



# Annual Report

Program Year 2024

July 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025

**Enriching Lives Through the Power of Connection and Collaboration.**

# ABOUT THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

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

Duties include:

- Attend hybrid monthly meetings.
- Advise and assist in preparation of the state plan for VRS.
- Review and analyze the effectiveness of and participant satisfaction with VR services.
- Report to the governor and the U.S. Department of Education on the status of the VR program.
- Coordinate activities with other state councils with interest in the issues pertaining to disability and employment.
- Hold hearings and forums as necessary to carry out the duties of the council.

SRC members represent all our constituents and stakeholders, come from many walks of life and represent all regions of our 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:

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

For more information about the SRC, contact Karla Eckhoff at [Karla.F. Eckhoff@state.mn.us](mailto:Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us) or 651-259-7364.



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- Sam Hannon, a graphic designer and VRS participant, was hired to design the cover for this report, along with corresponding design elements used in these pages. Read Sam’s story on page 5.

# ABOUT VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

VRS provides employment-related services to Minnesotans with disabilities to find and retain jobs, advance in their careers and live independently in their communities.

VRS has a “dual customer” approach and assists both:

- Minnesotans with disabilities who face significant barriers to achieving competitive, integrated employment. This includes students and young adults with disabilities who are making the transition from school to work or to post-secondary training.
- Employers who seek to hire, support and retain qualified candidates for job openings.

VRS administers several distinct programs and projects, the largest of which is the public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. The division also administers state initiatives such as an Extended Employment program, Independent Living services, Individual Placement and Supports grants, and Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing grants.

## Vocational Rehabilitation Program

The VR program works with individuals with disabilities to explore employment choices (including self-employment), find and retain jobs and advance in their careers. This is achieved through specialized one-on-one employment services such as job counseling, job search assistance, education and training, assistive technology and job placement services. The VR program is a federal-state partnership, with most of the funding coming through a federal grant that requires state match. In federal fiscal year 2024, Minnesota received about 79 percent of its total funding through grants from the U.S. Department of Education.

Another source of funding for the VR program is income through Ticket to Work. The Social Security Administration (SSA) reimburses VRS for services provided to SSA disability benefits recipients who reach substantial gainful employment (SGA) following these services. (See story on page 12).

## Introductory Career Services

Introductory Career Services (ICS) are services to students who have not yet applied for or been determined eligible for the full VR program. ICS provides Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and is an important sub-category of the VR program, mandated by the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014.

WIOA requires the state VR program to reserve at least 15% of its federal appropriation for the provision of Pre-ETS to students age 14 up until 22 who are served through ICS or the full VR program. Pre-ETS includes the following five services: Job exploration counseling, workplace readiness training, work-based learning experiences, counseling on postsecondary training or college opportunities and instruction in self-advocacy. These services are provided in collaboration with all Minnesota high schools and age 18 to 22 transition programs. VRS also maintains professional and technical contracts with community partners to provide Pre-ETS to students throughout Minnesota.

VRS encourages all students who need further individualized supports and who receive ICS to apply for the full VR program as they get closer to earning their high school diploma so that they can receive comprehensive supports to prepare for, enter and maintain employment after graduation.



## MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

This past year has been one of transformation, resilience and renewed purpose for Minnesota VRS. We faced significant budget challenges and structural changes that tested our systems and our resolve. Yet through it all, our commitment to Minnesotans with disabilities never wavered.

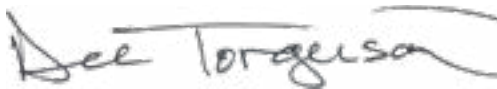
We've entered a period of greater stability. Our funding is more secure, our services are steady, and our focus is clear: To empower individuals with disabilities to achieve their goals for competitive, integrated employment and career development.

We've launched new initiatives, strengthened partnerships across sectors and continued to deliver high-quality services that make a meaningful difference in people's lives. These services include supports for adults with disabilities whether they're ready to start a new career, seek professional advancement or launch a business. Our work preparing youth for their future will now be through our re-imagined ICS ([careerforce.mn.gov/vrs-student](https://careerforce.mn.gov/vrs-student)). We keep growing our partnerships with employers to connect talent and foster supportive and accessible work environments ([careerforce.mn.gov/BiteSizedLearning](https://careerforce.mn.gov/BiteSizedLearning)).

None of this would be possible without our community. To our legislators and public partners, thank you for investing in this vital work. To our staff and community partners, thank you for your vision, your heart and your unwavering dedication. To our SRC members, participants, family advocates and business partners, thank you for the feedback and for trusting us to walk alongside you. Together, we're helping realize the vision of a Minnesota where everyone is empowered to achieve their employment goals, whatever their abilities.

As we look to the future, I am filled with hope. Hope for continued innovation. Hope for deeper collaboration. Hope for a system that reflects the full potential of every Minnesotan with a disability. We know that when people with disabilities have access to opportunity, our entire state benefits.

With gratitude,



Dee Torgerson  
Director, Vocational Rehabilitation Services



## DESIGNING THE LIFE HE ALWAYS WANTED



With support from his VRS team, Sam found his strengths, built his skills, and launched a career that makes a difference.

Sam first connected with VRS when he was in high school, as he was enrolled in the special education program. VRS was presented as an option to help ease his transition from high school to college: “I was just a teen wondering if I’d be able to complete college.”

Despite his concerns, Sam did indeed complete college successfully, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in graphic and interactive design at Minnesota State University of Moorhead (MSUM).

“My VRS counselor guided my academic journey, making sure I stayed on track with school while working,” said Sam. Students ages 14 up until 22 can access VRS student career services. Participating students get to learn about their strengths and interests, career and postsecondary education possibilities, how to gain work skills and experiences, and what they’ll need to make their plan happen.

Post college graduation, Sam decided to stay in the Fargo-Moorhead area where he had attended school and become an active community member. That’s also where he met his now fiancée, Grace. His VRS counselor Claudia Villafuerte supported his job search, providing guidance on resume writing and interview skills.

Since Spring of 2025, Sam has worked as the activities’ coordinator with Goldmark Property Management. “I’m in charge of planning a monthly event calendar for three different 55+ senior living properties,” explained Sam. “Throughout the month I plan and run events for the residents of all three properties. I use my design skills to make event posters, monthly calendars and other promo pieces.”

Goldmark property manager Jessica Brown only has positive things to share about Sam: “His creativity, dedication and professionalism consistently enhance the quality of life for our residents. He demonstrates outstanding organizational skills in planning and executing a wide variety of events that promote engagement, social connection, and overall wellbeing within our community.”

Sam enjoys the variety of the work, as “each day is new and exciting, with all the different events I plan.” That’s another aspect of the job he finds rewarding, planning events, as he knows he can make a difference in the lives of residents, bringing fun and enjoyment.

It really helped that he had some previous experience in this area from his time in school. “I was part of the Dragon Entertainment Group (DEG), a student-led organization that supports leadership and student development,” explained Sam. “We ran all sorts of events, plus homecoming for the fall and spring semesters, for the entire campus and the surrounding Fargo-Moorhead community.”



*Sam’s creative self portrait.*

It was through DEG faculty leader Becky Boyle Jones that Sam figured out what he wanted to do post-college. “The professors at MSUM help bring your visions to life, pushing you to always strive for greatness and bringing your artistic talents to the next level.”

Sam hopes to work with Goldmark for a few years, as he enjoys the engaging and welcoming work environment. He dreams of eventually working with a bigger event-planning company or sports team, or even with one of the local colleges.

When not working, Sam likes to make the most of all the great options to take Grace out on dates, whether hammocking at a park, bowling or eating out. He also makes graphic and digital art “just for fun,” spends time with friends, visits parks and hangs out at the farmers market.

Sam is living his best life. The support from both VRS and his professors at MSUM were invaluable, and he wants others to know the difference it can make to have this type of support.

*“Sam’s positive attitude, strong communication skills, and genuine care for residents make him an invaluable member of our team. His contributions not only strengthen our community culture but also set a high standard for excellence in resident engagement.”*  
—Jessica, Sam’s Supervisor



*“Sam takes great care in developing promotional materials such as flyers and newsletters that are both visually appealing and informative,” said Jessica. “His designs effectively capture residents’ attention and reflect his deep understanding of their interests and preferences.”*

## FROM SPARK TO STRENGTH



**With support from VRS, Kjirsten turned her passion for welding into a promising career.**

Kjirsten first discovered welding on a middle school field trip. It was love at first spark. By the time she was a sophomore in high school, she had taken every welding class available and was sure this wasn't just a passing interest. Welding was Kjirsten's vocation.

But turning her interest into a career came with questions. "I was really worried about how I was going to pay for training," Kjirsten said. "I didn't know what my options were."

That's when Sarah Frisch, a VRS counselor, entered the picture. Sarah met Kjirsten at her high school through an outreach session for students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Kjirsten has dyslexia and difficulty with reading comprehension.

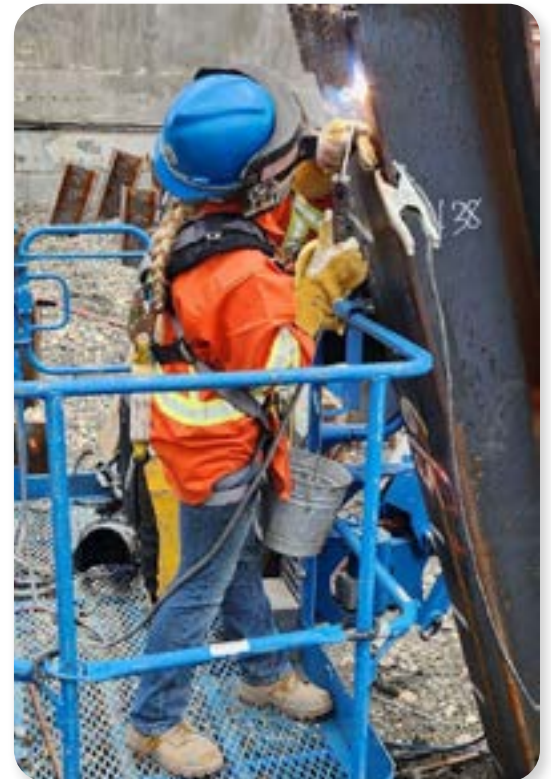
"Sarah has always been so helpful, and I feel comfortable with her," Kjirsten said. "With Sarah, I realized that even after high school, I could still get help and secure my future."

Together, they explored training options and found the perfect fit: Lynnes Welding Training in Fargo, North Dakota. Though the program was not in Minnesota, Sarah was able to find a path to fully support Kjirsten's participation in the training program.

The VR counselor looked into exceptions made in the past for similar situations, which led her to consult with her counterpart in Detroit Lakes, Maureen Lilleby. With Maureen's guidance, Sarah compared tuitions and found that Lynnes' program not only cost less, but it would allow for Kjirsten to get a job sooner, given that it's an accelerated program. That is, once they factored tuition and wages, the out-of-state program was the best choice. VR technician Kristen Schneeberger completed the paperwork to pay for school. "Without my colleagues, my team, I could not get all this work done," said Sarah.

Kjirsten did very well at Lynnes. Straight out of school, Kjirsten got her first welding job with TrueNorth Steel, earning a competitive salary and benefits. Just a few months later, she was offered an even better opportunity at ASN Constructors. She gets to work on major structural welding projects, including Nelson Studs and Pile Tension Anchors, both critical components for stability of concrete structures. And more importantly, she can continue to build her skills.

As she described her work, this young welder can't hide her excitement: "I work outside every day, and I get to do something new every day, so it's never boring. Welding is its own kind of art. It brings me peace and also challenges me."



*Kjirsten welding*

Kjirsten's long-term goal is to have her own business, "perhaps in auto body repair or creating custom metal art and sculptures or outdoor items – all to do with welding, of course!"

But for now, she's focused on growing her skills while doing what she loves.

When she started with VRS, Kjirsten had three main goals: to find a job that didn't feel like a job, "because I loved it so much," to achieve financial stability and to remain debt free. "I was able to check all those boxes! VRS has done so much for me. I couldn't be more grateful for all the hard work that went into getting me where I am today."



*"Instructors spoke highly of her hard work and positive attitude. Beyond mastering technical skills, Lynnes Welding Training supports students in preparing for the workforce, with guidance on resume writing, job applications and job search strategies."  
— Sarah Frisch, VRS counselor*

## **LG LAWN SERVICES IN THE COMMUNITY**



### **Family, a close friendship and VRS supports to help make dreams come true.**

When Matthew was six months old, his family moved into a quiet cul-de-sac in North Minneapolis, right next door to Nathaniel’s family. The young neighbors were inseparable from an early age. Yet, no one could have predicted their budding childhood friendship would shape their lives.

Raised in families that emphasized hard work, community and faith in one’s potential, the two friends started their entrepreneurial journey at an early age.

As toddlers, they pushed their toy mowers alongside their dads. As pre-teens, Matthew and Nathaniel started a car wash. When they noticed the need for lawn care in their community, an important aspect of neighborhood revitalization, they approached adults to offer their services. They didn’t shy away from tackling tough jobs like cutting branches and picking leaves. Their motto was simple: Build strength by doing the work and do it well.

With their early endeavors, the two friends learned about hard work, perseverance and the power of a strong work ethic. Matthew said his dream was to start a company after high school, “designing houses and lawns,” a dream he nurtured with support from his family.

### ***A dream with roots***

Matthew doesn’t like the “D-word;” disability. While he learns and thinks differently, he always believed in his ability to succeed – especially with the encouragement of his late mother, Darlene, who first connected him with VRS. Darlene recognized her son’s potential and knew the right resources could help him thrive.

After high school, Matthew honed his skills through Transition Plus, an experiential learning program for young adults with disabilities. He gained the confidence needed to step into the workforce, trying various jobs and, eventually, took on the challenge of starting a business.

VRS provided consistent support through the years, offering career guidance, job placement services and skill-building opportunities. When Matthew mentioned starting a business, VRS counselor Renate Schultz reached out to VRS small business specialist Josh Dean, who facilitated the mentorship and financial aid to make things happen.

Matthew’s sister Irene recalls, “VRS was great. We didn’t know they could help start a business! They guided Matthew every step of the way.”

### ***Launching LG Lawn***

By June 2024, LG Lawn, an acronym for “legacy and growth,” was officially launched.

Matthew and Nathaniel combined their passion for outdoor work with the lessons learned from their early jobs and family role models. Matthew brings hands-on skills. Nathaniel adds landscaping experience



*Matthew and Nathaniel’s bond, built on years of shared experiences, has turned into a powerful partnership.*

from his work at golf courses with the Minneapolis Parks system. They focus on residential lawn care, for now, with plans to expand into commercial contracts – and are excited to connect with new customers.

Starting a business comes with its challenges, but the brothers are learning and growing every step of the way. The support from VRS and Matthew’s family has been invaluable. Arthur, his older brother, shared his expertise in construction management, while Irene took on the role of bookkeeper and marketing director, and their dad provides operational support.

“Matthew’s success is rooted in his support system,” said Josh. “He has an incredible family and loyal friend who show up for him. Whether for VRS planning meetings or for the job, they’re always there when it counts.”

The fact that Matthew’s passionate about the work is also a big factor in his success. He loves cutting grass, edging lawns and clearing leaves, and finds joy in meeting new people and making customers happy. “When people appreciate your work, it makes you feel amazing. You know you’re doing something good for the community,” he said. Matthew sees the business as part of a bigger picture: a healthy, thriving community. “This job is about more than just lawns,” he said. “It’s about promoting a healthy lifestyle and giving back. We’re cleaning up our community, and that feels amazing.”

“This is the perfect job for Matthew,” said Renate. “He really enjoys working outdoors and operating small engine machines. He’s not intimidated by the fact that he has to self-promote and go door-knocking and make and hand out fliers.” Most of the business comes from word-of-mouth marketing, personal connections and canvassing efforts.

### **Real work, real impact**

As of mid-2025, LG Lawn has 26 clients, garnering consistent positive feedback. Matthew shared their guiding principles: “Make your customer happy. Work hard and work together. Keep growing!”

Starting small with tools like a lawnmower, rake, leaf blower and power washer, Matthew and Nathaniel have focused on building the business rather than paying themselves. They’re reinvesting their earnings and saving for new equipment. The duo is preparing for winter services and looking forward to adding a riding mower to their equipment, which will help them take on larger properties.

They’ve had some challenges, like underestimating project time or labor, but they choose to learn from drawbacks.

### **Go get your dreams**

When asked what they’d tell others considering VRS, Irene doesn’t hesitate: “No idea is too small. No matter your situation, don’t be discouraged. VRS has people who care and programs that can help, especially if you don’t have an Irene or a Nathaniel in your corner.”

Matthew chimed in with very thoughtful advice: “Go get your dreams! Take your time. Start a business in your own neighborhood, support the people around you and make your community better.”

### **Legacy in the making**

At the heart of LG Lawn is not just the hard work, but the deep-rooted friendship between Matthew and Nathaniel. Their bond, built on years of shared experiences, has turned into a powerful partnership. Nathaniel adds, “This business is more than a job. It’s a reflection of our history, our friendship and our commitment to the community.”

LG Lawn is a real-life example of what’s possible when people believe in each other. With their motto, “Your lawn, our legacy, brothers in service,” they’re proving that true success isn’t just about making money – it’s about making an impact and doing something meaningful together.

● LG Lawn (Minneapolis) [LGawnmaintenance.my.canva.site](https://lgawnmaintenance.my.canva.site), (612) 383-6141

*“My favorite part of working with Matthew was meeting and seeing how close and committed his family is. A family member was always in attendance during in-person or virtual VRS planning meetings. They helped Matthew with the small business paperwork, they went to the store together when purchasing items for the small business. Most importantly they helped Mathew focus on the big picture when he would become overwhelmed during this very intense process of starting a small business. Mathew knew he would be successful because he has the love and support of his family and that was such a joy for me to see.”*

– Renate Schultz, VRS Counselor

## Small Business Program

When a VRS participant expresses interest in starting a business, the first step is to work with the VR counselor to determine if it's a good option or not. Together, they look at skills and knowledge for the field of interest, as well as the capacity to run a small business. They may identify educational or training opportunities that VRS could fund.

The counselor then brings in the small business specialist, currently Josh Dean, who will help with a market analysis and offer whatever guidance participants need to draft the business and marketing plans and complete a feasibility assessment. "Business skills of participants I work with really vary," said Josh. "Sometimes, as in Matthew's case, the family and friends are able to provide natural supports for the operational side of the business. Other times, VRS is the main resource. Starting a business can be complicated, so having additional support is key." Josh has a background in marketing. He found his passion while managing a supported employment program helping people with disabilities find meaningful employment. Through his experience, he's gained valuable insights that he shares with Minnesotans with disabilities.

In addition to the professional support, there is funding available through VRS for participants to launch their business. These funds can cover start-up expenses such as equipment, materials, resources or software.

Once the business plan is approved, the entrepreneurs typically need to get licenses, permits, tax ID numbers, register the business name and more. The VR tech will offer assistance to complete all these steps, so the participant can focus on launching the business and doing it without a glitch.

Listen to Josh talk about the VRS small business program, and you'll get a sense of what it's all about: "I have the best job at the State. I get to make people's entrepreneurial dreams come true. I get to work with people with disabilities who, like everyone else, want to find a reliable income so they can live their best lives and have financial independence."

## OTHER MINNESOTA SMALL BUSINESSES SUPPORTED BY VRS IN PY24

### Winona3D (Winona)

Founder Shawn Hagedorn combines engineering skill, creative design and hands-on problem-solving to build functional, high-quality 3D printed products.

[Winona3d.com](http://Winona3d.com)

### Abundant Wellness (Duluth)

Founder, guide and therapist Barbara Miron offers forest therapy, massage therapy and various enrichment presentations and workshops that promote sacred wholeness. [AbundantWellnessNaturally.com](http://AbundantWellnessNaturally.com)

### Gymnarctos Studios LLC (Bloomington)

Through his company, Jason King-Lowe offers a range of technology services designed to empower businesses and connect them with their audience.

[GymnarctosStudiosLLC.com](http://GymnarctosStudiosLLC.com)

### Addie's Sweet Secrets (Minneapolis)

Addie's son, William Fridge, along with his daughter Denise Burnett, carry her legacy of handcrafted pie.

[AddiesSweets.com](http://AddiesSweets.com)

### Queen's of Hair Design LLC (Woodbury)

As a mortuary cosmetologist, Jessica Smith helps those who have passed away look their best one last time. She also sells high-end beauty and hair supplies.

[facebook.com/Jaymess2.0theslaymaster](https://facebook.com/Jaymess2.0theslaymaster)

### Twin Cities Cats (St. Paul)

Matthew Kaiser owns and operates this unique mobile, in-home service that provides compassionate, stress-free grooming exclusively for cats. Phone: 612-203-3949.

### Sew What? LLC (Rush City)

Seamstress Joanne Field brings her community together one hem at a time. Phone number: 320-496-0182.

### Devoniare LLC (Minneapolis)

Francewae Calmeter is a licensed real estate agent specializing in first-time home buyers and new construction developments.

[FrancewaeCalmeter.TheBridgeRealty.com](http://FrancewaeCalmeter.TheBridgeRealty.com)

# TICKET TO WORK

**Ticket to Work** ([ChooseWork.ssa.gov](https://ChooseWork.ssa.gov)) is a program that supports career development for people who receive Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits and want to work. It supports people with disabilities as they move toward financial independence and connects them with the services and resources they need to succeed in the workforce.

When people with disabilities who qualify for the program connect with authorized employment service providers, or a VRS agency, their “ticket” is assigned to that organization. Among other services, Ticket to Work program participants have access to an expert who can explain what happens to their disability benefits depending on how much they earn. They are also protected from a Continuing Disability Review (CDR) as they make progress towards gainful employment that will allow them to no longer need SSA benefits.

Ticket to Work is also a significant source of income for the VR program: Once a participant completes nine months of gainful employment, VRS can request reimbursement for services provided to that participant. These additional dollars allow us to serve more Minnesotans with disabilities.

It takes diligent tracking and reporting by our Ticket to Work specialist Shelley Paquette to realize this income. She uses technology to get data from different sources, including VR counselor notes, Unemployment Insurance and Social Security benefits. Shelley then carefully reviews the information before submitting claims to SSA for reimbursements. The review process needs to be completed, and a claim submitted, within a year of a participant being gainfully employed.

In program year 2024, VRS received \$3,347,714.70 in reimbursements from SSA for 261 current and former ticket participants who are now gainfully employed.





## **COUNSELOR AND SRC MEMBER**

### **Michael Windsperger**

As a rehabilitation counselor with the Mankato team, I empower individuals with disabilities to achieve their employment and career planning goals. I support them as they build skills, find jobs and advance in their careers. I help program participants gain confidence and develop the tools they need to succeed.

I happened upon my VRS counselor vocation by chance. I had originally wanted to work with veterans on college campuses. As an Army veteran myself, I understood the challenges of transitioning after service. But those roles were scarce, as many in the field stay until retirement time.

After earning a master's degree in counseling in student affairs and working with several state agencies, I discovered VRS. The mission resonated with me. In this work, I found everything I had hoped to accomplish with veterans and my why: helping people overcome barriers and achieve independence.

### ***On his role as a counselor***

I love working with VRS participants at all stages of their journey. Some are looking for their first job, while others are seeking advancement after years in a field. From earning a school diploma or college degree and deciding on a career path, to creating a resume and succeeding in competitive employment, I make a point of celebrating each small step or big milestone. Even the small victories can build toward bigger goals, and setbacks are opportunities for learning and growth as much as successes.

There are many other colleagues working with me to support vocational rehabilitation services recipients. VR techs, placement specialists, providers, assistive technology specialists, are all part of a team dedicated to ensuring participants can move towards their goals.

At the same time, nothing would be achieved without the full participation and determination of the people with disabilities that we serve. It takes hard work – it's our program participants who set their own goals and put forth the effort to achieve them. It takes patience – it can take a long time to build skills or find employment.

For three years, I worked with a young adult from a small school district who had limited family support. Together, we explored career options, practiced self-advocacy and workplace readiness, and launched a job search. Along the way, they graduated high school, earned a driver's license, saved for their first apartment and connected with county supports. They have now been successfully employed for two years.

*"I love what I do. While there can be challenges at times, it's rewarding to see the results of working with a participant to connect the dots and achieve goals."*

People often ask, “When will you get me a job?” Truth is, our program is not about handing someone a job, but about building lifelong employment skills and independence. Services vary depending on where a person is in their career journey.

### ***On his role as an SRC member***

In addition to my counseling role, I serve as a nonvoting member on the SRC, representing my fellow VRS staff. The council brings together stakeholders and individuals with lived experience to provide guidance for VRS. I provide field updates and share information on policies and procedures. I’ve answered questions about how people with disabilities learn about and apply for services, as well as how we determine their eligibility.

I joined the SRC to deepen my understanding of VRS, our vision and future direction. I’m now serving for a second term, through 2028, and can say that I’ve gained far more than I’d expected from my involvement with the SRC. I encourage other staff to attend a meeting or apply to the council. It’s an excellent opportunity to learn and contribute.

*“Sometimes the most meaningful support is simply giving someone a chance – especially for people facing barriers to employment.”*

*— Michael Windsperger*



## THE DISABILITY GLASS CEILING

by Deborah Gleason, SRC SILC Representative

### Defining the term

The Disability Glass Ceiling is about the invisible barriers that keep disabled people from fully realizing their potential, even when they have the

skills, knowledge and drive to go further. These barriers come in many forms: assumptions about capacity, benefit cliffs that punish ambition, lack of systemic support for advanced education or certifications and a widespread tendency to steer disabled individuals toward entry-level roles regardless of their actual abilities.

It's not a question of capability. It's a question of access, equity and the systems we've built around who gets to succeed.

### Barriers that reinforce the disability glass ceiling

- **Benefit cliffs.** Earning more can mean losing access to essential supports like healthcare or personal care assistance.
- **Low expectations within support systems.** Workforce systems often push disabled people into low-wage tracks, regardless of capability.
- **Access barriers to higher-level roles.** Higher-level roles come with rigid hours, travel and systems that don't accommodate complex support needs.
- **Obstacles in education and certification.** Professional advancement is blocked by inaccessible graduate programs and licensing systems.
- **Bias and stereotyping.** Leadership potential is still judged by outdated norms that exclude disability.

### What it costs us

- **Wasted talent.** When people with disabilities are locked out of advancement, their skills, insights and potential go unused.

- **Economic loss.** Underemployment limits income tax contributions, reduces consumer spending power and increases reliance on public supports.
- **Workforce instability.** Exclusion fuels turnover, limits internal promotions and increases recruitment costs. Minor and often non-cost accommodations can make all the difference.
- **Mental health and wellbeing.** Chronic underemployment, exclusion from advancement and purpose-driven work are linked to depression, isolation and burnout.
- **Perpetuation of inequity.** People with disabilities who are also BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, immigrants or part of other underrepresented communities face compounded barriers.
- **Hidden costs of exclusion.** The systems built to respond are far more expensive than the supports that would have prevented the barriers in the first place.

### How we break the ceiling

- **Normalize accommodations at all levels.** Access shouldn't end at the entry level.
- **Build advancement pipelines that include disability.** The focus on removing the barriers that keep disabled talent out of the running, not about setting aside a spot.
- **Stop penalizing progress.** We need to untangle benefits structures that punish success.
- **Rethink the "ideal" candidate.** We need to redefine being qualified to include authenticity, lived experience and adaptive brilliance.
- **Shift the narrative.** We need all people to be involved in making decisions, setting strategy, influencing policy and changing the rules for good.
- **Include disabled people in system design, not just feedback loops.** When disabled professionals are meaningfully involved in shaping policy, training programs and hiring systems, the outcomes are more inclusive from the start.

● To read Deborah's full article, visit [TheInformationTamer.com/The-Disability-Glass-Ceiling](https://TheInformationTamer.com/The-Disability-Glass-Ceiling)



# D A T A

# VRS PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

During program year 2024, VRS partnered with the SRC to develop survey questions aimed at evaluating participant experiences. Although the survey was designed to capture feedback from individuals at any point in their journey, VRS and SRC members chose to pilot the tool with individuals who had recently completed the application and eligibility process.

The evaluation was conducted twice during the year and distributed to all individuals who either completed the eligibility determination process or whose cases were closed after application but before eligibility was determined. In future surveys we'll ask participants about their experiences after exiting the program and other points of service.

## Combined survey results

### What answer below best describes how you work with VRS?

Number of responses.

I am the person who is receiving VRS services.	80%	167
I am a person who is helping a VRS participant answer this survey	20%	41
<b>Total:</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>208</b>

### Please answer the questions below about how VR staff worked with you.

Number of responses.

	Disagree	Agree	Don't know/ Unsure	Total
<b>I felt respected.</b>	4 2%	191 92%	13 6%	208
<b>My needs were met.</b>	16 8%	139 67%	51 25%	206
<b>I would tell people with disabilities to go to the VR program for help.</b>	5 2%	164 79%	39 19%	208

### Trends from respondent comments:

#### I felt respected.

- VRS staff listened to me (34)
- VRS staff were nice/kind (30)
- I received support/help and encouragement (25)
- VRS staff are understanding (18)

#### My needs were met.

- I'm getting help/support from VRS (27)
- VRS staff are understanding/accommodating (10)
- VRS staff answered my questions/explained the process so I could understand (9)
- I'm not making progress (8)
- The process is slow/I have been left waiting (5)

#### I would tell people with disabilities to go to the VR program for help.

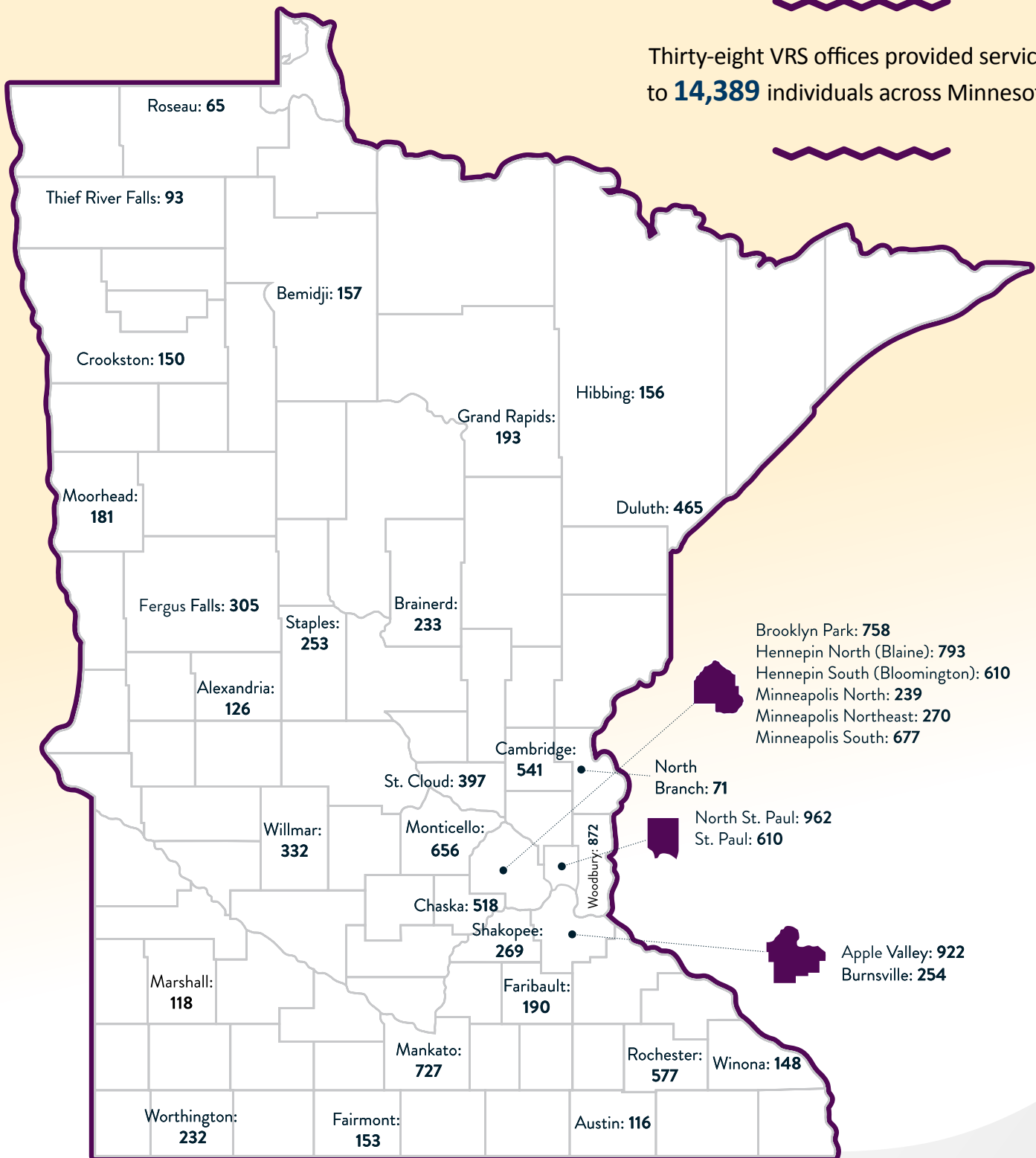
- VRS will help/support people with disabilities (61)
- VRS connects me to resources (11)
- I'm not getting the help I need yet/I have been left waiting (6)

#### Is there anything else you want us to know about your experience?

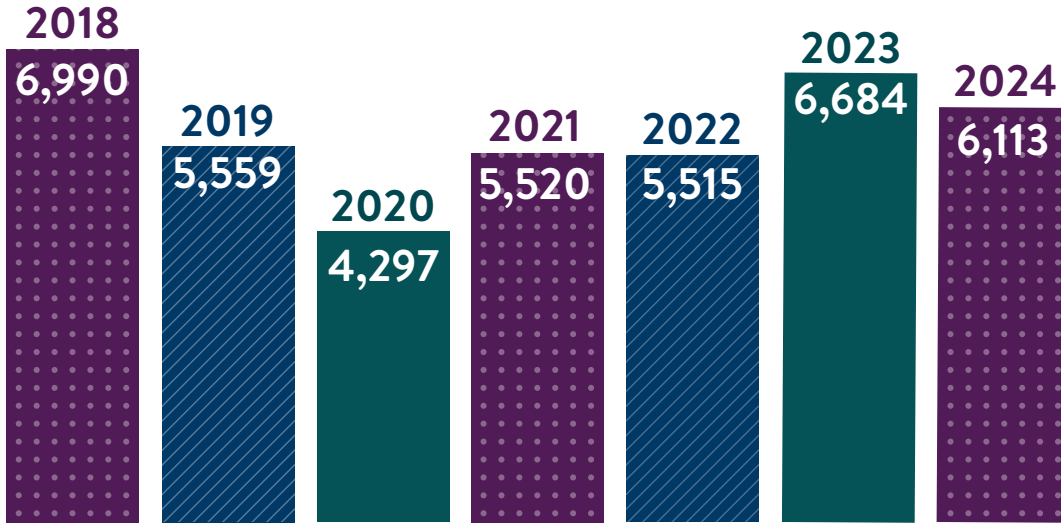
- Thank you (for being a resource, for support, etc.) (6)
- Working with VRS has been a positive experience (5)
- The process is slow (5)

**VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES TEAMS**

Thirty-eight VRS offices provided services to **14,389** individuals across Minnesota.

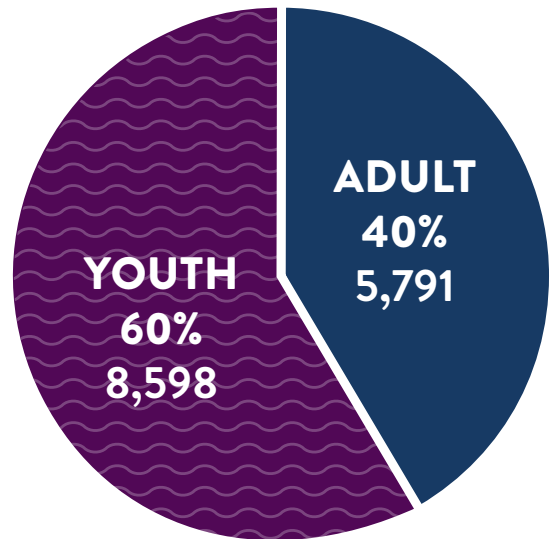
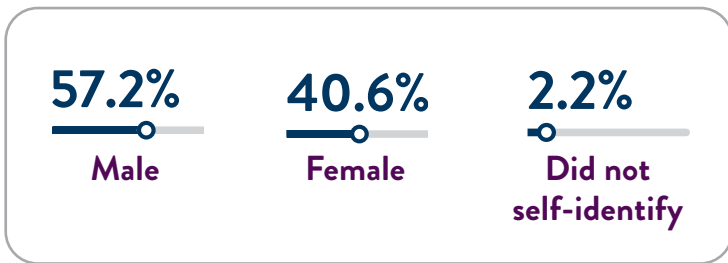


**APPLICATIONS BY FEDERAL PROGRAM YEAR**



**AGE AT EMPLOYMENT PLAN**

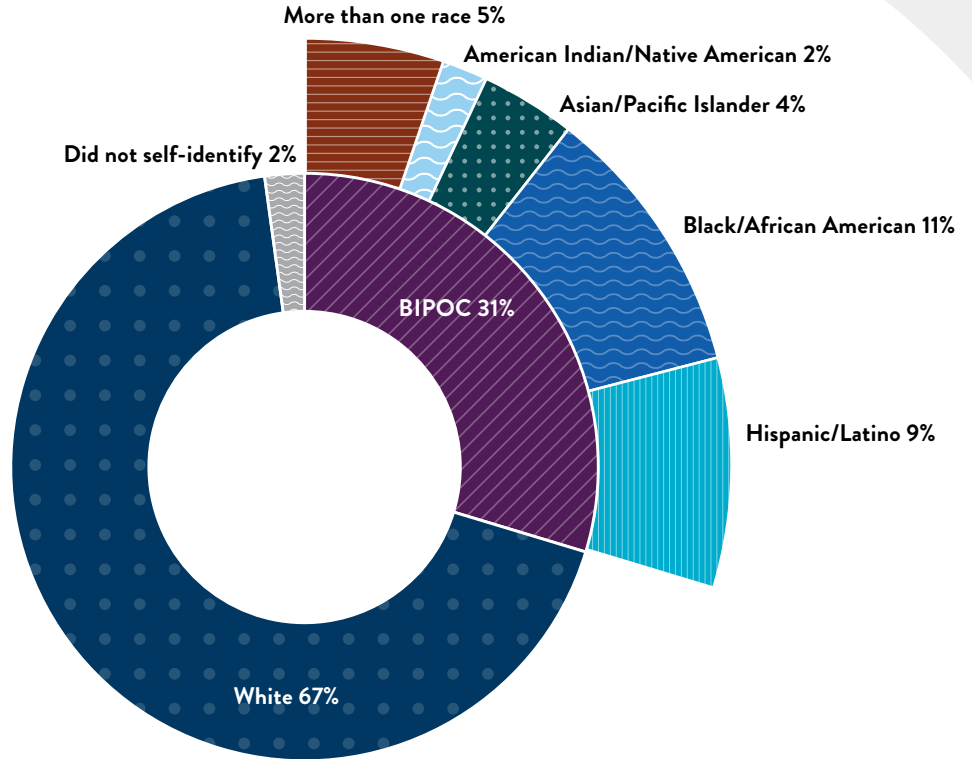
**GENDER**



Youth ages 14-24  
Adult ages 25+

## RACE & ETHNICITY

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

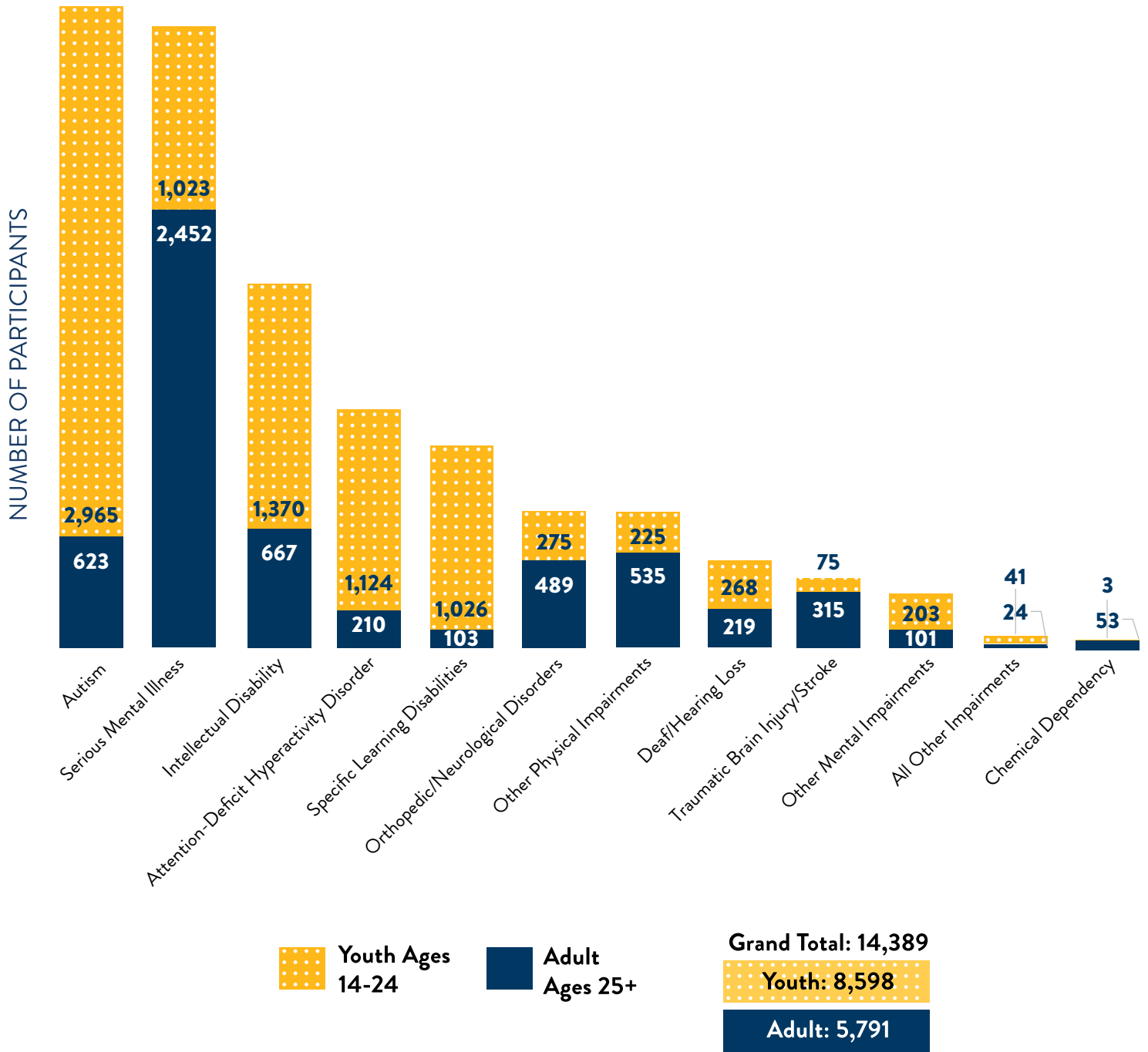


Race and Ethnicity	Participants Served	Youth	Adult	VRS Total	Minnesotans with Disabilities**
Asian/Pacific Islander	552	4.6%	2.9%	3.9%	3.1%
Black/African American	1,551	11.1%	10.9%	11.0%	8.2%
Hispanic/Latino	1,305	11.5%	5.9%	9.3%	6.3%
Other*	1,023	8.1%	6.1%	7.3%	7.8%
White Only, non-Hispanic	9,658	64.7%	74.2%	68.5%	74.6%
BIPOC	4,431	35.3%	25.8%	31.5%	25.4%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>14,089</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

\*The Annual Disability Statistics Compendium groups American Indian/Native American individuals and individuals who identify as more than one race in the “Other” category. VRS participant data has been combined accordingly to allow for comparison to the state population. Participants who did not self-identify race/ethnicity have been excluded from the data used for this table.

\*\*Citation: Thomas, N., Bach, S., & Houtenville, A.(2025). Annual Disability Statistics Compendium: 2023 (Custom Table). Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Institute on Disability. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey one-year estimates. [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov). Based on a sample and subject to sampling variability.

# PRIMARY DISABILITY GROUPS



## NEW STUDENTS SERVED BY PROGRAM YEAR

Case Type	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Introductory Career Services (ICS)*	729	906	389	842	1,013	1,386	883
Participant	2,036	1,779	1,554	1,863	1,711	1,838	1,366

\*ICS include services to students who have not yet applied for or been determined eligible for the full VR program. Participants have applied for and receive full VR services.

## INTRODUCTORY CAREER SERVICES

Service Category	Participants Served	ICS Students Served	Total Students Served	Percentage of Students Served
Work-Based Learning	1,930	1,175	3,039	60%
Job Exploration Counseling	1,540	1,479	2,977	59%
Workplace Readiness Training	1,459	1,517	2,929	58%
Post-Secondary Counseling	1,095	969	2,038	40%
Instruction in Self-Advocacy	605	1,046	1,631	32%
<b>Unique Count of Students</b>	<b>3,055</b>	<b>2,078</b>	<b>5,033</b>	

Note: Table includes high school and post-secondary students ages 14 up until 22 at the time of ICS service.

## HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

	Students	Percentage of High School Students
All High School Students Enrolled	6,233	100%
Received Pre-Employment Transition Services	4,479	72%
Students Receiving Introductory Career Services	2,503	40%
Students who are Black, Indigenous, or Persons of Color	2,409	39%
Received Counseling on Post Secondary Opportunities	1,675	27%
Participated in Paid Work Experience	1,065	17%

Note: High School Students table includes ONLY high school students ages 14 up until 22 at the time of ICS service.

## FIVE-YEAR TRENDS IN ACTIVITY INDICATORS BY PROGRAM YEAR 2020-2024

Indicator	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Percentage Change from 2023
Applications	4,297	5,520	5,516	6,684	6,113	-8.5%
Eligibility Completed	3,886	5,133	5,217	6,272	5,842	-6.9%
Plans Completed	3,395	4,268	4,601	5,449	5,113	-6.2%
Employment Outcomes	1,505	1,935	1,873	1,898	2,016	6.2%
Introductory Career Service Referrals	552	1,099	1,098	1,531	927	-39.5%
Participants Served	13,074	13,257	12,919	13,829	14,389	4.0%
Employment Outcome Rate	36.8%	39.2%	41.3%	41.7%	41.6%	-0.3%

Note: Order of Selection was implemented on April 7, 2025. In PY24, 85 individuals were found eligible but placed on a waitlist for services.

## EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY PLACEMENT TYPE

Employment Type	Employment Outcomes	Average Hourly Wage	Average Hours per Week	Average Weekly Earnings	Average Monthly Earnings
Competitive Integrated Employment	1,314	\$18.06	27	\$518	\$2,244
Self-Employment	9	\$25.75	21	\$566	\$2,451
Supported Employment in Competitive Integrated Setting	693	\$15.62	19	\$311	\$1,349
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2,016</b>	<b>\$17.25</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>\$447</b>	<b>\$1,937</b>

## EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY AGE

Age at Start of Employment Plan	Employment Outcomes	Average Hourly Wage	Average Monthly Earnings
14-18	71	\$16.04	\$2,113
19-21	429	\$16.10	\$1,958
22-24	312	\$16.14	\$1,668
25-34	445	\$17.12	\$1,901
35-44	303	\$17.86	\$2,032
45-54	204	\$19.29	\$2,191
55-64	200	\$18.54	\$1,964
65+	52	\$19.63	\$1,809
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>\$17.25</b>	<b>\$1,937</b>

## EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES BY OCCUPATION

O*NET Occupational Groups*	Number of Participants	Average Monthly Earnings
Transportation and Material Moving	348	\$1,685
Food Preparation and Serving-Related	333	\$1,220
Sales and Related	265	\$1,391
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	224	\$1,346
Office and Administrative Support	178	\$2,298
Production	145	\$2,596
Personal Care and Service	113	\$1,464
Healthcare Support	97	\$2,347
Education, Training, and Library	53	\$2,408
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	42	\$2,821
Community and Social Services	37	\$3,373
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	36	\$2,950
Business and Financial Operations	27	\$4,891
Computer and Mathematical	26	\$4,903
Management	19	\$4,757
Protective Service	16	\$1,826
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	15	\$2,402
Construction and Extraction	15	\$3,609
Architecture and Engineering	11	\$5,595
Life, Physical, and Social Science	7	\$3,674
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	6	\$2,730
Legal	3	\$4,887

\*The O\*NET (Occupational Information Network) system is maintained by a regularly updated database of occupational characteristics and worker requirements information across the U.S. economy. It describes occupations in terms of the knowledge, skills, and abilities required as well as how the work is performed in terms of tasks, work activities, and other descriptors.



*Co-chair Jim Ross*

## MESSAGE FROM SRC CO-CHAIR

It's been an honor to serve as co-chair of the SRC along with Jim Houston for the past year. Together, and along with the other SRC members, we work to provide an ever-evolving council with a wide range of input and experience so we can best serve VRS.

There has been a great deal of change throughout the last program year. VRS has had to adapt to a changing landscape while still providing services to people with disabilities, so that they can have the opportunity to grow personally, professionally and in the workforce. And at the SRC we get to hear directly from members of that community; each time we meet, we invite a participant to share about their experience with VRS. And what a gift it is to learn about the impact of vocational rehabilitation services!

As a one-time participant myself, I can attest to the importance of VRS. I received the tools to grow and the support to find the ways to manage a career – all without shame or the embarrassment that I sometimes felt because of my disability. Though it can feel daunting to move forward with an application, it's worth it. VRS is a valuable asset for many throughout the state of Minnesota.

Thank you to all who provide valuable input and take time to serve on the SRC. Thank you to the entire team that makes up VRS for your dedication to serving Minnesotans with disabilities.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to serve alongside all of you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Ross', written over a light blue horizontal line.

Jim Ross  
Co-Chair, Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council

# SRC MEMBERS, PROGRAM YEAR 2024

## **ADVOCACY ORGANIZATION REPRESENTATIVES**

Anisa Ali (Columbia Heights)

Crystal Hellekson (East Grand Forks)

Daren Howard (St. Paul)

## **BUSINESS, INDUSTRY AND LABOR REPRESENTATIVES**

Ty Barth (Jordan)

Ben Coady (Rochester)

Jim Houston (Burnsville)

Jim Ross (Red Wing)

## **CLIENT ASSISTANCE PROJECT (CAP) REPRESENTATIVE**

Anne Robertson (Minneapolis)

## **COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDER REPRESENTATIVE**

Jenna Askevold (Mankato)

## **CURRENT OR FORMER VR PARTICIPANTS**

Jill Belland (Waverly)

Nick Holzthum (Minneapolis)

Katie Legrid (Richfield)

One vacant seat

## **MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION REPRESENTATIVE**

Tom Delaney (Roseville)

## **GOVERNOR'S WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD (GWDB) REPRESENTATIVE**

Kyle Van Acker (Ham Lake)

## **PACER CENTER REPRESENTATIVE**

Sue Fager (Minneapolis)

## **STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL (SILC) REPRESENTATIVE**

Deborah Gleason (Minnetonka)

## **AMERICAN INDIAN VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM REPRESENTATIVES**

Connie Berg, Red Lake Nation (Red Lake)

Shelly Weaver, White Earth Nation (Naytahwaush)

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

Mike Windsperger (Mankato)

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

Dee Torgerson (St. Paul)



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



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

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The VR program received 78.70% of federal fiscal year 2024 funding through grants from the U.S. Department of Education. The federal fiscal year 2024 grants totaled \$52,850,455. The required state match for these funds is \$14,299,999. The state of Minnesota appropriated \$14.3 million to meet the match requirement.