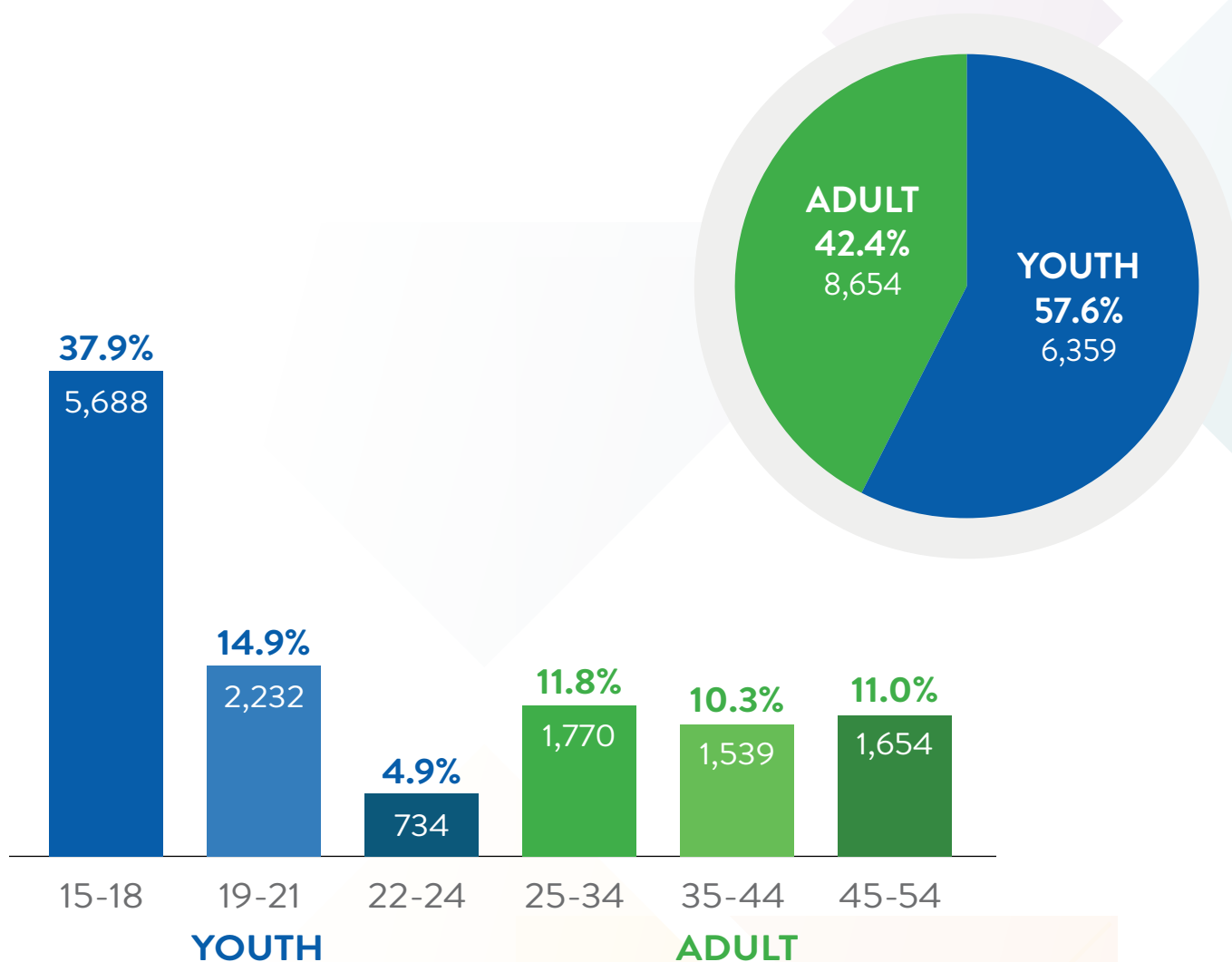


GENDER



AGE AT APPLICATION

There have been considerable changes in the population VRS serves since the implementation of the unfunded mandates put forth by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), enacted in Program Year 2015. Most notably there has been a significant increase in the number of youth being served and the complexity of cases.



PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES (PRE-ETS)

PRE-ETS PILOT PROJECTS

Vocational Rehabilitation programs are required by federal statute to use 15 percent of their federal funding for a coordinated set of activities known as Pre-Employment Transition Services (PRE-ETS). These services are available to students between the ages of 14 and 21 who have been determined as eligible for VR services or are “potentially eligible” students with disabilities who have been determined eligible but have not applied for VR services. Vocational Rehabilitation Services has developed two pilot projects in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Education – one in the metro area and one in a non-metro school district – to try out new approaches in providing Pre-ETS to high school students with disabilities. Developed over the past year, the two Pre-ETS pilot projects are being implemented during the 2020-21 school year.

These pilots emerged from discussions with school districts about how Pre-ETS could best be implemented in their respective schools. At the end of the school year, VRS and its partners will evaluate outcomes from these two pilots, share the results broadly, and determine next steps.

Minneapolis

The metro pilot project in Minneapolis Public Schools will test a consistent structure for providing Pre-ETS to students within Edison and Southwest high schools using the district’s [Career Readiness Seminar Student Guide](#) and lessons from [My Life Plan](#). Two contracted providers (Goodwill-Easter Seals and Midwest Special Services) were selected through a competitive process to join a team of VRS and school district staff to work with 12th grade students who are verified to be potentially eligible for VR services and are interested in participating. Using the Minneapolis Public School resources, each provider will offer lessons with students, individually or in groups, to help them create a post-graduation plan. The team will gather feedback on what worked well and what needs to be improved to scale the effort for all Minneapolis public high schools by the 2021-22 school year.

Meet the Minneapolis Pre-ETS Pilot Team

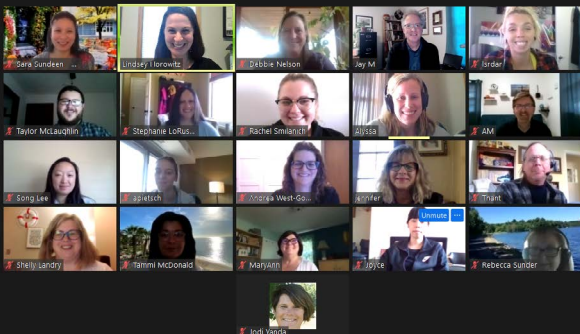
Top Row: Sara Sundeen (VRS Community Partnerships Specialist), Lindsey Horowitz (MDE Transition Specialist), Debbie Nelson (Minneapolis Schools Lead Counselor), Jay McGregor (MSS Instructor), Lauren Srdar (VRS Pre-ETS Representative)

2nd Row: Taylor McLaughlin (MSS Manager), Stephanie LoRusso (VRS Counselor), Rachel Smilanich (Goodwill Navigator), Alyssa Klein (VRS Transition Specialist), Allen Mavis (Goodwill Instructor)

3rd Row: Song Lee (VRS Pre-ETS Representative), Anna Pietsch (VRS Counselor), Andrea West (Goodwill Manager), Jennifer Schneider (Minneapolis Lead Work Coordinator), Thant Pearson (VRS Manager)

4th Row: Shelly Landry (Minneapolis Schools Counselor), Tammi McDonald (MSS Instructor), MaryAnn Sulik (Minneapolis Work Coordinator), Huang, Meng Chu (Joyce) (Minneapolis Schools Counselor), Rebecca Sunder (VRS Metro Regional Director)

5th Row: Jodi Yanda (VRS Manager)



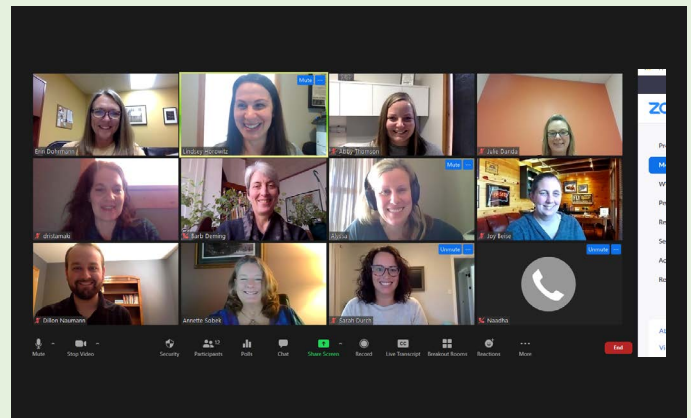
PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES (PRE-ETS)

Princeton

The non-metro pilot is at Princeton Public Schools in central Minnesota. It is designed to build a consistent structure for providing Pre-ETS to potentially eligible students by aligning instruction and support. Two contracted providers (Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services and Goodwill-Easter Seals) were selected through a competitive process to join a team that will also include staff from the school district, VRS, and the Minnesota Department of Education. This group will identify the availability and gaps in Pre-ETS within current district programming and then build new curriculum and work-based learning opportunities. The plan will be implemented with a select group of potentially eligible students. The expectation is that this new Pre-ETS model will then be solidified and training will be made available to other providers who wish to offer Pre-ETS to students throughout the state.

Impact of COVID-19 on Pre-ETS

COVID-19 has had a large impact on the provision of Pre-ETS services across the state. VRS staff are required to meet virtually with students, families and schools, most likely through the school year. This requires a greater partnership with schools than ever before so that connections with students can be made and meetings with students can be arranged (via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Meets, etc.). On the positive side, VRS staff have reported a greater engagement with parents and an enhanced ability to make it to all student Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Virtual services also allows VRS contracted community partners to provide services across the state, giving greater options in rural areas.



Meet the Princeton Pre-ETS Pilot Team

Top Row: Erin Dohrmann (Princeton Schools Director of Special Services), Lindsey Horowitz (MDE Transition Specialist), Abby Thompson (Princeton Work Coordinator), Julie Danda (Goodwill Manager)

Middle Row: Diana Ristamaki (Central MN Jobs and Training Services Manager), Barb Deming (Management Analysis and Development Facilitator), Alyssa Klein (VRS Transition Specialist), Joy Beise (VRS Manager)

Bottom Row: Dillon Naumann (Princeton Work Coordinator), Annette Sobek (VRS Counselor), Sara Durch (Princeton Dean of Students), Mariyam Naadha (Management Analysis and Development Facilitator)

NEW! Pre-ETS video for students and families

www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhOmM5qhsA



OMAR VELAZQUEZ: NEW LANGUAGE, NEW CULTURE, FINISHING SCHOOL, AND A JOB



After moving to Minnesota from central Mexico in 2014, Omar Velazquez and his Spanish-speaking family experienced many of the challenges – new language, new culture – that are common to immigrant families. Then age 14, Omar, who is deaf, had the added challenge of learning a whole new way to communicate with others. In Mexico he had communicated largely through hand gestures, modeling, and a little bit of lip-reading. In Minnesota, everything was different.

He was able to enroll in the Metro Deaf School, a public charter school in St. Paul that provides a bilingual curriculum using American Sign Language (ASL) and English. By 2018, when Omar was enrolled in the school's transition program and ready to start thinking about work, he was receiving services from Vocational Rehabilitation Services and a community service provider called Career Ventures Inc.

Several years ago, Lisa Holden, a VRS counselor with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Team in St. Paul, had encouraged Career Ventures to develop a school-to-work transition program at Metro Deaf School. The organization has staff who are fluent in ASL and understand deaf culture and the unique accommodations that are required. They provide direct services such as the job-seeking skills services and job placement that Omar received.

“ ... HE IS SO VERY PROUD OF HIS WORK AND HOPES TO SERVE AS INSPIRATION TO OTHER YOUNG DEAF PEOPLE. ”



Lisa, who happens to speak Spanish, worked with Omar and his family to help them understand and negotiate his transition from school to work. Chris Marble, a VRS occupational communication specialist, offered communication assistance, and Maddie Eklund from Career Ventures interpreted for job interviews and provided initial on-the-job supports and training when Omar successfully applied for a position prepping and organizing in the kitchen at a local Chick-fil-A restaurant.

Omar was hired in February and received job coaching funded by VRS to help him get started. He was soon furloughed because of the pandemic but was able to return to work in May and now works a couple of days a week. He's hoping to gain more work hours and is looking forward to finishing his last year of school. In the meantime, Omar's infectious smile tells the story as well as anything: He is so very proud of his work and hopes to serve as inspiration to other young deaf people.

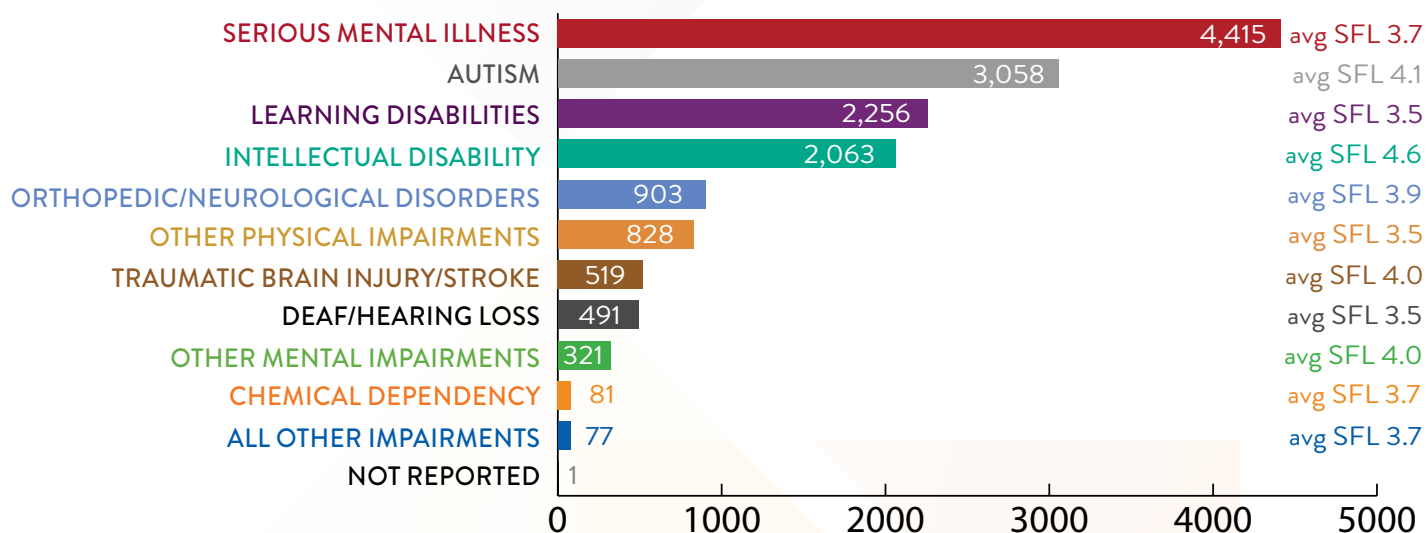
SERIOUS FUNCTIONAL LIMITATIONS (SFL)

Federal law requires the VR program to offer the full range of services to all eligible individuals unless it is insufficient resource to offer those services to all. In such instances, the state must establish an “order of selection” – or a priority for service – based on the number of life skill areas in which a person has significant limitations to employment referred to as Serious Functional Limitations (SFLs). Minnesota has established four such priority categories. Within this order of selection, persons with limitations in three or more functional areas must be served first, followed by those with fewer limitations to employment.

PRIMARY DISABILITY GROUPS

The population VRS serves has become more complex since the passage of WIOA, specifically the implementation of Section 511 requirements. Section 511 places limitations on the payment of subminimum wages to ensure that individuals with disabilities have access to information and services that will enable them to achieve competitive integrated employment. Individuals who may previously have been “tracked” into subminimum wage situations are now seeking competitive integrated employment through VR services.

Grand Total 15,013 participants - average Serious Functional Limitations (SFL) 3.9



IPS: A COMMON SENSE, PRACTICAL, COST-EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION

In recent years, Vocational Rehabilitation Services has seen an increase in the number of individuals it serves with behavioral health conditions. VRS utilizes a team approach for some of these individuals to provide an evidence-based practice of supported employment known as Individual Placement and Support (IPS).

IPS differs from other types of supported employment because employment services and supports are integrated or embedded within mental health treatment services. Its core principles are:

- 1 Integration of Rehabilitation and Mental Health Services:** IPS programs are closely integrated with mental health treatment teams.
- 2 Focus on Integrated Competitive Employment:** Agencies providing IPS services are committed to competitive employment as an attainable goal for people with behavioral health conditions seeking employment.
- 3 Eligibility Based on Choice/Zero Exclusion:** People are not excluded on the basis of readiness, diagnoses, symptoms, substance use history, psychiatric hospitalizations, homelessness, level of disability, or legal system involvement.
- 4 Attention to Individual Preferences:** Services are based on each person's preferences and choices, rather than a mental health or employment providers' judgments.
- 5 Personalized Benefits Counseling:** Employment specialists proactively help people obtain personalized, understandable, and accurate information about their Social Security, Medicaid, and other government entitlements.
- 6 Rapid Job Search:** IPS programs use a rapid job search approach to help job seekers obtain jobs directly, rather than providing lengthy pre-employment assessment, job training, and counseling. If further education is part of their plan, IPS specialists connect people to appropriate resources and provide continued support as needed.
- 7 Systematic Job Development:** Employment specialists systematically visit employers, who are selected based on job seeker preferences, to learn about their business needs and hiring preferences.
- 8 Time-Unlimited and Individualized Support:** Job supports are individualized and continue for as long as each worker wants and needs the support.
- 9 Worldwide evidence** continues to accumulate rapidly on the effectiveness of IPS, which is three times more effective than other vocational approaches in helping people with psychiatric disabilities to obtain and retain employment, increase income, improve self-esteem and quality of life and reduce symptoms. People who experience psychiatric disabilities want and are able to work successfully. The IPS approach is a common sense, practical intervention that appeals to mental health clinicians, participants and the general public.

IPS is cost-effective

People with serious mental illnesses continue to constitute the largest and fastest-growing group of beneficiaries in Social Security Disability programs. Once on disability, less than 1 percent of beneficiaries per year move off benefits to return to work. By helping people with mental illnesses gain employment, especially young adults experiencing the emergence of mental illness symptoms, IPS can help forestall entry into the disability system and reduce Social Security expenditures.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on IPS in Minnesota

COVID-19 changed many aspects of employment services provision, including how IPS services are provided. Minnesota's IPS projects adapted rapidly while implementing program decisions focused on the safety of IPS staff members and program participants.

Anecdotal reports from the community rehabilitation provider community in Minnesota indicate that IPS projects were able to provide continuity of services to people with mental illness during the pandemic “without missing a beat”. All IPS projects in Minnesota continued to provide services, at a time when many other employment service providers were forced to close, suspend services and furlough staff members. Perhaps this is because the IPS approach already requires staff members to operate with maximum flexibility and/or because IPS is highly person centered as well as non-site or location based. IPS staff members were already accustomed to working independently outside of an office environment and already had technology to provide services outside of an office site.



AMANDA CUMMINGS: IPS “THREE-LEGGED STOOL” SUPPORTS AMANDA’S PASSION TO HELP OTHERS



Having struggled for years with mental health issues, Amanda Cummings is now on the front lines assisting people who are especially challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a mental health practitioner at People, Inc.’s location in Coon Rapids, Amanda provides one-on-one and group support, assisting people with crisis prevention planning, identifying coping mechanisms, and setting attainable goals. Amanda also links people up with community resources for housing and employment, as well as connects them with mental health therapists, treatment centers, and county case managers.

Amanda was the recipient of services and supports provided by the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) approach to supported employment. The IPS approach rests on a so-called “three-legged stool” of supports provided by three partners: a mental health provider, a community provider, and a VR counselor. In Amanda’s case, counseling and guidance services – including mental health supports and Social Security benefits counseling – were provided by LaNay Koralesky, a VRS counselor. The other two “legs” were Bridgeview Drop-In Center at the Lee Carlson Center for Mental Health and Well-Being in Fridley, and Rise, a community rehabilitation provider.

After starting her new job in January 2020, Amanda now supports people in a mental health crisis. And she herself is supported by Rise’s employment consultant Ben Streitz who continues to check in regularly with Amanda via phone and text during this challenging time. Ben has been assisting Amanda with her career goals since she started attending peer support groups at Bridgeview.

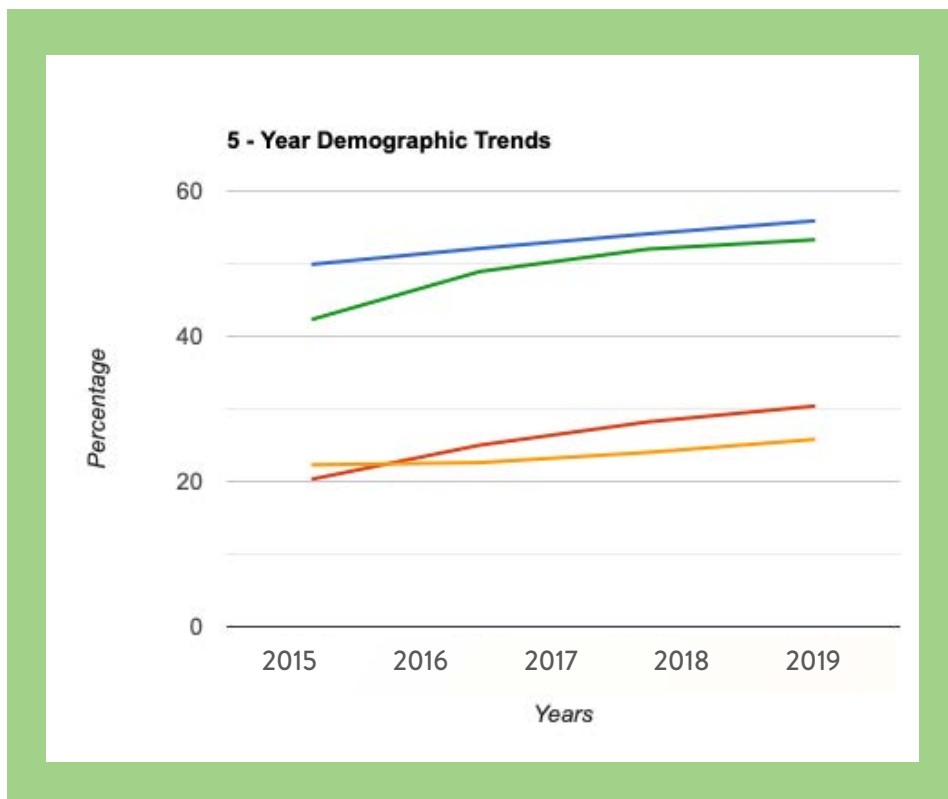
“The peer support specialist who led the groups lit a fire in me,” said Amanda, who had worked as a nurse in Maine for several years. “Her passion, along with having mental health challenges, sparked my passion and I knew then what I wanted to be: a mental health practitioner providing peer support.”

Amanda proudly reached her 90 days on the job April 13 and “continues to be doing really well,” LaNay said. “Before she started the job we had a lot of conversation about what that line of work would involve – and talked about how to cope with things like compassion fatigue that comes from being so supportive and kind to others in such difficult times.”

“Amanda is not afraid to take on challenges and is passionate about helping others,” said Ben. “I will do whatever she needs me to do to be successful. People are counting on her compassionate support.”

COMPARISON OF EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY PROGRAM YEAR

Program year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Youth	49.9%	52.1%	54.1%	55.9%	57.4%
Developmentmetal Disability	20.3%	25.0%	28.2%	30.4%	32.1%
Communities of Color	22.3%	22.6%	24.0%	25.8%	26.9%
4+ Significant Functional Limitations reported	42.3%	48.9%	52.0%	53.3%	54.6%



— YOUTH

— DEVELOPMENTMETAL
DISABILITY

— COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

— 4+ SIGNIFICANT FUNCTIONAL
LIMITATIONS REPORTED

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY RACE

Race/Ethnicity	Participant Count	Avg Hourly Wage	Avg Weekly Hours	Estimated Avg Monthly Earnings
White Only/Non Hispanic	1792	\$13.24	25.6	\$1,562
Communities of Color	498	\$13.37	25.6	\$1,563
Totals/Averages	2290	\$13.27	25.6	\$1,562

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY AGE

Age	# of placements	Average of hours per week	Average of hourly wage	Average of weekly earnings
14-18	80	28.1	\$12.08	\$353.70
19-21	517	26.4	\$12.03	\$329.80
22-24	368	24.8	\$12.74	\$335.20
25-64	1297	25.4	\$13.99	\$381.24
65+	28	24.0	\$12.94	\$324.21
Grand Total	2290	25.6	13.27	360.57

EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY PLACEMENT TYPE

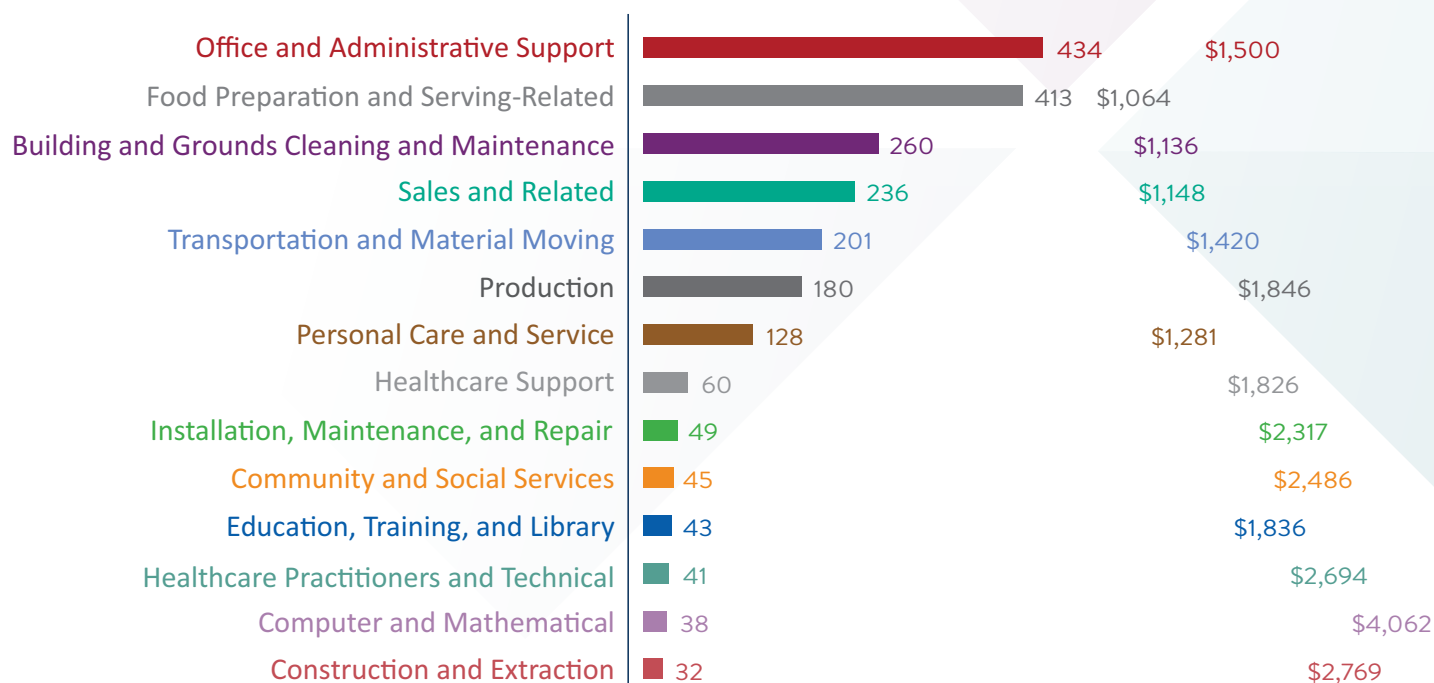
All VR placements are competitive (pay minimum wage or higher and at a rate comparable to non-disabled workers performing the same tasks) and integrated (at a location where the employee interacts with individuals without disabilities to the same extent that nondisabled workers do in a comparable position).

Placement by type of employment	# of placements	Average of hours per week	Average of hourly wage	Average of weekly earnings
Competitive Integrated Employment	1933	26.4	\$13.49	\$377.26
Self-Employment	9	20.1	\$17.26	\$350.18
Supported Employment - Short-Term	21	24.8	\$11.47	\$294.04
Supported Employment in Competitive Integrated Setting	327	21.4	\$11.95	\$266.47
Grand Total	2290	25.6	\$13.27	\$360.57

JOB STABILITY

VRS is required to report the number of participants who are still employed 4 quarters after they have exited as a measure of job stability. The most recent data indicated that 63% of participants were still employed, compared to those who were employed in the second quarter after exiting the program.

Top Occupations



of Participants and Average Monthly Earnings



TOP EMPLOYERS

Employer Name	Number of Placements
Wal-Mart (includes Sam's Club)	88
Hy-Vee	80
State of MN (includes 15 different state departments/agencies)	43
Coborn's Inc (includes CashWise and Hornbachers)	38
McDonald's	34
Goodwill Industries	34
Cub Foods	32
Kwik Trip	27
Fleet Farm	25
Target	23
Home Depot	22
YMCA	16
Culver's	15
Menard's	14
FDC	13
FedEx	13
Lunds & Byerlys	12
Burger King	12
Dollar Tree	11
Subway	10

ERICH HOFFMANN: A SEASON IN THE BIG LEAGUES, AND A LOOK TOWARD THE FUTURE

Erich Hoffmann spent the summer of 2019 at Target Field, working for the Minnesota Twins' Ballpark Operations Department. His job, achieved with the assistance of a VRS customized employment specialist, involved greeting and directing fans, scanning tickets, stamping hands, and passing out information to guests.

He left the ballpark that October, after the Twins were eliminated from the playoffs, and he planned to return in the spring – until the COVID-19 pandemic effectively closed down Target Field for the 2020 season.

Meanwhile, Erich hoped to find off-season employment. He got a little help from his ballpark manager, who praised the young man as “an absolute pleasure to have on staff” and recommended him as an employee who would be “a positive asset to any organization, group, or company.” It wasn't long before he landed a part-time position, at the Odyssey Theater in Burnsville, taking tickets, directing guests, and communicating with management.

Erich, who has a rare neurodevelopmental genetic disorder called Williams Syndrome, has received a variety of employment-related services since he first came to Vocational Rehabilitation Services in 2013 while a student Rosemount High School. He took Essential Work Skills summer classes at AVIVO and later enrolled in Transitional Ed Service Alternative, a transition program at Dakota County Technical College. In 2017 he participated in the Discovery Process at ProAct and the next year took Life Skills Programming with Lifeworks.

At least four VRS staff have enjoyed the opportunity to work with Erich to achieve his goal of competitive integrated employment. His first counselor was Margie Webb, who is now a customized employment specialist. Then came two other counselors, Natalie Sinn and Kaelene Klemick, along with Mary Peratt, placement coordinator.

“Erich has accomplished so many things, and he's not done yet,” Margie said, adding that the VRS team “will still keep our eyes open for his ‘ideal’ job.”

Because of the pandemic, Erich was unable to return to Target Field for the 2020 baseball season, but his journey continued elsewhere, in the realm of political and public advocacy. For many years he has volunteered and supported political campaigns. He has worked for state and federal legislators, received letters of support from them, and is on a first-name basis with Gov. Tim Walz. He hopes eventually to leverage his growing body of work experience into an influential career within government, advocating and supporting social change.

Photos: Erich Hoffmann dressed for work at Target Field and with Minnesota State Senator Greg Clausen, DFL-Apple Valley.



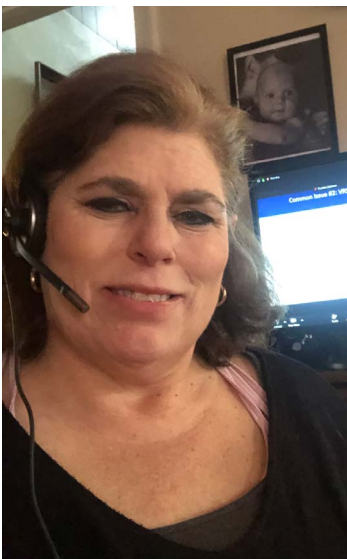


JOSUE MARTINEZ: ADAPT, CREATE, INNOVATE, INSPIRE - SUCCESS IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

To state the perfectly obvious, it's an unprecedented time. But the work of VRS doesn't end; it's just different now. Despite the pandemic closures and the disorienting solitude that comes from working remotely, VRS staff are finding ways to adapt, create, innovate, inspire, and succeed.

Paulette Liestman, a placement coordinator from Willmar, shares this story about how she was able to work remotely with a VRS participant named Josue Martinez to help him complete training for a new job.

Josue had been referred for Discovery and had completed an interview at RenVilla Health Center in Renville. RenVilla liked Josue and wanted to make him a job offer – but first he needed to receive training.



Because of the pandemic, of course, Paulette is now working remotely, so she needed to get creative and find an innovative approach for Josue to complete his training, which included 20 hours of video training and testing as well as completing forms.

“Josue and I made a plan that we would contact each other at 8 a.m. to plan the day's training,” Paulette said. First, they would each watch a training video and then speak to each other by phone when they had both finished watching the video.

“I would then read the questions to him and enter his answers into the computer,” Paulette said. “Since English is not his primary language, it made sense to read the questions to him to insure he understood the question completely and answer any questions or give examples. Each day we would talk throughout the day, completing videos and assessments in one- to two-hour blocks of time to ensure all the video training was completed within the week.”

Throughout the process Paulette maintained contact with Natasha (the HR contact at RenVilla) to provide assurance that Josue was completing everything correctly, and to submit the results by email to Natasha to place in Josue's employee training file.

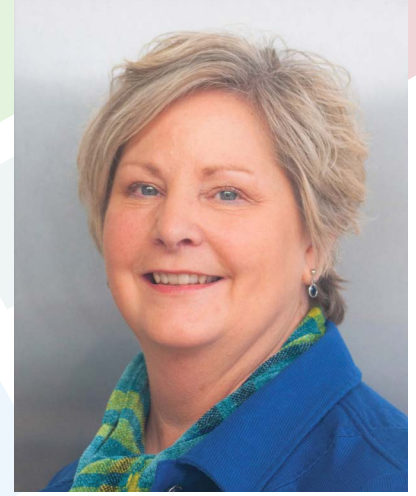
Josue started his job on Monday, March 23, working 20 hours a week – 10 hours each in both Laundry and Housekeeping – earning \$9.98 per hour.

Photo 1: Josue Martinez, left, and Bryce, the environmental supervisor at RenVilla.

Photo 2: Paulette Liestman

DEE TORGERSON

MESSAGE FROM THE VRS DIRECTOR



“Mankind’s greatest achievements have come about by talking, and its greatest failures by not talking. It doesn’t have to be like this. Our greatest hopes could become reality in the future. With the technology at our disposal, the possibilities are unbounded. All we need to do is make sure we keep talking.”

Those words are from the physicist Stephen Hawking, one of the people I admire most. They are especially resonant in 2020 – a year unlike any other. As I write, it has been one year since I became director of Vocational Rehabilitation Services in October 2019. Could anyone have imagined then what the next 12 months would bring? A global pandemic in which a quarter of a million souls perished in America alone. The economy in shambles and hundreds of thousands of people forced into unemployment. Nationwide unrest over racial tensions. Violence in the streets. The struggle, for many of us, to adapt to the new realities of remote work. The desperate urgency of providing services in ways that we likely had never considered possible.

We cannot pretend that the past year was anything but a series of unprecedented challenges. Yet through it all we in the world of Vocational Rehabilitation continued, as Stephen Hawking urged us to do, to talk with each other. To explore, to experiment, to try new things. We never let go of the realization that the possibilities really are unbounded as we set about the hard work of creating a future that features access, opportunity, and inclusion for people with disabilities.

In many ways, 2020 was a year of renewal. A time of challenge, change, and forced adaptation, to be sure, but also a time when the VR program was able to re-establish and re-build relationships with many of our partners. Together with community rehabilitation programs throughout the state we’ve had to find efficiencies and flexibilities in service provision – and we’ve strengthened our relationships in the process. We’ve worked diligently with Minnesota businesses to create healthy and lasting relationships that will provide long-term employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities and skilled and resilient workers for the employers who need them. Today we have a stronger relationship than ever with the Minnesota Department of Education, leading to more and better services to high school students and young adults. A formal agreement with the Department of Human Services to provide joint, collaborative, and seamless services is already yielding improved outcomes for individuals with the most significant disabilities.

A particularly fruitful and gratifying development in 2020 was the re-establishment of trust and partnership between Vocational Rehabilitation Services and State Services for the Blind. After many years of operating separately and at a respectful distance, the two sister agencies in 2020 found common ground. With both agencies under new leadership – and experiencing the stresses and challenges of the past year – VRS and SSB brought together a zeal for collaboration and the sharing of ideas, information, and resources.

That was a big milestone in a year of many milestones. Over the course of 2020 we observed and celebrated

the 100-year anniversary of the public Vocational Rehabilitation Program in America. But for COVID-19, the June 2 anniversary date would have brought together the leadership and staff of VRS and SSB for the first ever joint event sponsored by the two agencies. The pandemic, of course, disrupted those plans – but we were able to celebrate together anyway, with a series of virtual events throughout the summer.

The centenary of VR was one of three important milestones in 2020. In October we marked the 75-year anniversary of the National Disability Employment Awareness Month with a month-long celebration of opportunity, access and inclusion for people with disabilities. And we also observed the 30-year anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), perhaps the most important civil rights law ever enacted for people with disabilities.

Despite the unprecedented stress and unsettling challenges of this pandemic year, I am pleased to reflect on the progress we were able to make together. Time did not stop. We found ways of creating a healthy work culture, building robust relationships, and strengthening the vitality and resiliency of our organizations. We observed and celebrated important milestones. We kept talking, innovating, creating. We embraced, as Steven Hawking urged, the technologies that were at our disposal, and grasped the unbounded possibilities of the future.



CHASE FOREMAN

A MESSAGE FROM THE SRC CHAIR

We need you. Your experience. Your insights. Your ideas. Your expertise. Your questions. Your guidance. VRS leaders regularly express that sentiment to members of the State Rehabilitation Council.

I have been on the council since 2017 and that message has been consistent through changes in the job market, changes in the economy, changes in leadership at VRS, and changes in leadership at the State of MN. To me, as a businessperson, that is a sign of sincerity and well-established organizational values. VRS is a state agency that genuinely wants our help to ensure they are serving people with disabilities better and better every day.

Now, as the Chair of the State Rehabilitation Council, I say the same thing to you. We need you. VRS values our input as a council, and I invite you to make our input even more valuable by joining the council. Bring your lived experience. Bring your unique background. Bring your professional expertise. Bring your self to the table for the sake of thousands of Minnesotans with disabilities across the state and in your community.

We need you. Come join us.

ABOUT THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

The State Rehabilitation Council is a citizen council whose members provide counsel and advice to Minnesota's Vocational Rehabilitation program. Council members play an active role in making program performance and policy decisions. They collaborate with VR leadership and staff to shape priorities, assess needs, measure customer satisfaction, and produce an annual report on the status of the VR program.

Members come from many walks of life and represent diverse parts of the state. If you care about the issue of employment for people with disabilities and want to make a difference, please consider applying for this council. **For more information, please contact Karla Eckhoff at Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us or 651-259-7364.**

You may apply online by
using the Online Application:

**[commissionsandappointments.
sos.state.mn.us/Position](https://commissionsandappointments.sos.state.mn.us/Position)**

Search for
State Rehabilitation Council – General

2020 STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL MEMBERS

BUSINESS, INDUSTRY OR LABOR REPRESENTATIVES

Thomas DeVita – St. Paul
Chase Foreman – Minneapolis
Karen Leddy – Mound
Tyler Sadek – Minneapolis

CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROJECT REPRESENTATIVE

Anne Robertson – Minneapolis

COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDER REPRESENTATIVE

Lisa Parteh – Cambridge

CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENTS OF VR SERVICES

Delawoe Bahtuoh – Brooklyn Park
Michael Etten – Shoreview
Ana Rose Hart-Thomas – St. Bonifacius

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REPRESENTATIVE

Sue Benolken – Roseville

REPRESENTATIVE OF AMERICAN INDIAN VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES PROGRAM FUNDED UNDER SECTION 121 OF THE ACT

Shelly Weaver – Naytahwaush

DISABILITY ADVOCACY GROUPS REPRESENTATIVES

Jillian Nelson – St. Paul
Rebecca Puchtel – Elk River
Kelly Nye-Lengerman (resigned May,
2020)

GOVERNOR'S WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD REPRESENTATIVE

Joshua Berg – Elko New Market

PACER REPRESENTATIVE

Barb Ziemke – Minneapolis

STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE

Linda Lingen – St. Paul

VR COUNSELOR REPRESENTATIVE (NON-VOTING MEMBER)

LeAnn Kleaver

VRS DIRECTOR (NON-VOTING MEMBER)

Dee Torgerson



The Department of Employment and Economic Development is an equal opportunity employer and service provider.

Upon request, this information can be made available in alternate formats for individuals with disabilities by calling **651-259-7364** or emailing Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us.

The VR program received 74.9 percent of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2020, the total amount of grant funds is \$42,740,250. The required state match for these funds is \$11,514,652. The state of Minnesota has appropriated \$14.3 million – 25.1 percent of the total – to exceed the matching requirement.