

MINNESOTA-GENERAL
STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

ANNUAL REPORT

PROGRAM YEAR 2022
JULY 1, 2022 TO JUNE 30, 2023



*Enriching Lives Through the Power
of Connection and Collaboration*



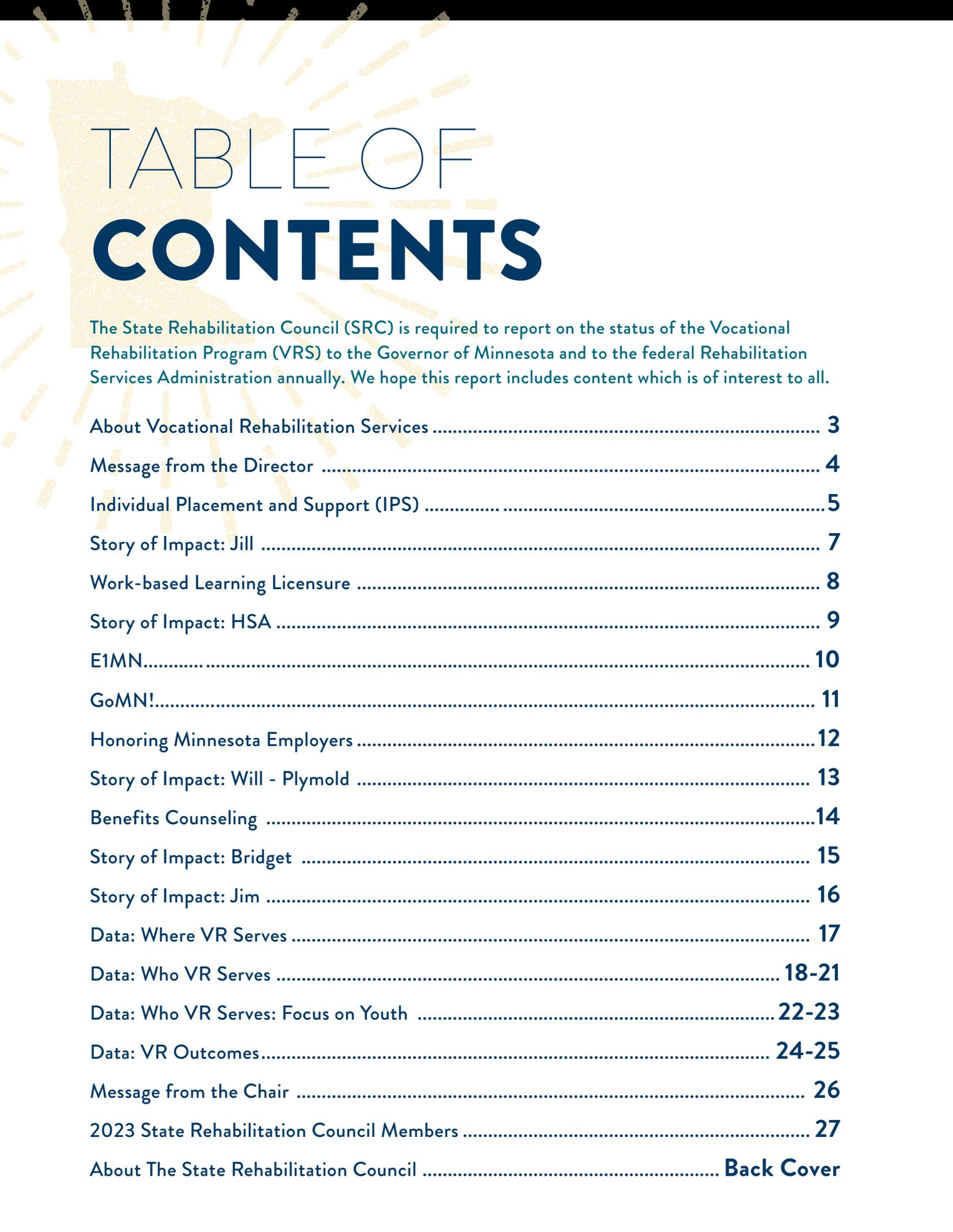


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The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is required to report on the status of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program (VRS) to the Governor of Minnesota and to the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration annually. We hope this report includes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

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INTRODUCTION TO VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VRS), 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 in Will's story on page 13.](#)

The division administers several programs and projects, the largest of which is the Vocational Rehabilitation program, with an annual budget of approximately \$70 million and more than 400 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 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 page 27.](#)

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), referred to as Introductory Career Services by VRS, 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 full 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 Work Based Learning on page 8.](#)

You will read about these programs and projects throughout the report.





MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

BUILDING CONNECTIONS FOR BETTER LIVES

The focus of this year's SRC Annual Report is building connections, encouraging collaboration, and creating partnerships with agencies, organizations, business and individuals – all with the goal of breaking barriers, unlocking opportunities, and opening doors to longer and better lives for Minnesotans with disabilities. In this report you'll read stories and see data that show how instrumental these connections and collaborations are for Vocational Rehabilitation Services and the people we serve to achieve our goals and milestones. I also want to highlight here a few other connections that don't appear in this report.

The State Rehabilitation Council, of course, is central to all that we do. Established in 1992, Minnesota's SRC members bring rich experiences and perspectives as people with disabilities, advocates, employers, services providers, and key system partners to connect people with disabilities and employers to employment resources. The council both represents and champions employment for the more than 500,000 Minnesotans who report having one or more disabilities.

A statewide network of dozens of Community Rehabilitation Partners (CRPs) is another key collaborator. Without the CRPs, the VR program simply could not succeed. These vital partners offer employment related services that VRS, on its own, cannot provide. For more than a decade, VRS built stronger connections with CRPs across the state through a Community Partners Committee that provided strategic advice and consultation to VRS on topics and issues affecting the shared provision of employment services. As we adapt to the times and deepen our connections, we are now finding ways to collaborate more broadly across our expanded network of providers to assure that quality services are available to all VR participants across Minnesota.

Over the past year, VRS strengthened its relationship with the Minnesota Council on Disability (MCD). Together we worked hard to pass substantive new legislation to benefit people with disabilities, such as the Employer Reasonable Accommodation Fund (ERAF), which creates a fund that offers reimbursement for small and mid-sized employers who provide reasonable accommodations for job applicants and employees with disabilities. ERAF encourages employment of people with disabilities by reducing any perceived or real financial barriers for employees with disabilities to request and receive reasonable accommodations in the workplace.

One more example: in the past couple of years, VRS supported the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities in the development of an important exhibition that charted the history of disability in Minnesota, from the early 1930s through today. The exhibition, which opened at the State Capitol in 2022, evolved into a Mobile Museum Exhibit and is now traveling throughout the state as a quick way to learn the story about this large, forgotten minority.

The past year was one of reconnecting with our partners, building and strengthening our relationships with collaborators, and rebuilding and reopening in the aftermath of all the disruptions of the pandemic years. It was an eventful and pivotal year – and I'm confident that the work we've done together, and will continue to do together, will help to make better lives for the people we serve.

INDIVIDUAL PLACEMENT AND SUPPORT

Minnesota's Individual Placement and Support (IPS) projects offer a full range of employment services and supports to assist people with serious mental illnesses to achieve competitive, integrated, and steady employment. IPS services emphasize a rapid search for competitive jobs consistent with the individual's goals, interests, and experience, and are available to anyone who wants to work regardless of diagnosis, past work history or assessment of work readiness.

There are 19 IPS projects in 44 Minnesota counties. The projects are a collaborative partnership that includes DEED - Vocational Rehabilitation Services, the Department of Human Services - BHDH Division, and a network of 32 community mental health providers.

Supported employment is for people who have not had success in integrated competitive employment or whose access to competitive employment is limited because of disability. IPS differs from other types of supported employment because employment services and supports are integrated or embedded within mental health treatment services. IPS has been effective for people with different mental health diagnoses, educational levels, and prior work histories; long-term Social Security beneficiaries; young adults; older adults; people with justice system involvement; people with experiences of chronic homelessness; and people with co-occurring mental illness and substance use disorders.

Worldwide evidence continues to accumulate rapidly on the effectiveness of IPS. Twenty-eight randomized controlled trials suggest that IPS is the most effective way to provide employment services for persons with serious mental illness. IPS is 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.

Over the last decade, several systematic reviews and meta-analyses of these studies indicate that the average employment rate was 55 percent for IPS compared to 25 percent for the control groups. Participants in IPS also had 33 percent fewer days to first job, four times as many weeks worked during follow-up, triple the earnings from employment, three times or more the number of working 20 hours/week. They reported greater job satisfaction and maintained employment four times longer during follow-up. Long-term studies show that

BENEFITS OF WORK

FOR PEOPLE WITH

SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS



Increased self-esteem

Better control of psychiatric symptoms

Reduced psychiatric



hospitalizations

Reduced criminal justice involvement

Increased



self-sufficiency

Decreased dependence on others

INDIVIDUAL PLACEMENT AND SUPPORT (IPS) CONT.

half of all IPS participants become steady workers, maintaining employment for 10 years or longer. About 40 percent of IPS participants who obtain a job with help from IPS become steady workers and remain competitively employed a decade later. IPS is more effective than alternative vocational approaches, regardless of a variety of client background factors (e.g., ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status). Cost-effectiveness analyses of randomized controlled trials of IPS generally found the aggregated costs of employment and mental health services to be no higher, and sometimes significantly lower, than for standard services.

Minnesota's IPS programs are part of an International IPS Learning Community, which collects and reports data on employment attainment quarterly. Minnesota has had the highest rate of employment attainment in the United States since 2010 and this continued through SFY 2022 despite the continuation of the global pandemic and challenging workforce issues (staffing) experienced by projects.

“Minnesota has had the highest rate of employment attainment in the United States since 2010 . . .”

IPS Core Principles

IPS is a systematic practice of supported employment for persons with serious mental illnesses. Its core principles are:

- 1. Integration of Employment (Vocational 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 is based upon Choice/Zero Exclusion:** People are not excluded based on readiness, diagnoses, symptoms, substance use history, psychiatric hospitalizations, homelessness, level of disability or legal systems involvement.
- 4. Attention to Individual Preferences:** Services are based on each person's preferences and choice, rather than a mental health or employment providers' judgments. Participant preferences are honored.
- 5. Personalized Benefits Counseling:** Employment specialist proactively help people obtain personalized, understandable, and accurate information about their Social Security, Medicaid, and other governmental 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 specialist connect people to appropriate resources and provide continued support as needed. Employer contact begins rapidly after participants enter the program.
- 7. Systematic Job Development:** Employment specialists systematically visit employers, who are selected based on job seeker preference 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.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE: NOW SHE WORKS THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE

In a lot of ways, Jill Belland came full circle. For many years she benefitted from services offered through a variety of providers following the IPS service model. Today, while still receiving mental health therapy and other services, she's also now a provider of some of those services – working as an employment specialist for Functional Industries in central Minnesota.

“I worked with a lot of professionals along the way, good and bad,” Jill says. “So now, being an employment specialist where I can potentially make a difference for the person, it is my mission to ensure they feel equal, empowered, welcome, and most definitely that they feel seen and heard during the process!”

Krissy Eich, supervisor of the IPS project that Functional Industries operates with the Central Minnesota Mental Health Center and Wright County Health and Human Services, says Jill's on-again, off-again journey goes back more than 20 years. Jill's mental health therapist suggested that she work with an employment specialist, job coaches, and VRS, alongside the therapy she continued to receive. The idea was to identify an employment goal and to talk through the anxiety and depression that had led to a series of jobs that never lasted very long.

“At first,” Jill says, “it seemed silly to focus on work-related topics and goals while my depression still felt so heavy; although even during those uncomfortable meetings, I continued to remind myself that I could do better for myself.”

She set her sights on completing a social work degree. VRS was able to offer assistance for Jill to pursue both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Her education was interrupted several times when she worked a series of jobs, none of them lasting very long. “I never had trouble getting the job but would start to crash and burn,” she says.

In therapy, a pattern started to emerge. “I would feel great in the beginning but would quickly become overwhelmed, then depressed, then went into avoidance mode which often resulted in me quitting my job.”

The long, bumpy, and often uncomfortable path that Jill had been following for so many years finally brought her to the job that she now feels that she might have been destined for. Functional Industries, one of the several IPS partners that had worked with Jill for all those years, hired her as an employment specialist to provide job counseling and job placement services to people with disabilities. She had indeed come full circle, to sit on the other side of the table. It was now Jill's role to assist people to find and maintain employment.

Jill freely acknowledges that her path to employment – to a job that she says is a calling, or a mission – was anything but easy. But, looking back on her journey, she says her experiences are crucial in her work of helping others identify their natural support system too.

“I'm not shy about talking about mental illness,” she says. “There's no reason to hide or pretend it doesn't exist. Talking about it definitely helps. Now when I feel depression setting in, instead of calling in to work, I tell myself the best place for my mental health is to be at work. If I just get to work, I know I'll be better.”

MANY STUDENTS' INTRODUCTORY CAREER NEEDS MET BY SCHOOL WORK-BASED LEARNING

In 15 years as a Minnesota educator, Breeana Zaic has worked with students, teachers, and families in multiple capacities, including as a paraprofessional, special education teacher, work-based learning instructor, and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) instructor. Currently working as the Student Services Coordinator for the Belgrade-Brooten-Elrosa School District, she is one of many Special Education teachers who participated in Minnesota's work-based learning licensure program.

Vocational Rehabilitation Services is required by federal law to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to all students with disabilities ages 14-21. These services, now referred to as Introductory Career Services (ICS) by VRS, include job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, postsecondary education counseling, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy. Many students can have their Pre-ETS needs met by work-based learning programs such as the one Breeana coordinates.

Not all high schools have work-based learning programs for students with disabilities because schools often lack qualified personnel with the work-based learning licensure endorsement. To increase these options for students with disabilities, VRS decided in 2020 to provide grant funding to organizations that offer a work-based learning licensure endorsement. Contracts were awarded to three entities: Bethel University, Lakes Country Service Cooperative, and St. Cloud State University. The grants, totaling more than \$1.3 million of Pre-ETS funds in 2021-2022, offered an opportunity for special education teachers to apply for funding that would pay for their tuition, fees, and books to complete the work-based learning licensure endorsement program.

Breeana participated in the work-based learning licensure program at St. Cloud State University in 2021. She prides herself in helping students find their ultimate potential and recognizes the support she received from VRS. For her, the work-based learning program opened her eyes to the possibilities that exist for Special education teachers and enabled her to thrive as a work-based learning coordinator.

The VRS-funded Work-Based Learning Licensure Endorsement Project trained 336 special education teachers from June 2021 through December 2022. Of those, 240 (or 71 percent of those who received training) completed and passed all coursework for the program, which qualified them to obtain the "Teacher Coordinator Work Based Learning" licensure endorsement from the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board (PELSB).

During the 2023-24 school year DEED-VRS regional youth specialists will be introducing all special education teachers who completed the work-based learning licensure endorsement to the local VRS Pre-ETS representatives and VR counselors that serve the schools they work in. This will allow partnerships to develop and grow to ensure more students with disabilities receive the work-based learning services and supports they need.

For Breeana and other teachers who successfully completed the work-based learning licensure program, VRS and the resources that were provided made a big difference in ensuring that students with disabilities have an equal chance in living a full and meaningful life.



Pictured l to r: Eh Wah Moo, Hsa Nay Than Soe, Hser Poe Ku

IMMIGRANT/REFUGEE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES GAIN EXPERIENCE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WORK-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITY

Hsa Nay Than Soe and his family immigrated to the United States in February 2017 from the Mae La refugee camp in Thailand. Originally from the Asian nation formerly known as Burma, now Myanmar, Hsa Nay’s family fled to Thailand because of the growing political unrest and safety concerns in their home country. The family – Hsa Nay, along with his parents and two brothers – now live in St. Paul, Minnesota, which is home to one of the largest Burmese American communities in the United States. St. Paul has offered the family a fresh start and a new life filled with opportunities – as well as some new challenges.

For Hsa Nay, who speaks Karen, Thai, and now English, the language barrier proved to be one of the biggest obstacles in his new life. “It took me many years to learn the language, the meaning behind words, and how to pronounce certain words,” he says. His family also lacked transportation for getting to work or to medical appointments and had to learn to use public transportation in a language they could not speak or understand. Hsa Nay struggled for the first few years in Minnesota as a student, especially learning to navigate a Western educational system in which he had no experience.

As a student at Sejong Academy, a Korean immersion school in St. Paul, Hsa Nay benefited from a work-based learning opportunity organized through Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Hsa Nay’s teacher Heasook Shin got the ball rolling when she referred him to VRS Pre-ETS Representative Susan Fox. Susan’s connection to Julie McKibbons at community partner Fraser helped identify the opportunities at Tree Trust, an organization that employs Minnesotans to help transform the landscape through meaningful work-based experiences. The work-based learning is meant to help students try out different jobs that they would possibly pursue as adults and to give students an opportunity to explore jobs in short-term work experiences. They also help students understand the job demands in today’s changing economy and the overall experience helps them with their interview skills, which many students describe as the most challenging aspect of job exploration. Hsa Nay and several other students from Thailand who shared a similar immigrant/refugee background participated in the work-based learning experience with Tree Trust.

“My first day on the job was exciting,” Hsa Nay says, noting that he had to wake up at 6 a.m. and prepare his uniform. He was a little afraid that he would not be able to connect with any of his co-workers and would perhaps not be good at the responsibilities given to him. But during their first week, Tree Trust briefed the students about the importance of being safe on the job and trained them to use various landscaping tools. The first tool Hsa Nay used was a handsaw to cut down trees and logs. Ultimately, he says, he found that he enjoyed working with his hands and being outdoors with the other students in his group.

“I am so grateful the students at Sejong Academy were able to participate in a work experience with Tree Trust last summer,” Susan says. “It was a team effort coordinated by VRS, Fraser, Tree Trust, and Sejong Academy.”

A SEAMLESS AND TIMELY SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Just two years after its implementation in 2021, **Employment First: Minnesota** – or E1MN as it came to be known – is gaining momentum and showing what can happen when partners in service provision take the time to get to know one another and take intentional action to work collaboratively.



E1MN represents a historic breakthrough in service provision for people with disabilities that came into being when the state’s Medicaid agency and the departmental home of its two Vocational Rehabilitation programs signed a memorandum of understanding that laid the framework for state agencies to provide coordinated employment services for people on Medicaid waivers who seek competitive, integrated employment.

It is an unprecedented partnership, 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 unique partnership, for the first time, sought 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

E1MN has come to be how DEED-VRS/SSB, DHS-DSD, and MDE work together to serve individuals who receive a waiver and are interested in competitive, integrated employment options. Today, two years into the E1MN initiative, this collaborative approach is now firmly embedded into how we do things. It has become “business as usual” rather than a new program or initiative. E1MN cements how we work together as a system to provide a seamless and timely support system for people with disabilities.



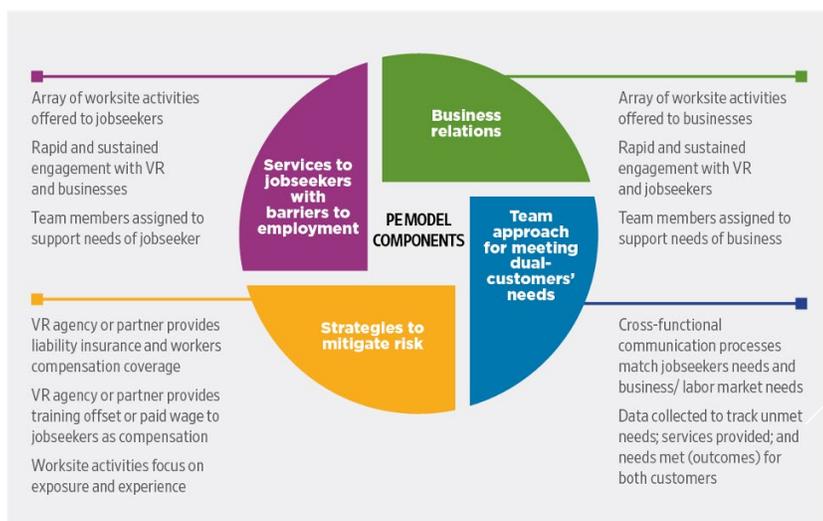
GoMN! GRANT-FUNDED PROJECT CREATES NEW OPPORTUNITIES IN MINNESOTA'S TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRIES

The U.S. Department of Education in 2022 awarded Minnesota's Vocational Rehabilitation Services a \$13 million Disability Innovation Fund grant to implement an employment demonstration project called "Go MN!" The project will provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities who are currently working in or contemplating subminimum wage employment to explore opportunities in Minnesota's growing transportation industry. An individualized and supportive exploration process seeks to meet individuals where they are in life and focuses on their strengths and interests.

The work will be done in collaboration with Minnesota's Department of Human Services, Minnesota's Department of Education, and the Minnesota State Transportation Center of Excellence, along with vital support from the Institute of Community Integration at the University of Minnesota and the Institute for Community Inclusion at the University of Massachusetts – Boston (ICI-Boston).

Using an evidence-based Progressive Employment model, Go MN! will serve youth and adults with disabilities who may be interested in competitive, integrated employment in Minnesota's high-growth and high-demand transportation industry. At the same time, Go MN! will cultivate relationships with businesses who can provide worksite activities such as tours, job shadows, informational interviews, and paid work experiences. This dual customer approach not only supports participants as they explore career opportunities and learn more about what they might like to do for work, but also supports businesses by connecting them to a potential candidate pool to help meet their workforce needs and creating opportunities to evaluate candidates in a low-risk environment. This approach offers several compelling features that reduce risk for jobseekers and businesses, replaces an emphasis on "job readiness" with an "everyone is ready for something" approach, uses intentional methods of rapid communication, and creates a community approach to addressing labor market needs for talent.

Between now and 2027, Go MN! will start with a pilot project in Northeastern Minnesota before expanding the program to provide services in the Twin Cities metro and Southwestern Minnesota. As the program grows and we learn more about what works, our hope is to create an effective service and support model that outlasts the Disability Innovation Fund grant and continues to provide Progressive Employment services to individuals with disabilities who can benefit from them.



ADVANCING ACCESS AND EQUITY

HONORING MINNESOTA EMPLOYERS THAT ARE LEADING THE WAY

Each October we observe National Disability Employment Awareness Month – a month to recognize the contributions of America’s workers with disabilities and to showcase supportive, inclusive employment policies and practices. This year’s theme was “Advancing Access and Equity,” helping to recognize the important role people with disabilities play in a diverse and inclusive American workforce.

Placement staff from Vocational Rehabilitation Services and State Services for the Blind sponsored an event on October 3, 2023, to share information about the rising share of people with disabilities in Minnesota finding fulfilling employment and show the many ways our work supports that progress. The following Minnesota employers, who are leading the way in recognizing the talents and contributions of employees with disabilities, were honored at the event.

EMPLOYERS

Avera Health

Blue Star Power Systems

Coborn’s

Crystal Cabinets

Culvers

Dairy Queen-Coon Rapids

Detroit Reman/Daimler Truck

Dunham’s Sports

Festival Foods-Andover

Hagens Bark Avenue

Home Depot

Hormel Institute

Hyatt Regency Hotels

Hy-Vee

ISD 709 Duluth School District

Jimmy John’s-St. Paul

Kwik Trip

Lake Shirts

Lueken’s Village Foods

Marvin Windows

Mayo Clinic

MN Zoo

Pahl’s Market

Rootz of Inspiration

Sam’s Club-Maple Grove

Service Food Market

Social Security Administration-Brooklyn Center

Techie Dudes

Touchstone Mental Health

TPI Hospitality

Ukura’s Big Dollar Store

CLIMBING THE CAREER LADDER

COLLABORATION IS THE CORNERSTONE OF SUCCESS FOR DEAF WORKERS AT KENYON MANUFACTURING PLANT



While attending the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf in his hometown of Faribault, Will Bondhus learned about deaf culture, practiced resilience, and explored career and life opportunities available to him upon graduation. Although he was uncertain about where his career might take him, he knew he wanted to work with his hands.

Will enrolled in South Central College, a community and technical college in Faribault, where he began to learn welding and CNC machining. He also connected with VRS Counselor Chandra Peterson. Will recognized that he needed all the support he could get in finding a career path that would allow him to live a full life. Chandra mentored him throughout his educational and professional journey and assisted him in exploring the options that best suited him. Whenever Will was a bit confused about something, or when he needed accommodation at school, Chandra would be right there to provide guidance and counseling. After a year at South Central College, Will had begun to develop the skills he would need to produce factory-ready products, obtaining a degree in welding and a certificate in CNC machining.

Not long after earning his degree and certificate, Will got a job as an entry-level welder at Plymold, a commercial furniture manufacturer in Kenyon. He quickly captured the attention of the Team lead, Jeremiah Daniels. Impressed by Will's commitment and focus, Jeremiah offered a permanent position on the production team. Will embraced the opportunity to contribute innovative skills to the manufacturing process, and he began ascent on the career ladder.

On a summer day, the Plymold the factory floor buzzed with activity as Will and Jeremiah led a tour of the facility. Although sound was absent, communication was vibrant. Workers used sign language, expressive gestures, and even innovative visual cues to convey their thoughts and ideas. They had cultivated a close-knit community where collaboration was the cornerstone of success. Deaf workers like Will have proven that their disabilities do not define their abilities or limit their potential. Their success is a testament to the support and understanding of their employers and coworkers.

Plymold's CEO Ryan Danhert said the company firmly believes in promoting inclusivity and providing a work environment that allows all employees to thrive and feel welcomed. They have hired and maintained five deaf employees.

"It has been a seamless process, and we value our deaf employees as we would any of our other employees here at Plymold," Ryan said, adding that his deaf employees provide a unique insight to the manufacturing process.

Will continues to climb the professional ladder and is now an advanced welder. His story shows that with the harmonious collaboration of deaf and hearing workers at Plymold, they will continue to revolutionize Minnesota manufacturing and how all perceive it, proving that when a company looks beyond misconceptions and preconceived notions, every voice, whether spoken or signed, matters in creating a Minnesota that works for all.



BENEFITS COUNSELING

The fear of losing your health care can be daunting. Many of the individuals receiving VRS employment services are concerned that having a job might cause them to earn too much money, and to risk losing access to affordable health insurance and services through subsidized programs like Medicaid. In Minnesota, a system of benefits planning and counseling offers great resources and options for individuals with disabilities who desire to work. These Work Incentives can reduce an individual's reliance on health care benefits, and allow greater freedom and more choices for employment.

The Minnesota benefit planning (BP) network assists individuals to see the value of work and increased earnings and to reduce their fear of losing benefits. Minnesota VRS staff receive training on the topic of benefits, so they often are able to begin working with individuals by sharing their own knowledge of benefits and the BP resources. Many VRS community partners also have benefit planners and coaches who can offer a more in-depth look into an individual's benefits and options. VRS is also very fortunate to have strong relationships for benefits planning with the Minnesota Social Security Administration Area Work Incentives Coordinator (AWIC), and the Minnesota Work Incentive Planning and Assistance program (WIPA) under Minnesota Work Incentives Connection (MNWIC) through Goodwill Easter Seals and the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS).

Medical Assistance for Employed Persons with Disabilities (MA-EPD) is a powerful health care work incentive within the Medicaid program, created in 1999 as part of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act. Recent legislation, passed in 2023, removed a \$20,000 limit on assets. The removal of the asset limit is significant and will allow individuals to save for future needs rather than keeping their assets below a set amount to maintain their health care eligibility. MA-EPD is very affordable, with premiums that start at around \$35, based on both earned and unearned income.

Any of these options can help individuals find answers to their benefit questions. A vast network of benefit planning professionals allows VRS staff to connect with benefit planners or coaches to provide accurate and individualized information for both simple and complex situations.

B'S FARMERY

HER PASSION FOR GARDENING, PLUS ASSISTANCE FROM VRS, LEADS BRIDGET TO ROCHESTER AREA FARMERS' MARKET POP-UP BUSINESS

Bridget Dolan-Lawler began working with a VRS counselor in the spring of 2021. Together they developed the goal of creating a small business involving gardening and organic farming. Her background includes a love of gardening, as well as encouragement and influence from family members.

Although Bridget is not a registered Master Gardener, she has taken courses through the University of Minnesota and is working towards achieving that certification. The Village Agricultural Cooperative, which runs her community garden plot, contacted Bridget about an opportunity to be part of a farmers' market in the History Center in Rochester.

From that opportunity grew a new small business called B's Farmery, an organic farm providing produce and other goods baked and created by Bridget. B's Farmery now operates as a pop-up at various farmer's markets.

Her VRS counselor, Bonnie Bittner, offered support and recommendations at each stage of the process, collaborating with external partners and internal connections to assist Bridget on her journey. For example, Bridget receives SSA and other public benefits, many of which are impacted by earnings. Bonnie was familiar with wage earnings impact on benefits but was not clear in the case of small business earnings. So she turned to Nancy Wagner, a benefits planner from Yes Works LLC, a local Community Rehabilitation Program, to create a Benefit Summary and Analysis (BS&A). The BS&A identified the impact of small business earnings on the SSA and other public benefits.

Bonnie also identified specialized internal VRS services for Bridget, who experiences chronic health concerns which can impact her daily activities. While developing her business plan, Bridget sought assistance from the Small Business Development Center. Josh Dean, the VRS Small Business Specialist, offered suggestions and critical information and a template. Josh answered her questions, reviewed and approved the plan, and continues to have contact with Bridget through and after case closure to ensure continued progress. John Bredehoft, the VRS Assistive Technology Specialist, recommended an electric wheelbarrow to aid in her business, and Bridget also received assistance in transporting supplies and obtaining tools required for the preparation of the farming plot through contracting and purchasing services from other local vendors.

Bridget refers to the supports she received through VRS as "absolutely mission critical. There wouldn't have been a business had there not been the support . . . not only forming the concrete ideas that led to a launchable business, but having those tools and resources in place that I would not otherwise have had access to." To emphasize the value of the collaboration of services, she adds, "this was a huge growth opportunity for me to recognize that there were tools out there to tap into and getting hooked up with vocational rehab has actually been a really great tool...for basically all of those things all at once."



STORY OF IMPACT: JIM – SELF-EMPLOYMENT

MAN ON THE MOVE

WORKING WITH VRS LEADS JIM TO FULFILLMENT AS HIS OWN BOSS

From working on a Navy flight deck to running a successful business and getting elected to a local political office, Jim Ross has enjoyed a broad range of experiences over the course of his life. But progressive hearing loss that began during his time around very loud naval aircraft led to complications in day-to-day activities. He developed balance, fatigue, and mobility issues, and over time he became concerned about his ability to retain employment. He had tried traditional VRS employment services and found some success as a production worker. But the job didn't really match up with his skills and professional experience. He believed there was something better out there for him, both professionally and personally – he just didn't know what.

Jim met VRS Counselor James Langevin when he visited the CareerForce Center in Red Wing. Together they began exploring a variety of employment and job placement options. Jim worked with a local CRP for several months, reviewing hundreds of job opportunities and job descriptions. But none of these positions seemed to resolve his underlying barriers to employment.

At some point, the VRS counselor suggested a change in their approach. Maybe Jim could put to good use his life experiences in the Navy, as a politician, and entrepreneur. Maybe he had the skills and talents that could lead to him developing his own small business, perhaps as a consultant or troubleshooter who analyzes businesses such as restaurants and bars. The idea resonated with Jim and restored his optimism. In 2021 he was introduced to Josh Dean, the VRS Specialist in Small Business, and together they began to develop a plan.

“From the get-go, it was clear that he had the knowledge, heart, and experience to start a small business,” Josh said.

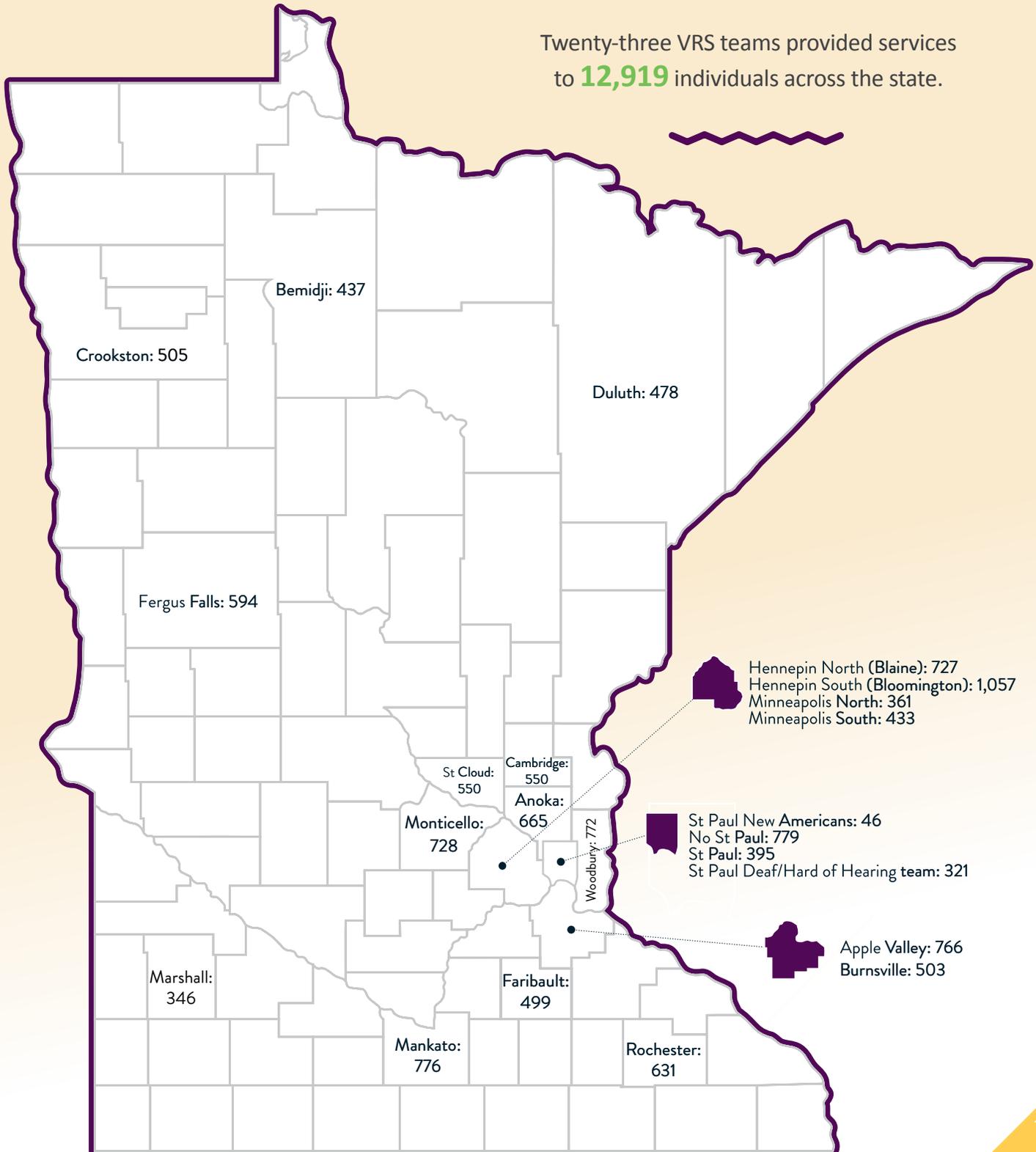
With assistance and advice from Josh, Jim came up with a concept and comprehensive business plan for what became The Ross Group LLC, a consulting group that supports and assists local businesses in his home community of Red Wing. VRS was able to assist him in purchasing a computer, printer, and other related items to help launch The Ross Group.

Since then, Jim has been a man on the move, acquiring a local trolley for tours and advertising and purchasing a small restaurant as well. Jim now partners with several other local businesses by purchasing their goods for resale and promoting their businesses in his trolley. He now runs a successful consulting firm, a restaurant, a souvenir and chocolate store, and trolley in Red Wing. When he is not busy running his businesses, he can often be found at the local prison giving motivational speeches to the prison inmates. He loves mentoring the youth and has even employed ex-inmates in his businesses.



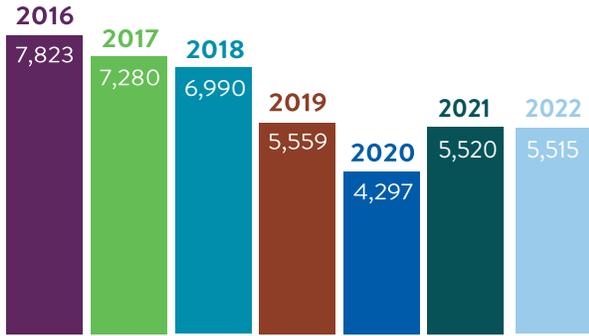
Jim Ross with VRS Staff; pictured l to r Mohamed Mohamud, James Langevin, Jim Ross, Josh Dean

Twenty-three VRS teams provided services to **12,919** individuals across the state.



PROGRAM YEAR 2022 YEAR IN REVIEW: WHO VR SERVES

APPLICATIONS PER FEDERAL PROGRAM YEAR



The number of applications to VRS has been stable the past two years, after a significant decline in PY2020 resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

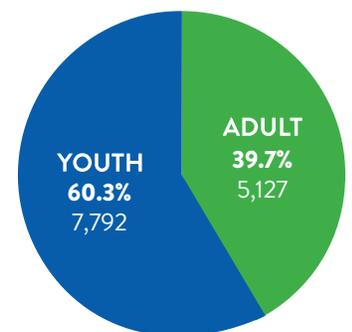
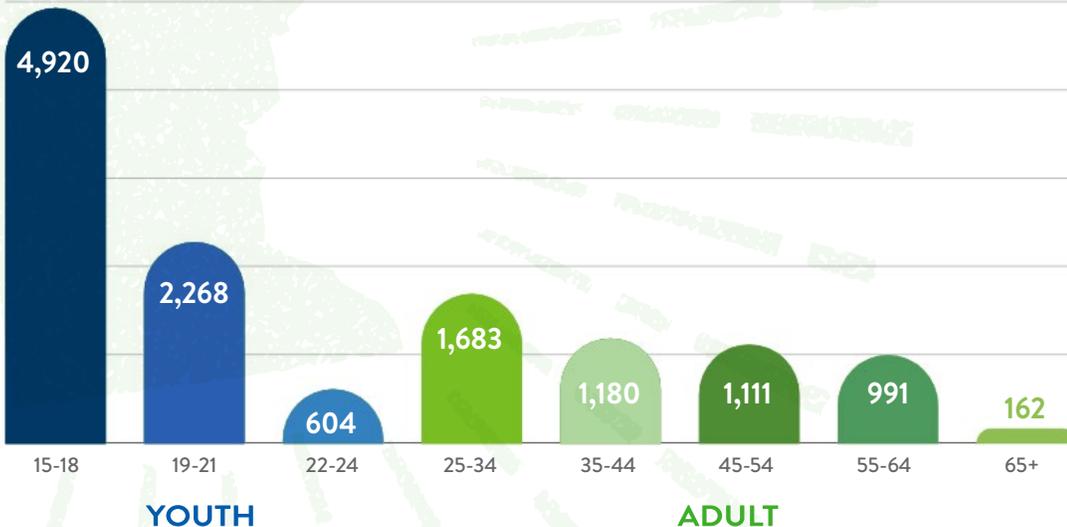
GENDER

58.4%
Male

40.6%
Female

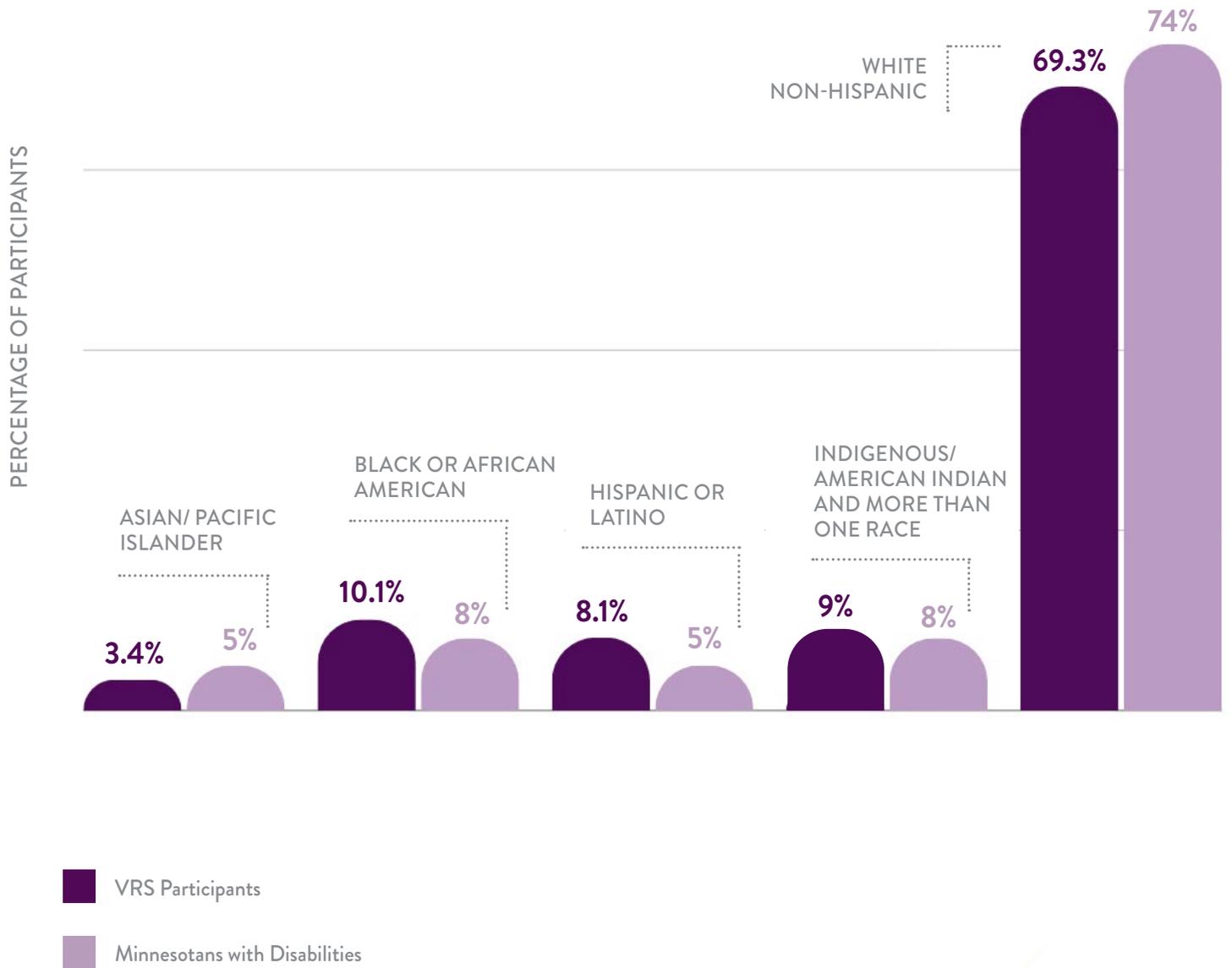
1.0%
Did Not
Self-Identify

AGE AT EMPLOYMENT PLAN



RACE & ETHNICITY

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



WHO VR SERVES

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

| Race and Ethnicity | Participants served | Youth | Adult | VRS Total | Minnesotans with Disabilities * |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------------------------|
| More Than One Race | 692 | 6.4% | 3.8% | 5.3% | * |
| American Indian/ Native American | 223 | 1.6% | 2.0% | 1.7% | * |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | 432 | 3.9% | 2.5% | 3.4% | 5% |
| Black/African American | 1306 | 9.5% | 11.1% | 10.1% | 8% |
| Did Not Self Identify | 266 | 2.1% | 1.9% | 2.1% | * |
| Hispanic/Latino | 1051 | 10.0% | 5.3% | 8.1% | 5% |
| White Only Non Hispanic | 8949 | 66.5% | 73.5% | 69.3% | 74% |
| Participants Served | 12,919 | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| BIPOC | 31.4% | 31.4% | 24.6% | 28.7% | 26% |

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

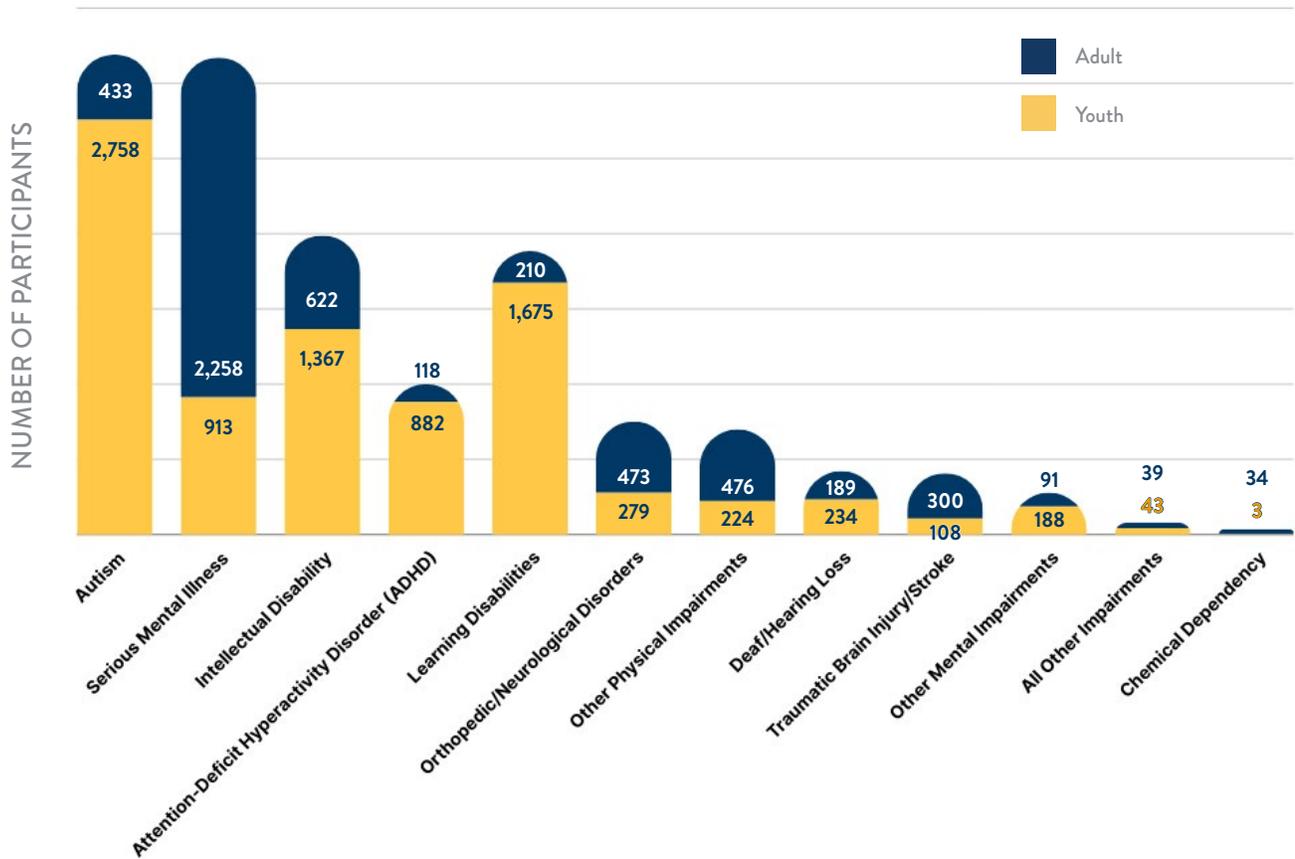
*Citation: Paul, S., Rafal, M., & Houtenville, A. (2021). Annual Disability Statistics Supplement: 2021 (Tables 1.16; 3.21-3.25). Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Note: Authors' calculations using the Census Bureau American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample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

5-YEAR TRENDS IN ACTIVITY INDICATORS BY PROGRAM YEAR 2018-2022

| Indicator | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Applications | 6,990 | 5,559 | 4,297 | 5,520 | 5,516 |
| Eligibility Completed | 6,756 | 5,410 | 3,886 | 5,133 | 5,217 |
| Plan Development | 6,322 | 5,427 | 4,036 | 5,135 | 5,216 |
| Plans Completed | 5,406 | 4,753 | 3,395 | 4,268 | 4,601 |
| Employment Outcomes | 2,604 | 2,290 | 1,505 | 1,935 | 1,873 |
| Other Participant Exits | 3,288 | 3,043 | 2,580 | 3,004 | 2,666 |
| Pre-ETS Referrals | 840 | 1,108 | 552 | 1,099 | 1,098 |
| Participants Served | 16,151 | 15,012 | 13,074 | 13,257 | 12,919 |
| Employment Outcome Rate | 44.2% | 42.9% | 36.8% | 39.2% | 41.3% |

Youth and adult participants experience different types of primary disabilities; serious mental illness affects close to half of adults. Autism, intellectual disabilities, and learning disabilities are the main types of disability for younger participants.

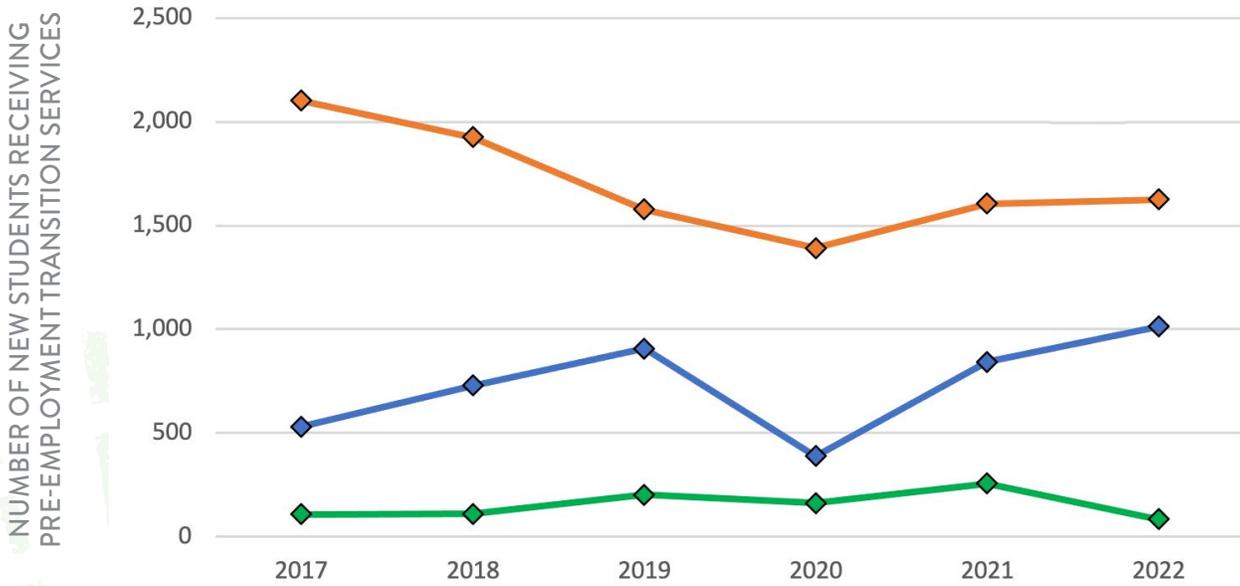
PRIMARY DISABILITY GROUPS



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

| Primary Disability Group | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | PY18 to PY21 |
|--------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|--------------|
| Serious Mental Illness | 35% | 34% | 30% | 28% | 25% | -10% |
| Autism | 17% | 19% | 20% | 22% | 25% | 8% |
| Intellectual Disability | 13% | 13% | 16% | 16% | 15% | 2% |

NEW STUDENTS SERVED BY PROGRAM YEAR



Participant - applied for and received full VR services

Potentially Eligible - received Pre-Employment Transition services but have not applied for full VR services

IPE from Referral - Individuals referred as “potentially eligible” who later applied for services

STUDENTS ENROLLED

| | Students | % of All Students Enrolled |
|--|----------|----------------------------|
| All High School Students Enrolled | 5,512 | 100% |
| Received Pre-Employment Transition Services | 4,481 | 81.3% |
| Participated in Paid Work Experience | 2,228 | 40.4% |
| Received Counseling on Post Secondary Opportunities | 1,773 | 32.2% |
| Students who are Black, Indigenous or Persons of Color | 1,947 | 35.3% |
| Students Receiving Introductory Career Services | 2,137 | 38.8% |

PRE-ETS SERVICE

| Pre-ETS Service Category | Potentially Eligible | Participants | Total Students Served | Percent of Students Served |
|------------------------------|----------------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| Instruction in Self-Advocacy | 697 | 465 | 1,162 | 24% |
| Job Exploration Counseling | 1118 | 867 | 1,985 | 41% |
| Post Secondary Counseling | 496 | 428 | 924 | 19% |
| Work-Based Learning | 1033 | 2,066 | 3,099 | 64% |
| Workplace Readiness Training | 1253 | 1,254 | 2,507 | 52% |
| Totals | 1,974 | 2,893 | 4,867 | 100% |

LABOR FORCE BY AGE

| Age Group | Empl Outcomes | Avg Hourly Wage | Avg Monthly Earnings |
|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| 15-18 | 483 | \$15.52 | \$1,922 |
| 19-21 | 288 | \$14.80 | \$1,527 |
| 22-24 | 138 | \$15.50 | \$1,788 |
| 25-34 | 325 | \$15.57 | \$1,759 |
| 35-44 | 222 | \$16.92 | \$1,824 |
| 45-54 | 213 | \$17.04 | \$1,845 |
| 55-64 | 183 | \$16.49 | \$1,777 |
| 65+ | 21 | \$16.05 | \$1,607 |
| Grand Total | 1,873 | \$15.85 | \$1,785 |

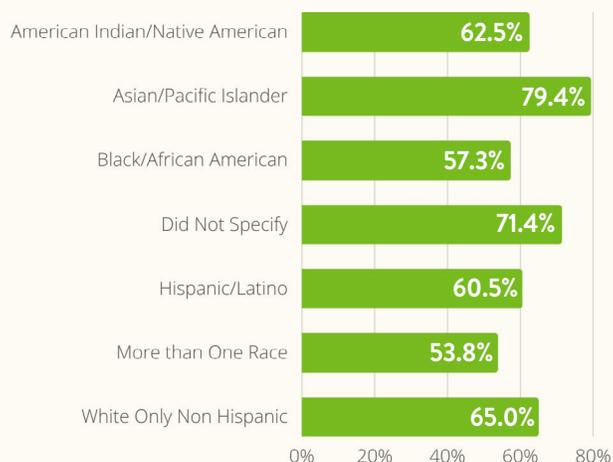
EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY PLACEMENT TYPE

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 | Avg Hourly Wage | Avg Hours Per Week | Avg Weekly Earnings | Avg Monthly Earnings |
|--|---------------|-----------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Competitive Integrated Employment | 1,505 | \$16.31 | 26 | \$446 | \$1,933 |
| Self-Employment | 4 | \$21.02 | 14 | \$253 | \$1,098 |
| Supported Employment in Competitive Integrated Setting | 364 | \$13.90 | 18 | \$272 | \$1,180 |
| Grand Total | 1,873 | \$15.85 | 24 | \$412 | \$1,785 |

PLACEMENT BY OCCUPATION

| ONET Occupational Groups | # of Participants and Average Monthly Earnings | |
|---|--|---------|
| 35 - FOOD PREPARATION AND SERVING-RELATED | 336 | \$1,228 |
| 53 - TRANSPORTATION AND MATERIAL MOVING | 320 | \$1,614 |
| 41 - SALES AND RELATED | 247 | \$1,301 |
| 51 - PRODUCTION | 186 | \$2,189 |
| 37 - BUILDING & GROUNDS CLEANING AND MAINTENANCE | 186 | \$1,188 |
| 43 - OFFICE AND ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT | 143 | \$2,127 |
| 39 - PERSONAL CARE AND SERVICE | 113 | \$1,310 |
| 31 - HEALTHCARE SUPPORT | 61 | \$1,993 |
| 25 - EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND LIBRARY | 43 | \$2,418 |
| 21 - COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL SERVICES | 38 | \$2,904 |
| 29 - HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONERS AND TECHNICAL | 37 | \$3,043 |
| 15 - COMPUTER AND MATHEMATICAL | 33 | \$5,082 |
| 49 - INSTALLATION, MAINTENANCE, AND REPAIR | 28 | \$2,260 |
| 13 - BUSINESS AND FINANCIAL OPERATIONS | 23 | \$3,386 |
| 27 - ARTS, DESIGN, ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS, AND MEDIA | 20 | \$2,313 |
| 33 - PROTECTIVE SERVICE | 14 | \$2,176 |
| 17 - ARCHITECTURE AND ENGINEERING | 13 | \$4,962 |
| 11 - MANAGEMENT | 13 | \$3,677 |
| 47 - CONSTRUCTION AND EXTRACTION | 11 | \$3,804 |
| 45 - FARMING, FISHING, AND FORESTRY | 4 | \$1,930 |
| 19 - LIFE, PHYSICAL, AND SOCIAL SCIENCE | 3 | \$4,795 |
| 55 - MILITARY-SPECIFIC | 1 | \$2,328 |



JOB STABILITY FOR VRS WORKERS

Job stability can be measured by retention with the same employer at six months and one year after leaving VRS. Overall, 62% of people employed six months after exit were working with the same employer at one year as well. Some disparities exist between groups in this measure.

MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR



EMBRACING AND ADAPTING TO CHANGE

It has been my distinct honor to serve as the Chair of the State Rehabilitation Council for the last two years. As I reflect upon my tenure, the themes I keep coming back to are those of embracing change and adapting to a world that doesn't look the same as it did just a few years ago. As Minnesotans, we have seen our state transform in a short period of time as we seek to reaffirm our status as the "Beacon of the North", if not a beacon for the whole country. I have also watched as VR has dealt with change – not only by reacting and adapting to changes in policy and the populations we serve, but also by proactively seeking to improve services for individuals with disabilities and taking steps to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to access VR services when needed. I have also seen significant changes in the SRC itself, as longtime members retire or move on to new opportunities and then those seats are filled with the next generation of representatives that will steer the SRC into the future and through whatever changes come their way. All of this is to say that I am extremely proud to have been a part of the SRC and to have had the opportunity to serve as Chair as we have navigated through these changes. There are few things I enjoy more in life than working alongside people who are passionate about what they do, and, in that spirit, my time with the SRC has been an absolute blast.

Finally, there is one more change in my life that I owe to my time with the SRC: I recently accepted a position with VR and will be joining their team as the manager of a new, statewide program ([read about GoMN! on page 11](#)). I feel very lucky to have the opportunity to continue the work of improving the lives of Minnesotans with disabilities. I look forward to utilizing my previous experience with VR, as well as the leadership experience and knowledge I have gained during my time with the SRC, as I continue down my own career path. I extend my sincere gratitude to the members of the SRC for their support, patience, and dedication during my time as Chair!

Tyler Sadek, SRC Chair

2023 STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL MEMBERS

BUSINESS, INDUSTRY OR LABOR REPRESENTATIVES

Scott Berscheid – Mayer

Jim Houston – Burnsville

Karen Leddy – Mound – term ends January 2024

Tyler Sadek – Minneapolis – resigned August 2023

Ben Coady – Rochester

CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROJECT REPRESENTATIVE

Anne Robertson – Minneapolis

COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDER REPRESENTATIVE

One position vacant

CURRENT OR FORMER RECIPIENTS OF VR SERVICES

Michael Etten – Shoreview

Trevor Turner – Minneapolis

Katie Legrid – Richfield

One position vacant

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REPRESENTATIVE

Lindsey Horowitz – resigned May 2023

Tom Delaney – Roseville

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

Shelly Weaver – Naytahwaush

One additional position added – to be filled

DISABILITY ADVOCACY GROUPS REPRESENTATIVES

Jillian Nelson – term ends January 2024

Crystal Hellekson – East Grand Forks

GOVERNOR'S WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD REPRESENTATIVE

Kyle Van Acker – Ham Lake

PACER REPRESENTATIVE

Deanne Curran – Farmington

STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE

Deborah Gleason – Minnetonka

VR COUNSELOR REPRESENTATIVE (NON-VOTING MEMBER)

Mike Windsperger – Mankato

VRS DIRECTOR (NON-VOTING MEMBER)

Dee Torgerson – St. Paul

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. Individuals outside the metro area are encouraged to apply. Meetings will continue to be either virtual or hybrid going forward.

For more information about the State Rehabilitation Council, please contact Karla Eckhoff at [Karla.F. Eckhoff@state.mn.us](mailto:Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us) or 651-356-5467.

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)

*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 651-356-5467 or emailing Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us.

The VR program receives 71.05% percent of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For federal fiscal year 2023, the total amount of grant funds is \$47,425,377. The required state match for these funds is \$12,835,584. The state of Minnesota has appropriated \$14.3 million to meet the matching requirement.