

MINNESOTA STATE  
REHABILITATION COUNCIL-GENERAL

# ANNUAL REPORT

PROGRAM YEAR 2021  
JULY 1, 2021 TO JUNE 30, 2022



 *Minnesota's Recovery Powered by Inclusion*



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The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is required to report on the status of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program (VRS) to the Governor of Minnesota and to the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration annually. We hope this report includes content which is of interest to all.

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# 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. It utilizes a dual customer model to meet the needs of both participants and employers. *Read more about the benefits to both individuals and employers on pages 8-9.*

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 2022, Minnesota received about 81.7 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.

Another source of funding for VRS is called program income, which is gained by reimbursements from Social Security for VR services to individuals who reach substantial gainful employment (SGA) following those services. *Read more about program income through Dillon's story on page 12-13.*

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. *Learn more about the council and its members on pages 29-30.*

**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 ages 14-21, which includes 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. These services are provided through partnerships with the Departments of Education and Human Services and through community providers. *Gain more information about transition services on pages 10-11.*



## MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

# TURNING ADVERSITY INTO OPPORTUNITY

**In a time like no other, it's time to change and adapt.** That was the headline above last year's Message from the Director. I was tempted to use it again this year. In fact, I was tempted to simply recycle last year's message, which concluded this way: "We live and work in a time like no other. It's a time that makes the imperative to rethink, adapt, and change our approach more urgent than ever."

It's as true today as it was then – only more so.

The past few years have been a period of sustained organizational disruption and adversity for the Vocational Rehabilitation program. Structural changes and new mandates at the federal level created a seismic shift in our approach to providing services to our customers, and it forced us to change who our customers were. Then COVID struck. With almost no warning we were compelled to shutter our offices and figure out on the fly how to conduct our work from our basements, kitchens, and living rooms. Unprecedented. Impossible.

But we did it. Somehow, we found a way to muddle through, continuing to provide essential services as best we could under extremely difficult circumstances. If we've learned anything over the past couple of years, it's that we can be more flexible, more agile, and more adaptable than we ever imagined.

And now, as we've begun to return to our offices and to, once again, meet people face-to-face – unmediated by a Teams or Zoom screen – we must find a way to keep evolving, growing, and adapting. We must seize this moment and recognize that it's a time for turning adversity into opportunity. We must embrace a culture of innovation that is not averse to risk and trying new things.

More than half a million Minnesotans report having one or more disabilities, and their unemployment rate is double that of people without disabilities. Plus, the current historically tight labor market makes it more important than ever for us to put forth resources, practices, policies, and supports that improve the employment prospects of people with disabilities – and help businesses tap into a rich and robust pool of potential employees.

Our innovations need to be reflected in the work that we do with individuals. As we adapt to the changing landscape and post-COVID recovery, we have an opportunity to build on the lessons we've learned over almost three years of pandemic-induced challenges. We now know how to make hybrid workplaces work for us and for our participants. We've learned how to meet participants where they are and where they want to be by expanding ways of serving and meeting virtually, in communities, in schools, in homes, and in our state sites. We have to keep doing that – and doing it better.

We've also learned new and more efficient ways to make it easier for participants to gain access to our services. We developed legal electronic signatures. We are in the process of developing electronic and streamlined applicant inquiries, intakes, and applications. We created a smart phone app that allows staff and participants to easily connect to our case management system, WorkForce One.

All of these are directly related to the disruptions and adversity of the past few years. The myriad of challenges forced us to adapt and to find new ways to do almost everything. It hasn't been easy. AND we have to keep innovating. A key benefit from these challenging times has been a renewed focus on the individuals we serve. You'd think that would be an obvious focus, but like any complex organization, we've sometimes been guilty of focusing too much on the system and not enough on the people for whom the system exists. We've been reminded forcefully that we must raise our expectations, as well as society's expectations, of the great potential of people with disabilities. And we must build systems that above all recognize and value their strengths, talents, and diversity.

The theme for this year's National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October was Disability: Part of the Equity Equation. This year's SRC annual report in many ways mirrors that theme by recognizing and highlighting that people with disabilities are indeed a crucial part of the diverse and inclusive American workforce.

## TOP EMPLOYERS

VRS has developed valuable relationships with many employers across the state. Below is a list of the employers who provided new job opportunities to the most participants last year.

Employer Name	Number of New Employees Hired from VRS
Wal-Mart (includes Sam's Club)	76
Hy-Vee	75
Coborn's Grocery Store	28
Cub Foods	24
Goodwill	24
McDonalds	23
Kwik Trip	23
Home Depot	20
State of Minnesota	20
TJ Maxx	16
Culvers	16
Marshalls	15
Target	11
Home Goods	11
Holiday Inn	11
Kohl's	11
Fleet Farm	8
FedEx	6



## STORY OF IMPACT - OVERCOMING LIFE-CHANGING ILLNESS



Kari overcomes life-changing illness and finds new employment at one of VRS' top employers

### DRIVE TO INDEPENDENCE

JAMES HEGSTROM, VRS PLACEMENT COORDINATOR

Kari Nesje, who lives in a small town near Albert Lea, contracted a virus in 2017 that resulted in amputations of all her limbs and parts of her face. After a long hospitalization and recovery, the former factory employee wanted to get back to work. Kari never lost hope. Instead, she embraced her new reality, and sought the assistance she needed to relearn the skills and habits that would enable her to pursue a new work experience.

“Through the whole time in the hospital,” her husband John said, “all the skin grafting and everything she has gone through, she’s never complained about anything. No matter how hard it is to find help when I’m not around, she’s had a positive attitude through it all.”

To begin her journey toward returning to work, Kari collaborated with VRS counselor Sue Draayer in the Austin office to arrange an internship in the CareerForce location in Albert Lea. There Kari assisted customers with job applications and Unemployment Insurance – and through her own experiences provided inspiration to CareerForce customers.

Later, after her internship ended, Kari found employment at the SPAM Museum in Austin. Her network of supporters offered rides, 60 miles each way, for her to go to work. Kari continued to work at the museum until she applied for and landed work at Home Depot monitoring the self-checkout. Now Kari has her driver’s license back and drives her modified vehicle to and from work. With guidance from the VRS statewide assistive technology specialist and financial investment from VRS, the modifications to her 2021 Chrysler Voyager include separate, rubber-sleeved prosthetics permanently mounted on the left for the gas and brake and a Tri-pin steering mount on the right. Operating the in-floor ramp and automatic doors independently, she is fully self-sufficient.

Referring to their new normal, John says, “Coming home, I never know where she is half the time. She just takes off with someone else.” Kari points out, “He’s got a tracking thing on his phone!” Their laughter fills the room.

Each morning Kari opens her eyes at 6 a.m. and pulls into Home Depot by 7 a.m. Adapting to her environment, Kari continued to coach customers safely during the pandemic, as well as in the days to come. “I love it there,” she says. With her independence back, Kari has the tools, the purpose, and the drive to be her very best at work, for customers.

# STORY OF IMPACT - COMPANY COMMITTED TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Property management company committed to diversity and inclusion

## TPI HOSPITALITY

JAMES HEGSTROM, VRS PLACEMENT COORDINATOR

We all want to be part of something important – and hospitality means there’s a place for everyone. That philosophy lies at the core of TPI Hospitality’s success in hiring skilled and diverse staff in the hotels and properties the company manages. With headquarters in Willmar, the property management and hospitality company’s portfolio features industry-leading hotels throughout the state and elsewhere.

Pete Bromelkamp, TPI’s Chief Human Resources Officer, oversees 1600 employee relationships, among 41 locations in Minnesota and Florida. He says, “Our core values keep us respecting diversity and each other. Here, each of us has the power. Diversity makes us better because all perspectives are different. It’s valuable to have a diverse population of individuals working for your company. We believe that the more diverse we are, the stronger we are.”

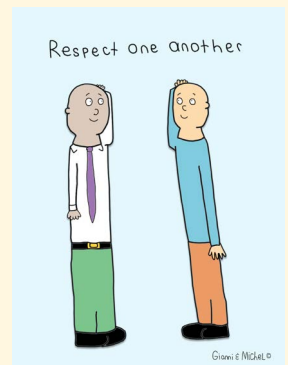
Twin brothers Gianni and Michel Moroni illustrate the company’s spirit of diversity and inclusion. The brothers are neurodiverse, both on the autism spectrum, and VRS participants who interviewed for housekeeping positions at one of TPI’s properties, the Hilton Garden Inn in Roseville. For the interview, VRS Customized Employment Professional James Hegstrom helped the brothers use visual resumes to not only demonstrate their housekeeping skills but also their natural artistic talents for cartooning.

Gianni and Michel brought iPads to the interview to show off their cartooning talents. Using the iPads, the brothers portrayed characters ranging from Mickey Mouse to Thomas the Tank Engine, impressing the interviewers with their seemingly effortless skills and talents. HR asked if they would contribute their artistic talent to educate other TPI employees on aspects of company values. Both brothers and their family loved the idea.



The brothers were hired. Now, from April to November they work with a job coach to complete housekeeping tasks, making the public spaces shine. During the slow season, the artists fire up their creativity for the benefit of all employees, spotlighting the benefits of diversity and celebrating neuro- diversity in the same brushstroke.

TPI Human Resources Specialist Ben Coady affirmed, “I enjoy the empowerment experienced by every employee. If there is an idea that is beneficial to TPI, we have the power to make an impact right away, no waiting for approval.”



*The illustrations on these pages were created by the Moroni brothers as part of their work to educate fellow employees on company values.*



The truth in his words is evident not only in the experiences of Gianni and Michel, but also by numerous employee relationships TPI has made with people served by VRS. For example, Coady has worked with VRS Placement Coordinator Mary Peratt to identify and host work experiences for multiple students. “If students are interested in the hospitality industry, we introduce and expose them to the different jobs they can try; like breakfast, housekeeping, and janitorial, to gain skills. That is a huge win-win for us because we need help in those areas.”

And a win for students with disabilities, too, who are given a chance to try different skills and decide for themselves if hospitality inspires their future. As Mary Peratt says: “TPI is a great company to work with and they will do whatever they can to accommodate someone.”



# A NEW STRATEGIC PLAN FOR PROVIDING SERVICES FOR STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

In the late summer of 2022, after a year of intensive planning, Vocational Rehabilitation Services unveiled its new five-year strategic plan for providing services to students and young adults. [The VRS Youth in Transition 2022-2027 Strategic Plan](#) defines, organizes, and supports the work of VRS to empower youth with disabilities to explore, prepare for, and achieve their goals for competitive integrated employment.

The new strategic plan solidifies a partnership that includes VRS, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), and a network of community service providers. Through this partnership we engage students, families, guardians, and others to offer person-centered services that help students make informed choices about their career journey.

“The exciting part of this new strategic plan is that it establishes a very comprehensive work plan for achieving our goals,” said Alyssa Klein, VRS Youth Services Coordinator. “It’s really the first time we’ve had a coordinated set of strategies to define the course of our work going forward.”

This new plan describes four key strategies that will chart the path toward realizing the goals that were established by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Passed in 2014, WIOA imposed new requirements on the nation’s public Vocational Rehabilitation programs and schools to provide significantly expanded services to all students and youth with disabilities, including a new set of services called Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students beginning as young as 14. The four new strategies include:

- **Streamline**, strengthen and share a statewide VRS-school coordination process that emphasizes diversity, equity, inclusion, access, and opportunity for all students with disabilities
- **Strengthen** relationships with community partners, increase choice of and access to services
- **Increase focus** on performance and evaluation
- **Build** VRS Pre-ETS/Transition staff development

Beginning in 2019, VRS began staffing up to meet the challenge of providing services to transition-age students between the ages of 14 through 21. The goal was to have services available to all students with disabilities, including those who are potentially eligible for VR services but had not yet applied to the VR program. Dozens of new transition counselors and Pre-ETS representatives have joined VRS since the hiring push began, and by the end of 2022, VRS had also hired four new regional Pre-ETS specialists to coordinate and manage the work in all parts of the state.

It’s been a slow journey, and not always a smooth one with more than two years of the COVID-19 pandemic causing major disruptions in the ability to provide services in schools and elsewhere. However, the efforts to increase quality services for students are showing real results. In the six years since WIOA was passed, the data show that VRS has made a significant pivot toward increasing service for youth in transition. See [page 21](#) for data that shows the dramatic upward trend in the numbers of students receiving pre-employment transition services in recent years.



### VRS YOUTH IN TRANSITION

MIKE WINDSPERGER, VRS TRANSITION COUNSELOR

Peyton Groth was a high school Junior with an IEP (Individualized Education Program) when his teacher connected his father and Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS). Peyton has a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, and he requires additional time to process and respond. This impacted the services he used as a participant of VRS and his progress in skill building but he had retained an incredibly valuable asset, a positive attitude. Through senior year, Peyton completed a work evaluation at a local department store where he stocked shelves and returned unpurchased items when needed. He did great at this and was able to work independently when he knew the job tasks. At the end of his work evaluation, we learned that the department store did not have a permanent position open at that time, but Peyton was encouraged to keep an eye on the website to watch for openings.

While the department store did not work out in the long run, Peyton remained positive and optimistic. After he graduated from high school, Peyton participated in a job search while also working on additional workplace readiness skills. He was willing to learn and try and showed personal growth and maturity due to exposure to these new experiences. The job search was interrupted and ended during the early time of COVID-19. As businesses started operating again, Peyton was able to take part in a Job Tryout at the local Subway Restaurant. A Job Tryout is a way to have a potential employee try a job as a working interview to prove to the employer that they can do the job tasks with little risk to both the employee and the employer. The manager there was looking for someone who could help with morning prep and other tasks as needed before the lunch rush.

During his Job Tryout, Peyton learned tasks quickly, took feedback from his manager like a champ and strived to do his best. Toward the end of this Job Tryout, Peyton was offered a position permanently, which he accepted and has been enjoying since.

Peyton continues doing the same job and has added some additional duties. His main responsibilities are to cut vegetables, prepare cold meats, cheese, and utensils needed during the lunch rush. Peyton's positive attitude and dedication to achieving his goals has been amazing to watch. He has been able to overcome so much adversity already and if he keeps these attributes, I have no doubt in my mind that he will continue to be successful in his goals.



### A DIVING ACCIDENT TURNS INTO OPPORTUNITY

Dillon Barrowicz has turned adversity into opportunity throughout his life. After a backyard diving accident left the high school junior paralyzed from the chest down in 2012, he turned his focus to a future of self-sufficiency and independence. “VR was there every step of the way. I am where I am supposed to be,” Dillon beamed.

After his injury, Dillon began receiving disability benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA). Some of the services Dillon received through VRS were offered through the Ticket to Work (TTW) program for eligible individuals who receive disability related cash benefits from SSA. The program offers free employment services, typically offered in partnership with a state agency like VRS, to help adults with disabilities reduce their reliance on SSA cash benefits and increase their self-sufficiency.

VRS counselor Jennifer Koski helped with Dillon’s transition to college while mentoring his next counselor Emily Kolbinger, from the Apple Valley office. VRS assisted Dillon through his general education requirements from Normandale Community College and onto graduating from the University of Minnesota in 2019. With a bachelor’s degree in Business and Marketing Education, Dillon is a first-generation college graduate. He knew the importance of education to his future but needed a plan to get there.

Emily became aware of a mentorship with Old National Bank and Dillon “jumped right on it.” Unfortunately, cut short by the COVID 19 pandemic, his 10-month mentorship ended after just four months. Ben, an Old National employee who uses a wheelchair, advocated for Dillon’s mentorship to convert to a paid internship for a full experience. The internship was mostly a virtual experience – Dillon attended meetings, completed projects, and submitted reports via online platforms – and after a successful internship, Old National offered Dillon full-time employment as a Mortgage Sales Associate, one year ago.

Counselor Hilary Kruckenber and Placement Professional, Mary Peratt were patient with Dillon as he waded through the uncertainty of the pandemic. Hillary and Mary concentrated their efforts on the Old National building in Farmington, organizing and making his personal office accessible with items like his height-adjustable desk to accommodate his wheelchair. He enjoys working in Farmington, and commutes there daily from his home in Lakeville.

Dillon refers to himself as a relatively healthy quadriplegic with a power wheelchair. He maintains self-sufficiency, comprehensive group medical insurance, and financial stability, the essential elements for leading life on his terms.

As a former recipient of Social Security benefits, Dillon now says with pride, “I’m not on public assistance. I do a lot of meaningful work. I not only get to see beautiful homes on the Internet, but I also work with other people, striving to achieve their own financial independence.”

Still, he admits, “I have no interest in a mortgage whatsoever right now. With the rates as they are it’s just crazy. I am glad to be learning a whole new facet of the business.”

Looking ahead, Dillon says, “I have got to stay humble and hungry.” He enjoys celebrating small victories. Eager to make contributions to the community of people with disabilities, he works with his employer to make their few remaining local buildings, more accessible to all people. Dillon would like to do more of that in the future. For now, he concentrates on doing his best work, as he builds his experience.

As he looks back at his personal journey, Dillon is grateful: “Without VR services I would not be where I am today. I would not have the degree or have made great connections. I would not have the job that I have. The job allows me to save money and pay for my own therapies and to work out. It’s all connected.”

## PROGRAM INCOME

The Ticket to Work (TTW) program is for eligible individuals who receive disability related cash benefits from the Social Security Administration (SSA). TTW offers free employment services, typically offered in partnership with a state agency like Minnesota’s Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS). Services also can be provided by Employment Networks (ENs), agencies under agreement with SSA to help adults with disabilities reduce their reliance on SSA cash benefits and increase their self-sufficiency.

A big benefit to VRS of the Ticket to Work program is cost reimbursement, or program income, from SSA for costs paid to support a person receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) to obtain and maintain employment earning above what’s called Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA). In 2022, SGA is defined as \$1,350 per month.

The agency receives cost reimbursement when people on SSI/SSDI go off benefits and earn sustainable wages. VRS collected more than \$6.4 million in federal fiscal year 2022 from SSA cost reimbursements.

## PY 2021 SERVICES TO PARTICIPANTS RECEIVING SSA BENEFITS

SSA Benefit Status	Participants	% of All Participants	Employed at Exit	% of All Exits	Avg Monthly Earnings	Earnings >=SGA **	% of Employed
Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI)	2,142	16.2%	426	22.0%	\$1,340	131	30.8%
Supplemental Security Income (SSI)	2,528	19.1%	316	16.3%	\$1,120	89	28.2%
Both SSDI and SSI	365	2.8%	54	2.8%	\$1,152	11	20.4%
Not on SSA Benefits	8,222	62.0%	1,139	58.9%	\$2,168	769	67.5%

\*\* SGA: Substantial Gainful Activity set by Social Security as \$1,310 per month for 2022



## A SEAMLESS AND TIMELY SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

It took many months of negotiations to get there, but in September 2019, a historic breakthrough in service provision for people with disabilities came into being. The state’s Medicaid agency and the departmental home of its two Vocational Rehabilitation programs signed a [memorandum of understanding](#) that created **Employment First: Minnesota** – or E1MN as it came to be known. The agreement laid the framework for state agencies to provide coordinated employment services for people on Medicaid waivers who seek competitive, integrated employment.

Nearly two years of intensive planning for E1MN resulted in an unprecedented partnership, implemented in July 2021, and jointly led by the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development’s Vocational Rehabilitation Services and State Services for the Blind (DEED-VRS/SSB), along with the Minnesota Department of Human Services Disability Services Division and the Minnesota Department of Education. This first-time unique partnership seeks to deliver a seamless and timely employment support system for youth and adults with disabilities so they understand their options and get what they need to achieve and maintain competitive integrated employment.

The E1MN partnership seeks to achieve cross-agency alignment of all disability employment systems, policies, programs, funding, providers, and roles — and to better coordinate services and Employment First approaches. The initiative provides interagency training and support, focused on disability employment services professionals and providers so they understand the flow of services and sequencing of funding responsibilities. [This partnership](#) is complex and highly technical, but the framework consists of four simple components:

1



**It plans and improves coordinated services and Employment First approaches,**

2



**It removes barriers and confusion, making it easier for people to navigate employment services,**

3

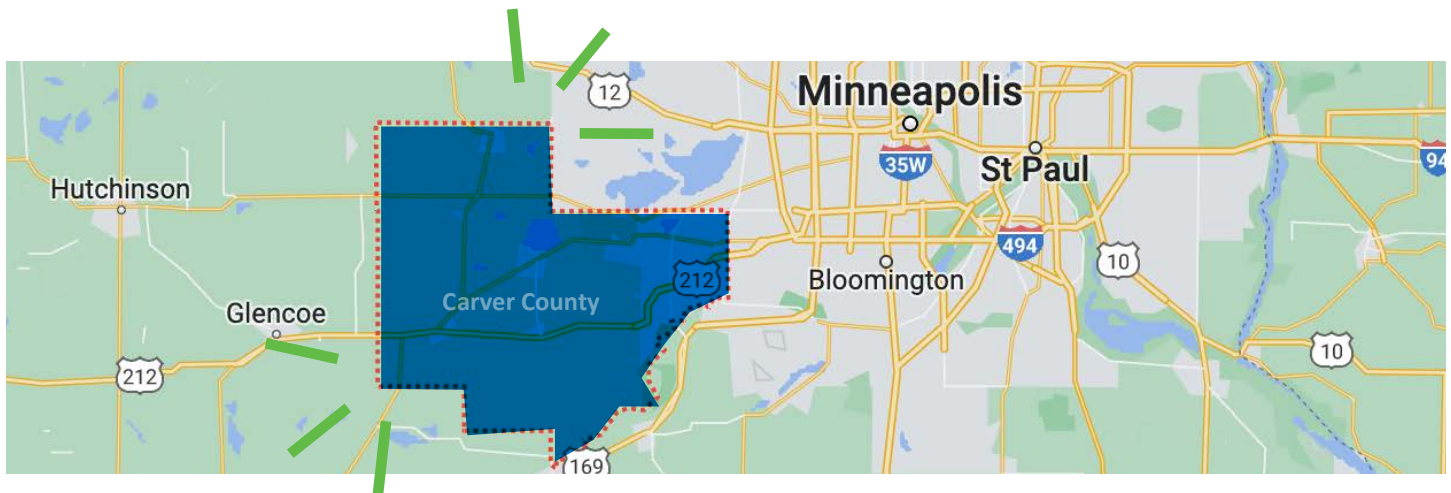


**It works with local and culturally specific partners to improve access and equity, and**

4



**It supports and brings out the best each of the participating agencies has to offer.**



### Carver County shows how it can work

The E1MN partnership is, relatively speaking, still in its infancy, and there are few measurable outcomes to report. But the early signs are promising – demonstrating what can happen when partners in service provision take the time to get to know one another and take intentional action to work collaboratively.

In Carver County, southwest of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan core, the first real effort to implement E1MN began in the spring of 2022 with a series of E1MN group meetings that included VRS, county staff, and local community rehabilitation programs. Before those meetings, VRS and Carver County staff had minimal interaction. “It was more of a transactional relationship,” says Laura Meyer, a VRS counselor in the Chaska office in Carver County. “Since the collaboration meetings earlier in the year, the relationship between VRS and Carver County has developed stronger ties and more regular communications regarding common clients and goals.”

VRS and Carver County convened a series of meetings throughout the summer of 2022, focusing on providing seamless services for clients. Meyer says, “We talked to each other about who we use for services, examples, and discussed providers that we’re finding success with.”

VRS and county staff also explored the Carver County Youth Program, a resource that both agencies have access to but may be underutilized. “Having both agencies there at the same time allowed for questions and collaboration with the goal of increasing the utilization of that service in the future,” Meyer says. “The more we know about each other’s options, the more we can brainstorm ideas together and best serve our clients.”

As the E1MN initiative continues to gain momentum statewide, the collective goal in Carver County – as is true elsewhere around the state – is for the partners to meet and discuss regularly, to keep the lines of communication going, problem-solve common challenges, increase understanding of each other’s roles, and communicate changes in real time.

**CONTINUE READING ON PAGE 16**

## Baseline Results

From the start, the E1MN partnership determined that it was imperative to establish a baseline measure of its efforts to provide a seamless and timely employment support system. During the state fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, DEED-VRS improved its data collection to identify people who are on a Medicaid waiver and receiving supports through their programs. The goal was to develop new measures of individuals in competitive integrated employment and, by September 30, 2022, to establish an E1MN baseline that includes: the number of individuals served with a Medicaid waiver, the number of waiver recipients who received competitive integrated employment outcomes, and the numbers by age race and ethnicity.

Here are the baseline results for the first year of data collection.

- **2,649:** Number of individuals served by VRS and SSB in SFY2022 who were on a Medicaid waiver
- **806:** Number of individuals served by VRS and SSB in SFY2022 who were on a Medicaid waiver and exited VRS and SSB services that year
- **373:** Number of individuals served by VRS and SSB in SFY2022 who were on a Medicaid waiver and exited into competitive employment that year

The table below provides breakouts of this data by race and ethnicity

Race Ethnicity	Participants served	Percent of total served	Participant Exits	Employment Outcomes
More Than 1 Race	134	5.1%	41	18
American Indian/Native American	52	2.0%	11	6
Asian/Pacific Islander	71	2.7%	20	9
Black/African American	258	9.7%	74	23
Did Not Self Identify	55	2.1%	10	4
Hispanic/Latino	149	5.6%	52	19
White Non Hispanic	1,930	72.9%	598	294
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,649</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>806</b>	<b>373</b>



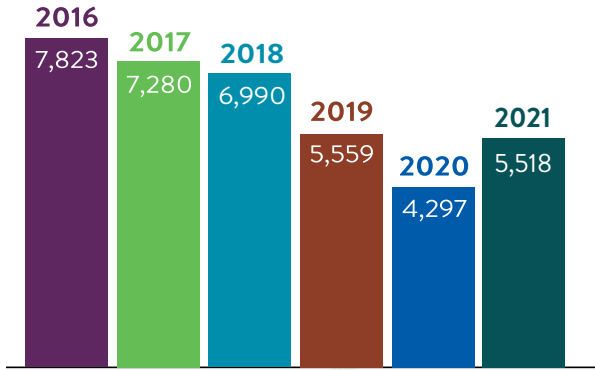
Age: 66% of individuals served by VRS and SSB who were on a Medicaid waiver are adults aged 25 and above; 44% are youth ages 24 and under. A table below provides additional age information.

Age Group	Participants Served	Percent of Total Served
15-18	144	5.4%
19-21	625	23.6%
22-24	408	15.4%
25-34	561	21.2%
35-44	350	13.2%
45-54	277	10.5%
55-64	240	9.1%
65+	44	1.7%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,649</b>	<b>100%</b>

*\*Data note – individuals are counted twice if they exit and return to VRS/SSB services within the same reporting period.*

# PROGRAM YEAR 2021 YEAR IN REVIEW: WHO VR SERVES

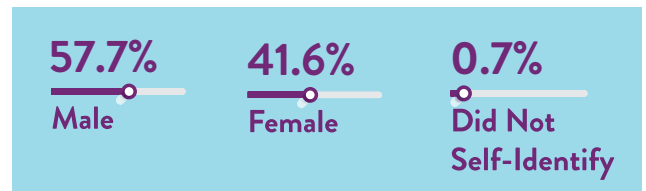
## APPLICATIONS PER FEDERAL PROGRAM YEAR



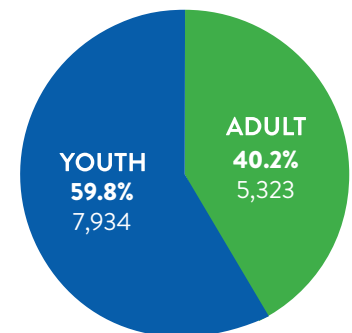
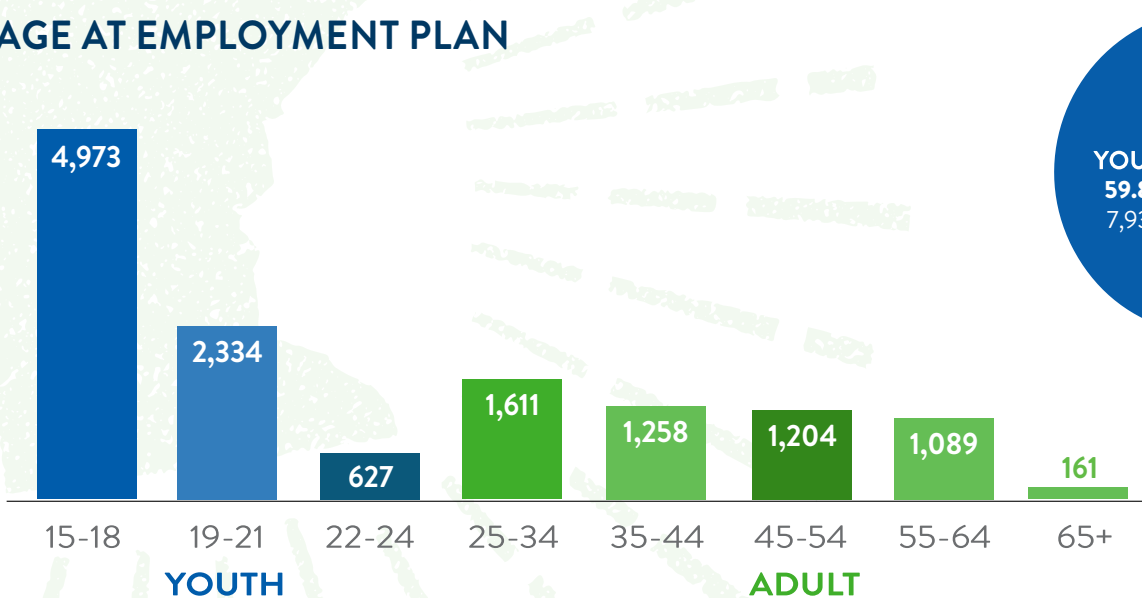
A gradual decline in applications to VRS from 2016-2018 was amplified in program years 2019 and 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Increased applications in PY2021 indicates signs of recovery from the pandemic.

## GENDER

The Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council - General has raised concerns regarding limitations of gender reporting practices under the federal reporting guidelines and recommend changes to ensure that the response to gender identity fosters an environment that is inclusive of all types of people and ensures the most accessible and positive outcomes for all job seekers.

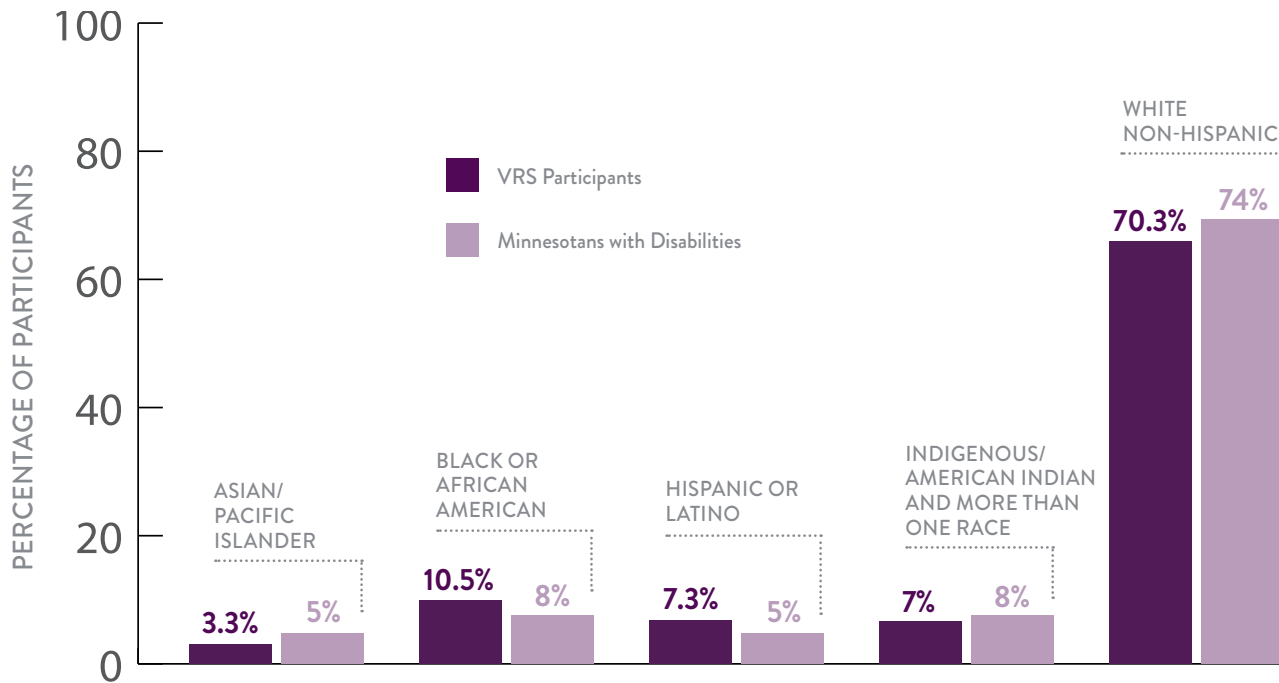


## AGE AT EMPLOYMENT PLAN



## RACE & ETHNICITY

Overall, VRS participants closely reflect the census-defined racial and ethnic demographics of Minnesotans with Disabilities.



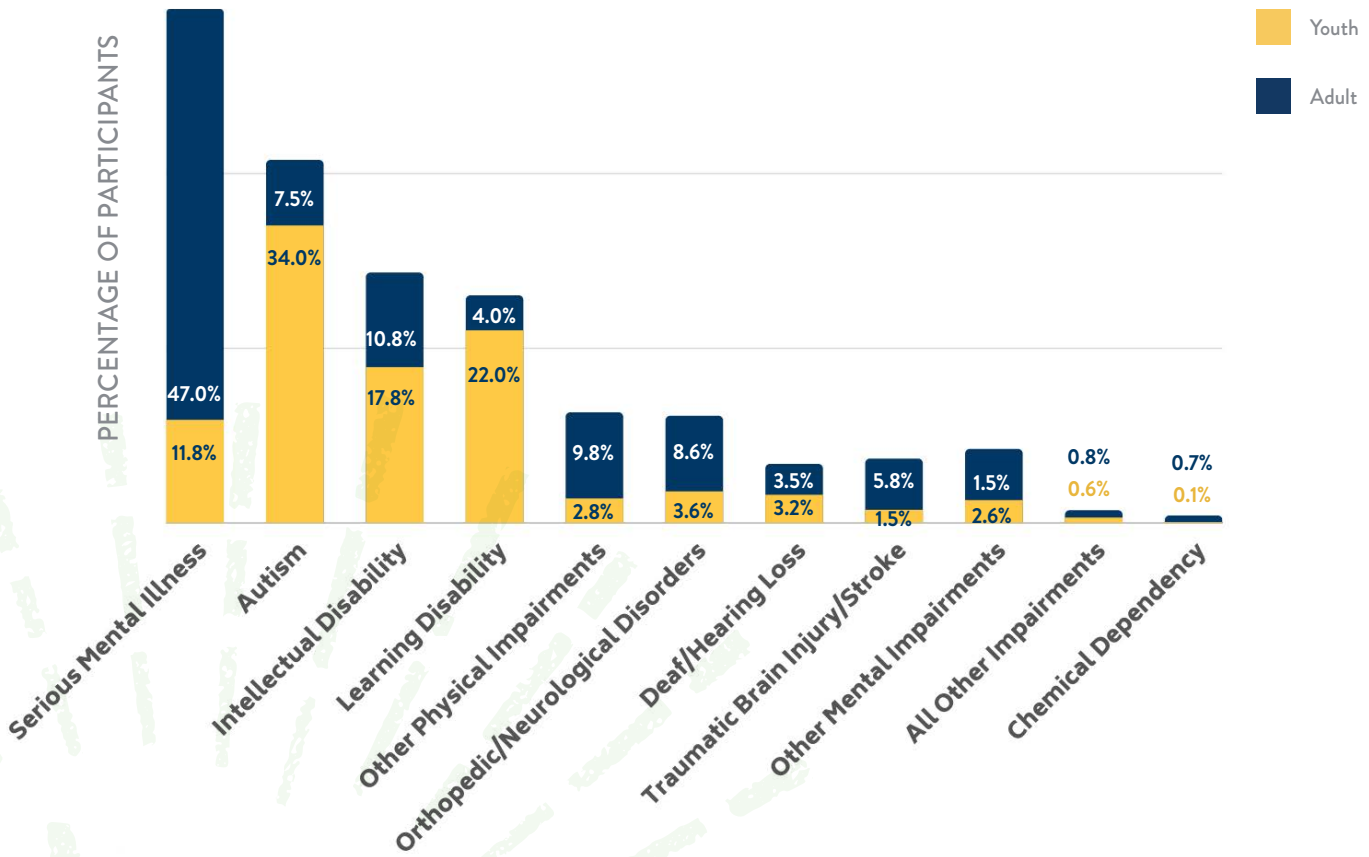
The table below provides detail of this data by age group.

Race and Ethnicity	Youth	Adult	VRS Total	Minnesotans with Disabilities *
More Than One Race	6%	4%	5%	*
American Indian/Native American	2%	2%	2%	*
Asian/Pacific Islander	4%	2%	3%	5%
Black or African American	10%	12%	11%	8%
Did Not Self Identify	2%	2%	2%	*
Hispanic/Latino	9%	5%	7%	5%
White Only Non Hispanic	68%	74%	70%	74%
<b>Participants Served</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>BIPOC</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>26%</b>

\*The Annual Disability Statistics Supplement groups these categories into a group totaling 8% category.

\*Citation: Paul, S., Rafal, M., & Houtenville, A. (2021). Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2021 (Tables 1.16; 3.21-3.25). Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note: Authors' calculations using the Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample with Experimental Weights, 2020, which U.S. is subject to sampling variation.

PRIMARY DISABILITY GROUPS

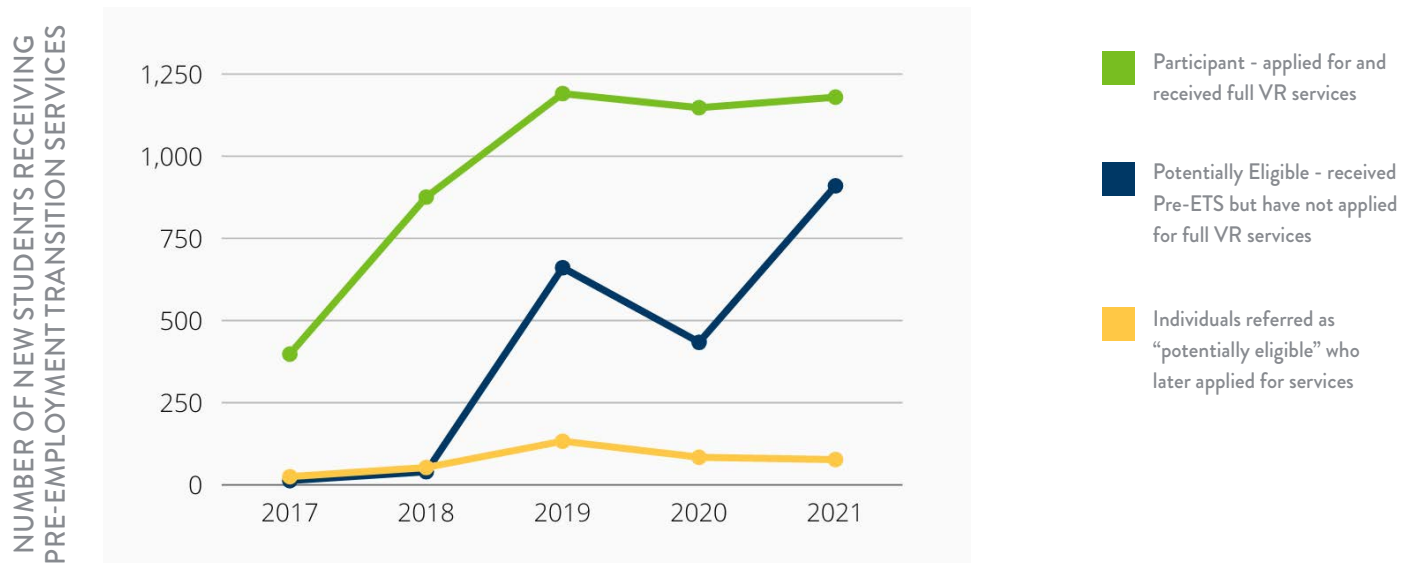


As more young people participate in VR services, the percent of people with specific types of disabilities has changed.

Primary Disability Group	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	PY17 to PY21
Serious Mental Illness	35%	36%	35%	34%	30%	28%	-7%
Autism	15%	17%	17%	19%	20%	22%	5%
Intellectual Disability	16%	14%	13%	13%	16%	16%	2%

# WHO VR SERVES: FOCUS ON STUDENTS AND YOUTH

## NEW STUDENTS JOINING EACH YEAR



## STUDENTS ENROLLED

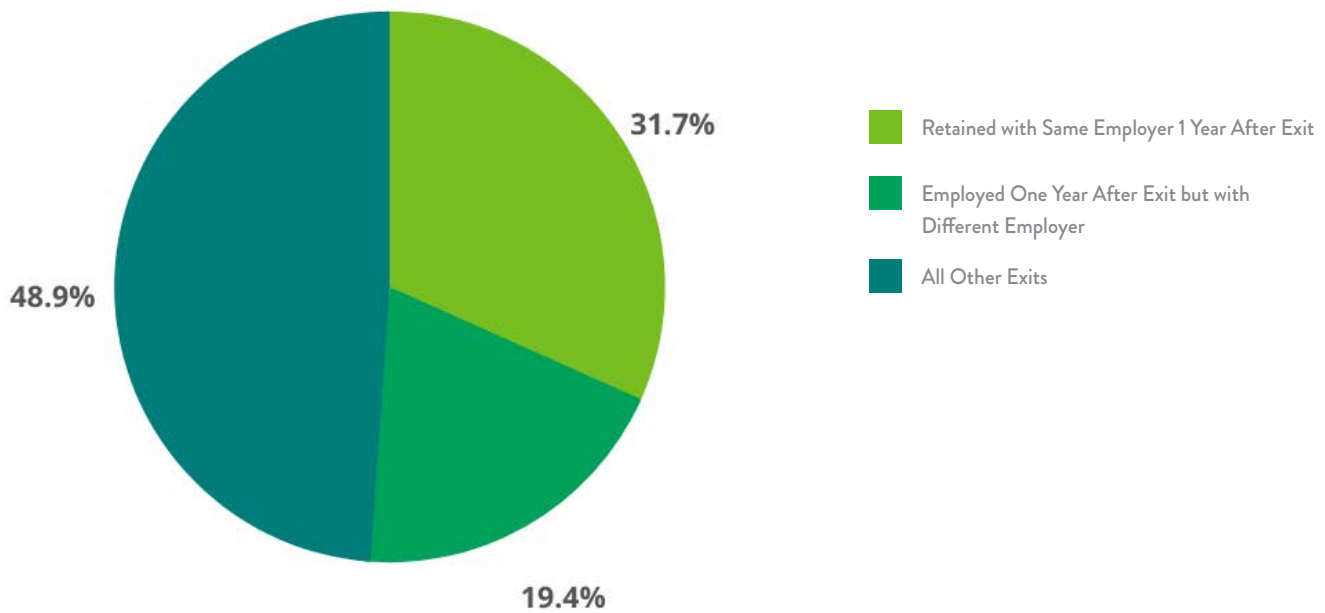
	Students	% of All Students Enrolled
All High School Students Enrolled	4,993	100%
Received Pre-Employment Transition Services	3,781	76%
Participated in Paid Work Experience	2,091	42%
Received Counseling on Post Secondary Opportunities	1,304	26%
Students who are Black, Indigenous or Persons of Color	1,656	33%
Students who are potentially eligible and have not applied for full VR services	1,774	36%

## PRE-ETS SERVICE

Pre-ETS Service Category	Potentially Eligible	Participants	Total Students Served	Percent of Students Served
Instruction in Self-Advocacy	340	657	997	30%
Job Exploration Counseling	617	1,595	2,212	66%
Post Secondary Counseling	373	804	1,177	35%
Work-Based Learning	495	1,702	2,197	66%
Workplace Readiness Training	639	1,260	1,899	57%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>1,003</b>	<b>2,326</b>	<b>3,329</b>	<b>100%</b>

## JOB STABILITY FOR VRS WORKERS

Job stability can be measured by retention with the same employer one year after leaving VRS. Of the 2,131 VR participants employed one year after exit, 62% (1,330) were at the same employer.



## LABOR FORCE BY AGE

Age Group	Empl Outcomes	Hourly Wage	Hours Per Week	Weekly Earnings	Monthly Earnings
15-18	503	\$14.47	28	\$429	\$1,858
19-21	331	\$13.71	24	\$344	\$1,490
22-24	126	\$14.69	28	\$431	\$1,868
25-34	311	\$15.13	25	\$407	\$1,765
35-44	226	\$16.00	26	\$465	\$2,016
45-54	240	\$15.61	25	\$420	\$1,821
55-64	176	\$16.70	23	\$428	\$1,853
65+	22	\$13.28	19	\$262	\$1,134
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1935</b>	<b>\$14.97</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>\$412</b>	<b>\$1,786</b>

## PLACEMENT BY OCCUPATION

ONET Occupational Groups	# of Participants and Average Monthly Earnings	
TRANSPORTATION AND MATERIAL MOVING	382	\$1,452
FOOD PREPARATION AND SERVING-RELATED	286	\$1,154
SALES AND RELATED	219	\$1,231
PRODUCTION	207	\$2,111
BUILDING & GROUNDS CLEANING AND MAINTENANCE	178	\$1,291
OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT	175	\$1,937
HEALTHCARE SUPPORT	81	\$1,931
PERSONAL CARE AND SERVICE	79	\$1,336
EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND LIBRARY	52	\$2,247
COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES	40	\$2,690
INSTALLATION, MAINTENANCE, AND REPAIR	40	\$2,712
COMPUTER AND MATHEMATICAL	38	\$4,991
HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS AND TECHNICAL	26	\$2,892
BUSINESS AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS	26	\$4,491
MANAGEMENT	24	\$3,682
ARTS, DESIGN, ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS, AND MEDIA	19	\$2,525
CONSTRUCTION AND EXTRACTION	16	\$2,976
PROTECTIVE SERVICE	13	\$1,735
LIFE, PHYSICAL, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE	11	\$3,286
FARMING, FISHING, AND FORESTRY	10	\$1,683
ARCHITECTURE AND ENGINEERING	10	\$4,621
LEGAL	3	\$4,610

## VR OUTCOMES

### EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY PLACEMENT TYPE

The goal of VRS services is for individuals to find jobs in competitive, integrated settings. Some individuals may benefit from short-term or ongoing supports in order to achieve stability in their work.

Employment Type	Empl Outcomes	Hourly Wage	Hours Per Week	Weekly Earnings	Monthly Earnings
Competitive Integrated Employment	1,551	\$15.35	27	\$440	\$1,908
Self-Employment	9	\$24.56	27	\$664	\$2,875
Supported Employment - Short-Term	1	\$48.00	40	\$1,920	\$8,320
Supported Employment in Competitive Integrated Setting	374	\$13.05	21	\$286	\$1,238
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1,935</b>	<b>\$14.97</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>\$412</b>	<b>\$1,786</b>

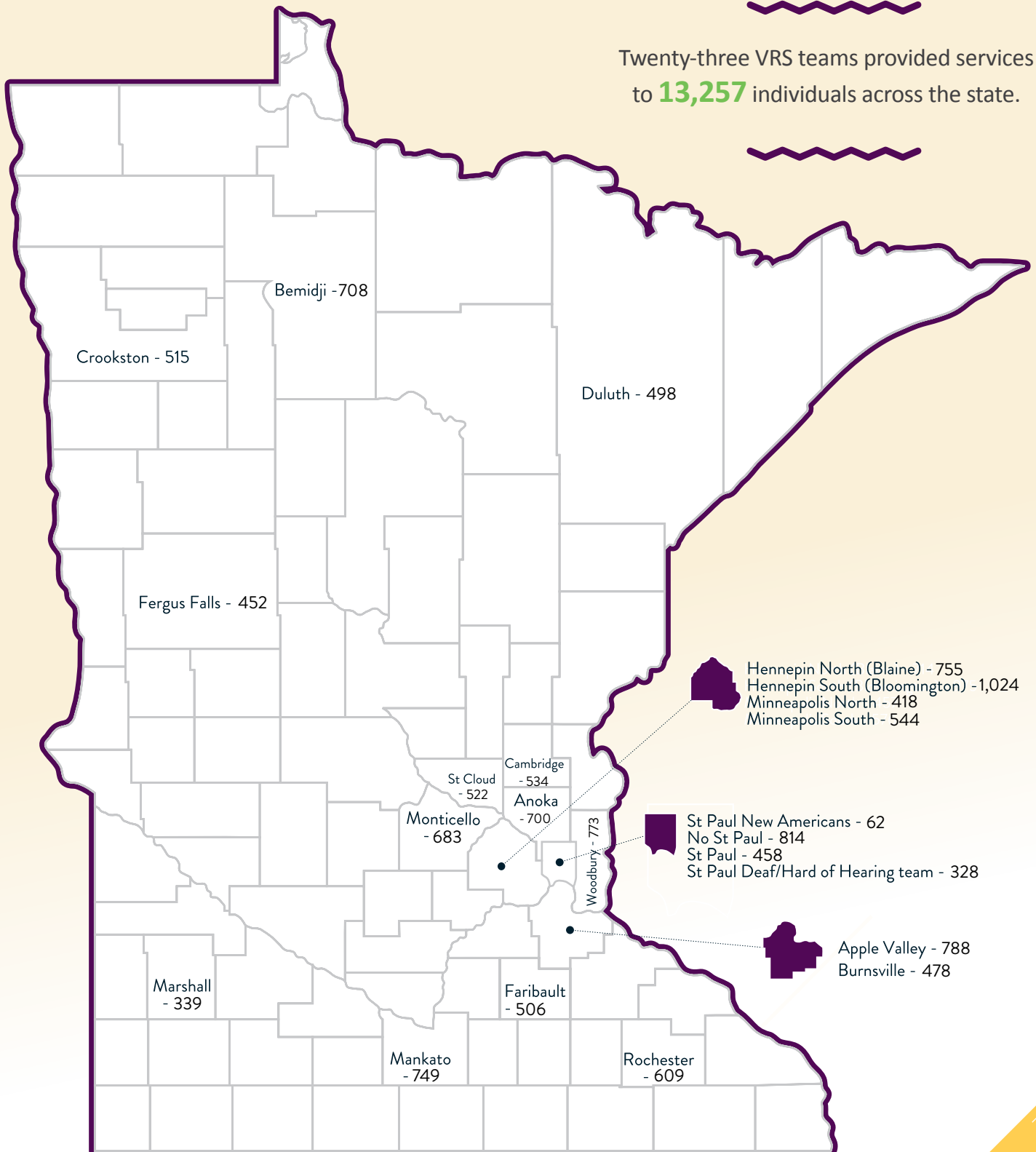
### 5-YEAR TRENDS IN ACTIVITY INDICATORS BY PROGRAM YEAR 2017-2021

Program year 2021 marks the start of the recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on new applications to VRS.

Caseload Activity Indicator	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Change from Previous PY	Percent Change
Applications	7,280	6,990	5,559	4,297	5,518	1,221	28.4%
Plan Development	6,584	6,322	5,427	4,036	5,135	1,099	27.2%
Plans Completed	5,656	5,406	4,753	3,395	4,268	873	25.7%
Employment Outcomes	2,702	2,604	2,290	1,505	1,935	430	28.6%
Other Participant Exits	3,233	3,288	3,043	2,580	3,004	424	16.4%
Participants Served	16,680	16,151	15,012	13,074	13,257	183	1.4%
Employment Rate	45.5%	44.2%	42.9%	36.8%	39.2%	2.3%	6.3%



Twenty-three VRS teams provided services to **13,257** individuals across the state.



## STORY OF IMPACT - AN IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY



A letter to VRS sharing her story of challenges, success, and gratitude

### AN IMMIGRANT'S JOURNEY

*Blanche Nicole Kissambou Tchimbambou came to the United States in August 2015, at the age of 27, from the Republic of the Congo. Her journey, told here in a letter addressed to Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Services, relates a powerful story of challenges, success, and gratitude.*

Dear Board of Directors and Sponsors:

My name is Blanche Nicole Kissambou Tchimbambou. I am one of the people who were lucky enough to receive school support through the Minnesota Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program. I want to thank you for supporting me in my academic goals. I am so grateful for all the resources and help I received from your program from the time I started going to college until I obtained my bachelor's degree. This experience has helped shape my life today.

I would like to share a little about my journey. I was born in a small village called Loubandila in a rural zone in the Republic of the Congo. I lived there from 0 to 2 years old; moved to another village near the rainforest from 2 to 9 years old; lived as nomadic people for about three years; then moved to Pointe-Noire, the second largest city in the Republic of the Congo, in my early teen years, after the Congolese Civil War. In other words, I grew up in the rainforest and urban areas back in the Congo.

I am the fifth out of 10 children on my mother's side and 25th out of 30 from my late father's side. It is not customary in my culture to say half siblings or step siblings. Growing up, I had a speech impediment that was never diagnosed. I started speaking audibly when I turned 6½ years old. This made me feel like I was the left-behind kid that most children teased and laughed at. Also, being in a family of 30 children with so little to eat was very challenging. Sometimes, we would spend days without food. The worst part was during the Congolese Civil War from 1977 to 2000 when most of my family members fled in a different direction and never united since. We ran from place to place looking for shelters for three years. This experience was so traumatizing – to the point that I can't stand fireworks sounds up to this date.

My family is among the poorest families in the Congo. My father and his five wives all worked in the fields and lived near the rainforest most of their lives with no electricity, running water, TV, and all other basic needs. They were cultivators, and so were their parents' parents. We are more and less like pygmies' people in Congo. None of my parents and siblings went to school. I am a first-generation high school graduate out of 30 children. I graduated from Lycée Victor Augagneur (LVA) High School in 2011 at the age of 23. I came to the United States in 2015, when I was 27.

Briefly, having the opportunity to attend school regardless of my history of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), high blood pressure, vision, chronic abdominal pain, and from being homeless from time to time, I am still thriving as a survivor. I try to leave my past in the past and keep believing in positive change. Also, I have a good physical appearance. I hope this helps me to hide my disability and allows me to pretend that everything is okay, even when I am hurt inside.

I keep trying to use my smiling face to the best of my ability and have a positive attitude. I enjoy going for long walks around the lake, biking and reading as coping skills or habits. Also, I am passionate about being helpful to people and positively impacting people in communities. Likewise, I like doing a lot of community volunteer activities like helping pack food for homeless people, volunteering at church, helping clear yards, etc. I am more like an extrovert but get drained very quickly. However, when I am not in the mood, I like withdrawing from people and prefer being alone and quiet with no TV and no sounds. I believe that I am both an introvert and an extrovert for my personality.

Additionally, I consider myself a naturally dedicated and hard-working individual who likes working and helping different people. I have always been driven to work in a diverse business environment. My long-term goal is to work in government institutions such as the Department of Education, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Developmental Disabilities to help people like myself who have invisible disabilities and do not know how to fit in.

I am proud to have graduated from North Hennepin Community College with my Associate of Science in Business Administration in 2020 and I got my Bachelor of Science in Human Resource Management last fall at Metropolitan State University. This is all thanks to you, who decided to invest in me. Also, I was accepted earlier this year at the University of Minnesota Carlson School of Management in the part-time Master's degree program. I will be majoring in Human Resources Management & Industrial Relations by the end of 2024, God willing.

Coming to the USA from the Congo has been life-changing for me. I do not know if I would still be alive if I had not decided to leave my country when I wanted to. Also, I am so proud that I was able to go to school in a foreign country and to study in English versus French or my local languages, which makes life even better. I remember my friend telling me that I would have to live here for 10 years before I could consider going to school. However, with your support, I was able to attend school within two years instead of 10 as predicted.

With your school assistance program, I went from living from shelter to shelter, to meeting a classmate who invited me to live at her house instead of being homeless and helped me find work as a server in a Senior Living Facility. I also got my CNA certified and BLS certificate and was trained as meds passer. I worked there for about 3½ years and then quit my job when I moved closer to school in Saint Paul during the Covid-19 pandemic and was between several temporary jobs for the last two years. I just got a full-time position a few months ago at UnitedHealthcare as a bilingual broker agent services specialist.

Although I am not yet financially stable, I believe that things will change once I am done with school and find a better-paying position in Human Resources Management. I strongly believe this will come true because I put my faith and my values into practice. I am believing in God who makes everything possible at His timing. I am also choosing to commit myself to work hard, so I can have a better life tomorrow and a place I could call home. I feel like I have a chance to have another life experience and you are all part of that new experience.

My special thank you goes to all sponsors and staff including Howard, Stephanie, Brittany, Dawn, and others who dedicate their time and talents, and energy to helping people that were once lost to get another chance in life to become what they have always dreamed of.

Sincerely,

Blanche Nicole Kissambou Tchimbambou

## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR



### TYLER SADEK, SRC CHAIR

Dear reader,

Thank you for taking the time to review this State Rehabilitation Council Annual Report. These last few years have been a trying time for many of us. Despite the challenges that we have faced, Minnesota's Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS) has continued to meet these challenges head-on and have continued to find success in the work we do. Whether it be in the classroom or in the workplace, VRS staff have gone above and beyond to provide high-quality services to individuals with disabilities as they seek and retain employment in Minnesota's great economy. It is because of the dedication of Minnesota's VRS team that such success has been possible.

This report, prepared by the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) and VRS, provided a glimpse into the work being performed by this exceptional team. While this report showcases the great depth of work being done, it can only capture a sliver of all the work VRS staff does to support individuals with disabilities in Minnesota. As this important work continues, both the SRC and VRS have made it a priority to focus on the equitable provision of our services so that no Minnesotan is left behind as our economy recovers from the last few years.

We hope that you found this report as inspiring as it is informative!

Sincerely,

Tyler Sadek, SRC Chair

## ABOUT THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

The State Rehabilitation Council is a citizen council whose members provide counsel and guidance 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 this 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](mailto:Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us) or 651-259-7364.**



You may apply online by using the Online Application:

**[commissionsandappointments.sos.state.mn.us/Agency/Details/150](https://commissionsandappointments.sos.state.mn.us/Agency/Details/150)**



# 2022 STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL MEMBERS

## **BUSINESS, INDUSTRY OR LABOR REPRESENTATIVES**

Scott Berscheid – Mayer

Jim Houston - Burnsville

Karen Leddy – Prior Lake

Tyler Sadek – Minneapolis

## **CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROJECT REPRESENTATIVE**

Anne Robertson – Minneapolis

## **COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDER REPRESENTATIVE**

Vacant

## **CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENTS OF VR SERVICES**

Delawoe Bahtuoh – Brooklyn Park

*resigned July 2022*

Michael Etten – Shoreview

Trevor Turner - Minneapolis

## **DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REPRESENTATIVE**

Lindsey Horowitz – 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

Addyson Moore – Apple Valley

## **GOVERNOR'S WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD REPRESENTATIVE**

Kyle Van Acker – Ham Lake

## **PACER REPRESENTATIVE**

Barb Ziemke – Minneapolis

*resigned October 2022*

## **STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE**

Linda Lingen – St. Paul

## **VR COUNSELOR REPRESENTATIVE (NON-VOTING MEMBER)**

Mike Windsperger - Mankato

## **VRS DIRECTOR (NON-VOTING MEMBER)**

Dee Torgerson





Upon request, this information can be made available in alternate formats for individuals with disabilities by calling **651-356-5467** or emailing [Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us](mailto:Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us).

The VR program receives 81.7 percent of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2022, the total amount of grant funds is \$53,031,304, which included \$8,158,000 in reallotment funds. The required state match for these funds is \$14,299,905 (18.3 percent). The state of Minnesota has appropriated \$14.3 million to meet the matching requirement.