

Colorado State Rehabilitation Council's

2023-2024

# Annual Report of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation



**COLORADO**  
Division of Vocational  
Rehabilitation

Department of Labor and Employment

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# 1

## Letters To: The Governor, Commissioner, Key Stakeholders and Partners



**COLORADO**

Division of Vocational  
Rehabilitation

Department of Labor and Employment

# Director Letter

Dear Stakeholders and Partners,

Colorado DVR has experienced an innovative year, full of growth and gratitude. Our dream goal for DVR, together with partners and stakeholders, is to close the prosperity gap for people with disabilities by 10%. Over the last year we have moved closer than ever to this goal, as record Coloradans with disabilities join the labor force and access our services. The employment gap for people with disabilities has seen a 5.62% decrease over the last four years. We are collaborating to foster a thriving employment environment where every Coloradan with a disability has the opportunity to live independently and achieve prosperity.

DVR is actively lifting people out of poverty, and with that comes a stronger economy and more inclusive communities. The number of people with disabilities applying for DVR services has increased over 23% since 2023 and continues to increase. This is exciting and hard. I am so proud of our DVR team members who continue to focus on engaging the people we serve with timely, quality services leading to employment while the demand for their services continues to increase. To manage this opportunity to serve more people, we have embarked on a number of changes including:

- We are working on ways to reduce turnover and improve hiring such as:
  - ▶ We have been advocating for competitive compensation for our VR Counselor series.
  - ▶ We have been advocating for career advancement opportunities.
  - ▶ We are working on an agreement with the University of Wisconsin Stout to assist in initial engagement meetings and drafting eligibility. This pilot will start in the near future in Region 3 and will expand once proven successful.
- We are making process improvements—most notably our new case management system, Reimagine VR, as well as developing legislation to no longer require the Financial Needs Analysis, changes in policies to not require so much supervisor sign off, and empowering our front line staff.
- We are increasing vendor rates in order to recruit and retain more high quality vendors.
- We are working on partnerships to improve information sharing, co-enrollment of the people we serve, and funding of VR services.
- We are working with employers to provide quality employment opportunities for the people we serve
- We are recognizing staff in our monthly All Staff meetings, through kudos and spot awards and our new Culture in Action awards.
- We are improving training and looking for more opportunities to support counselor's improved understanding, expertise, and competence to make their jobs easier.

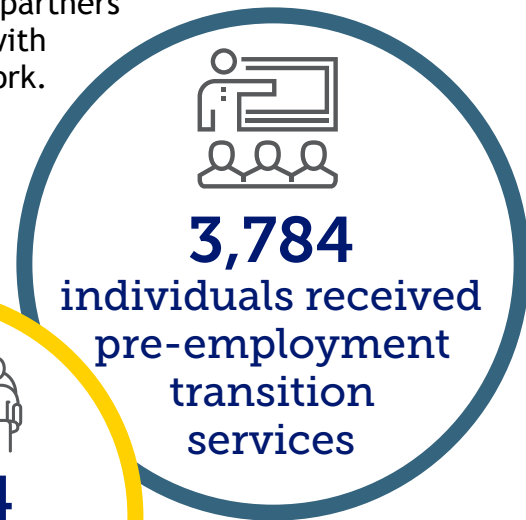


The number  
of people with  
disabilities applying  
for DVR services  
has increased  
**over 23%**  
since 2023

Achieving our mission and vision requires us to work closely with our partners and stakeholders to provide high quality customer service, operate with fiscal responsibility, and continuously improve the ways we do our work.

A few highlights from the past year include:

- ▶ 18,244 individuals received services from DVR
- ▶ 3,784 individuals received pre-employment transition services
- ▶ The people served by DVR achieved 1,845 successful employment outcomes at an average hourly wage of \$20.05
- ▶ 215 skills-based hiring trainings were given to employers across CO and two of our Business Outreach Specialists have become Certified ADA Coordinators



## Success Details:

- **Culture in Action Award:** To promote values that improve staff wellbeing, and the experience of our customers, DVR has identified 8 Culture in Action Awards: Bravery, Team Bravery, Innovator, Team Innovator, Bridge Builder, Team Bridge Builders, Rookie, Coach. Staff are able to nominate any individual or team that they feel encompasses these values. At the end of the performance year, the winners are chosen by the State Rehabilitation Council. This collaborative effort has allowed staff to recognize one another, while breaking down silos between DVR and SRC.
- **Disability Hiring Preference:** DVR is working to make the state of Colorado a model employer for people with disabilities. By offering application preference points to both veterans and people with disabilities, the DVR-initiated Disability Hiring Preference pilot program has allowed CDLE to successfully hire 42 individuals with disabilities, and we're now working with other state agencies to expand the pilot and broaden the State's workforce to include more highly qualified individuals.
- **Colorado's Hands on Hyatt Program:** Colorado successfully relaunched Hands On @Hyatt, an inclusive workplace training program. The students are temporary, paid employees of Hyatt Hotels during their two-week internship, which includes a residential program that provides lodging, meals and local transportation. DVR has successfully helped eight individuals graduate from this program, with two being offered permanent employment.
- **Disability Innovation Fund Grant (DIF Grant):** DVR received notification in September 2023 that we have been awarded the Disability Innovation Fund grant for the amount requested in our application: \$14,116,234.89. This five-year grant provides Colorado with an opportunity to develop a seamless model of collaborative services to youth with disabilities leading to Competitive Integrated Employment. The model demonstration project we proposed will:  
(1) Provide opportunities for secondary education, vocational rehabilitation, and local community partners to receive technical assistance and guidance to discover and collaborate with their community resources for students to achieve successful Post-School Outcomes.

(2) Expand the availability of and access to vocational services with a grant-funded dedicated DVR Counselor housed full time in select local school districts. (3) Provide training directly to family members of students with disabilities in the district or Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES) to provide them with vital tools to support students' successful achievement of Post-School Outcomes. (4) Implement a dynamic website geared specifically towards the employment and post-secondary needs of students with disabilities and their families.

A program manager and program assistant have been hired, and the school-based counselors will begin their work in November 2024.

- **Referrals Process Improvement:** The DVR referral process varies statewide, can be cumbersome to staff, and confusing to the people we serve and our partners. Through a grant awarded to develop an online request for services, a statewide process was initiated. Coloradans and their advocates looking for DVR services can now fill out a simple form that is routed to their local office. Improved usage of a Referral tracking system was also implemented to provide consistent experiences for staff and the people we serve. The referral form is the third most visited page of our website.
- **Disability Program Navigator Project (DPN):** Colorado is implementing an innovative Disability Navigator Program through collaborative contracts with our Workforce Centers. The DPN is a contracted program between DVR and Workforce Centers, to staff a Navigator within the Workforce Center who is responsible for cross-system alignment, service navigation and braiding; as well as increasing co-enrollment opportunities. In its second year the DNP was located in all but two Workforce Areas across Colorado. Watch this [short video](#) on collaboration success between a local Navigator and a VR Counselor.



- **Improved Case Management System:** DVR is currently building a Salesforce-based case management system in order to improve transparency, efficiency and collaboration across the people we serve, providers, and staff. The new system will integrate with other systems such as Adobe Sign and Box to provide a seamless experience for staff and the people we serve. The people we serve will also find more opportunities to be involved in their services through integrated assessments and provider choice. Providers will be able to better track services, participants, and payments.

## Addressing Human Resource Needs

We continue to identify areas of improvement and need within our agency so we can better serve and support our staff and the individuals we serve through new positions and strategies:

- **Registered Apprenticeship Program (RAP):** Our Business Relations Unit is working closely with Colorado's RAP to ensure that people with disabilities have equal opportunities to participate in apprenticeships and that employers recognize the valuable talent that people with disabilities can provide in apprenticeship programs. Qualified Apprenticeship Intermediaries are organizations operating in Colorado that play a crucial role in expanding or enhancing our state's Registered Apprenticeship System through their support of career seekers, apprentices, employers, and/or Sponsors. Apprenticeship Colorado recognizes two types of Qualified Apprenticeship Intermediaries to reach more career seekers and employers throughout the state:
  - ▶ Industry Apprenticeship Intermediaries focus on addressing employer needs through apprenticeship by providing industry focused services, reducing administrative burden, and support with the implementation of apprenticeships.
  - ▶ Talent Apprenticeship Intermediaries focus on career seeker and/or apprentice needs, especially those facing employment barriers, by increasing awareness of apprenticeships, providing direct connections to opportunities and providing the resources necessary to retain in their program.

*DVR is now recognized as both!*

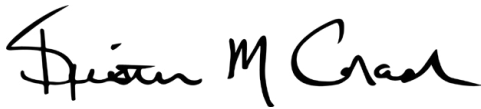
- **Skills-Based Hiring:** DVR's Business Relations Unit continues to be a state leader in the provision of Skills-Based Hiring services to business partners statewide, including collaboration on professional development and initiatives with the Markle Foundation (Skillful) and with Skills-Based Hiring professionals across the State. DVR exceeded its goal to increase the number of skills-based hiring trainings by providing 215 trainings as of June 2024, a 10% increase over 2023.
- **New positions:** Through our DIF Grant focused on areas where youth are underserved (Pueblo and Fountain), we have hired two school-based counselors, a program manager, and program assistant. A third location is being developed in Steamboat Springs.
- **Improved Business Services:** DVR has expanded the skillsets of our Business Outreach Specialists, now including two Certified ADA Coordinators. DVR frequently receives inquiries from employers regarding how to provide accommodations, and how to support their staff. By having two Certified ADA Coordinators, with even more Business Outreach Specialists enrolled in the certification, DVR can provide holistic employment services to Colorado businesses.

## Upcoming Strategies:

- **Outreach and Awareness to Employers:** DVR plans to create an outreach and awareness campaign targeting businesses. By focusing on providing proactive services to businesses which will improve hiring and staff retention, DVR aims to create an inclusive economic environment, where Coloradans with disabilities are welcomed and supported.
- **Disability Contact Center:** This year, our Employment First Program Manager joined forces with Colorado's Digital Equity Center submitting a grant application to explore developing a Disability Contact Center that will allow individuals to access resources their own way, on their own time. The Contact Center will utilize AI to provide support to individuals looking for resources across interagency sites. The grant was awarded in 2024.

We believe that anyone with a disability who wants to work, can work, regardless of the type or severity of their disability. We are so grateful for our staff and partners who share this vision.

Regards,



Kristin Corash

Director, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation



Provided **215**  
trainings as of  
June 2024, a  
10% increase  
over 2023.

# SRC Chair Letter

Dear Mr. Governor, Mr. Commissioner, and Key Stakeholders:

As we reflect on the past year, I am grateful for the hard work and commitment that our State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) has demonstrated in partnership with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). Together, we continue to push forward and break down barriers to work toward our vision of equitable employment opportunities and economic advancement for people with disabilities. At the same time, we have faced challenges that highlight areas where we still have work to do.

Outlined below are some of our key objectives and accomplishments this year:

## Focus on aging adults with disabilities in the workforce

During our annual strategic planning meeting earlier this year, we discussed that by 2030, there will be more adults over 55 in Colorado than under 25. A significant portion of those will be older adults with disabilities. The SRC decided to focus on understanding how DVR already supports older adults in employment and what supports exist within the state and communities. Our approach included reviewing existing DVR data, accessing and reviewing the Community Assessment Survey for Older Adults (CASOA), creating focus groups and surveys to gather new data, and learning from subject matter experts. In the coming year, we will combine our findings and present recommendations to DVR to help prepare for this demographic shift.

## Endorsement letters in support of DVR changes

The SRC issued two endorsement letters in support of DVR initiatives. One letter advocates for increased compensation for vocational rehabilitation counselors, while the other endorses legislative changes to eliminate the financial needs analysis for DVR services. These endorsements were crafted with the individuals served by DVR at the forefront of our considerations. Increased compensation will aid DVR in attracting and retaining skilled counselors, thus enhancing service quality and benefiting the people being served. Eliminating the financial needs analysis will remove a barrier to accessing necessary services, allowing a smoother path to employment.

## Task Force Update

Last year, the SRC established a task force to create a more robust onboarding process for new members. Our goal is to equip new members with the knowledge and confidence needed to engage fully with SRC activities and, over time, to prepare them for potential leadership roles within the council. We have developed two self-paced training modules: one offers a detailed overview of the SRC's history, role, and goals.

While the other addresses ableism and the impact of language. The onboarding will also include live orientation in which we will cover an overview of DVR. We are also finalizing a leadership transition guide to ensure a smooth and effective transfer of responsibilities within our council.

As we enter a new year, we do so with a shared understanding of our progress and the hurdles we still face. We know the path ahead may be filled with uncertainty and, at times, resistance to change. Together, we will continue to move forward, adapt, and seek innovative solutions while remaining firm in our vision for a more inclusive and equitable future.

Sincerely,

Sherrell Bethel

Chairwoman, Colorado State Rehabilitation Council





# 2

## DVR & SRC Leadership



**COLORADO**  
Division of Vocational  
Rehabilitation

Department of Labor and Employment

# DVR & SRC Leadership and Contact Information

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**Division of Vocational Rehabilitation  
Colorado Department of Labor & Employment**

633 17th Street, Suite 500  
Denver CO 80202

**Phone:** 303.318.8571

**Toll Free:** 866.870.4595

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**[www.colorado.gov/dvr](http://www.colorado.gov/dvr)**

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## **Executive Leadership Team:**

**Kristin Corash**

Director, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

**Stacy Evans**

Assistant Director, Field Services

**Augusta Klimek**

Assistant Director, Administration

## **State Rehabilitation Council Officers:**

**Sherrell Bethel, Chair**

[sbethel@peakparent.org](mailto:sbethel@peakparent.org)

**Yolanda Webb, Chair-Elect**

[principal@bgiwebbadvisors.com](mailto:principal@bgiwebbadvisors.com)

# State Rehabilitation Council



## VISION

### SRC Vision Statement:

The Colorado State Rehabilitation Council envisions a day when Coloradans, regardless of disability, have equitable opportunities for employment, economic advancement, and the tools and resources, such as services through the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, to lead and participate in all aspects of a high-quality life.



## MISSION

### SRC Mission Statement:

Colorado State Rehabilitation Council reviews, analyzes, advises, and partners with Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to effectively deliver services that are equitable, inclusive, and lead to quality of life for Coloradans with disabilities through competitive integrated employment, community integration, and independent living.

## Purpose of the Council

The Colorado State Rehabilitation Council is established under the authority of Section 105 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended.

The SRC provides guidance at the systemic and policy level that assures the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation assists Coloradans with disabilities to achieve meaningful employment and maximize individual independence goals. The Council provides DVR with an external, customer-oriented perspective and advises DVR on the vocational programs, policies, services and other issues that affect Coloradans with disabilities. The SRC provides people receiving services, business representatives, service providers and other citizens with a formal mechanism to influence the direction of rehabilitation services in Colorado.

## SRC Responsibilities

The overall purpose of the council is to work in collaboration and partnership with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to review, analyze, and advise the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) regarding the performance of the agency.



Established by  
**Section 105**  
of the Federal  
Rehabilitation Act  
of 1973

## The Council shall:

- Review, analyze, and advise DVR regarding the performance of the responsibilities of DVR, particularly responsibilities relating to eligibility (including order of selection).
- In partnership with DVR, develop, agree to and review state goals and priorities as well as evaluate the effectiveness of the DVR and submit reports of progress to the commissioner.
- Assist with the creation of the State Plan.
- When feasible, conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness of, and customer satisfaction with:
  - ▶ the functions performed by DVR;
  - ▶ vocational rehabilitation services provided by DVR and other public and private entities responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities; and
  - ▶ employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services from DVR, including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with such employment outcomes.
- Prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and Commissioner on the status of DVR programs within Colorado and make it available to the public.
- Coordinate activities with the activities of other councils within the State, including:
  - ▶ the Statewide Independent Living Council;
  - ▶ the advisory panel established under section 612(a)(20) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act;
  - ▶ the State Council on Developmental Disabilities;
  - ▶ State behavioral health planning council;
  - ▶ the State workforce development board; and
  - ▶ the activities of entities carrying out programs under the Assistive Technology Act of 1998.
- Provide for coordination and the establishment of working relationships between the DVR and the Statewide Independent Living Council and centers for independent living within the State.
- The Council shall prepare, in conjunction with DVR, a plan for the provision of such resources, including such staff and other personnel.
- Perform other functions the SRC determines to be appropriate.

## 2024 SRC Members and Membership Categories

Name	Status	Voting	Officers during SFY24	Membership type
Bobbie Rosa	Active	Voting Member		Southern Ute Tribal VR
Brenda Mosby	Active through SFY24	Voting Member		Current or Former Recipient of Services
Charlotte Morgan	Active	Voting Member		Statewide Independent Living Council
Jennifer Mendenhall	Active through SFY24	Voting Member		Parent or Guardian of a Person with Disability
Jennifer Penhale	Active through	Voting Member		Colorado Development Disabilities Council
Vacant				Business, Industry, & Labor
John Bailey	Active	Voting Member		At-Large Representative
Josh Davies	Active	Voting Member		Business, Industry, & Labor
Katie Oliver	Active	Voting Member		Advisory Panel established under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
Kristin Corash	Active	Non-voting		Director of DVR
Lisa Taylor	Active	Voting member		Colorado Workforce Development Council
Lloyd Lewis	Active through SFY24	Voting Member		Business, Industry, & Labor
Michael Bolarinwa	Active	Non-voting		Qualified Rehabilitation Counselor
Vallen Sarnoff	Staff	Non-voting		Acting SRC Manager
Sheila Benintendi	Active	Voting Member		Retired Social Worker, Representative of Behavioral Health
Sherrell Bethel	Active	Voting Member	Chair; Chair Customer Satisfaction Committee	Parent Training & Information Center
Timothy Postlewaite	Active	Voting Member	Chair Policy Committee	Client Assistance Program
Yolanda Webb	Active	Voting Member	Chair Elect	Business, Industry, & Labor
Vacant				Client Service Provider

# Standing Committees

## Executive Committee

High performing boards rubric: Last year, The Executive Committee dedicated time and effort to researching and creating evaluation tools for the State Rehabilitation Council. Developing these rubrics focuses on engaging SRC members while developing ongoing communication between Council members and leadership. The rubrics also strive to encourage members to engage before, during, and after SRC meetings to ensure their questions are answered and their accommodation needs are met.

This year, we began with implementing the rubrics to members and each committee to evaluate and support the work for the year. As with any new process, we experienced a few barriers. One of those barriers was that the format we were using was not an accessible one, and that didn't allow for all members to participate. Our goal for the next year is to move forward with the accessible version and a better process for disbursement to ensure the rubric meets its intended purpose.

**Task Force Project:** To lessen the time for new members or new chairs to feel comfortable enough with their roles to be fully active and engaged, the Executive Committee set a goal to begin working on a leadership transition guide and a more in-depth onboarding process for new SRC members.

We are creating a task force of about 4-5 members to help make the leadership guide and onboarding process. This task force is open to any current SRC member interested in supporting this endeavor. A new self-paced onboarding has been created and will be used with new members joining in the next year. The onboarding includes the history of SRC, meaning of our work, and topics such as Ableism.

**Recruitment:** The Executive Committee worked hard throughout the year to fulfill all vacant positions on the Council, with only two positions remaining unfilled at this time. Council leadership met with prospective applicants to gain an understanding of their passion for working with individuals with disabilities towards seeking competitive integrated employment, community integration, and independent living prior to finalizing their recommendations to the Governor for appointment.

This year, we requested that potential members attend a full council meeting and pick one or two committee meetings to attend before their appointment. This allowed the Executive Committee to see how the potential members engage and share ideas in discussions and let the potential members get a glimpse of what takes place during the meetings and ask questions or get clarification on becoming a member.

With full support from the SRC, the executive committee successfully recommended that the position reserved for a Behavioral Health Planning and Advisory Council (BHPAC) member be opened up to an individual in the broader behavioral health community. In the past, recruiting a BHPAC member has been difficult due to the other commitments that these members have. We broadened the qualifications to ensure that someone on the Council represents behavioral health. We were able to fill this position this year because of this change. SRC also recommended that representatives from both the Southern Ute Tribe and Ute Mountain Ute Tribe have positions available. Previously only one seat was available. This change will allow for better representation from our Tribal partners, and a broader voice for all participants of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Due to the ever-evolving changes in Council membership, the Executive Committee will continue their recruitment efforts indefinitely so vacancies remain minimal and adequate representation from stakeholders and community partners are fulfilled on the Council.

## Employment First Committee

Senate Bill 16-077 “Employment First for persons with Disabilities” made the SRC lead agency in coordinating Employment First-related collaboration within Colorado Department of Labor and Employment and among additional state agencies (the Colorado Departments of Education, Higher Education, Healthcare Policy and Financing, and Human Services). These efforts were to result in recommendations to CDLE and the other state agencies, as well as to the Colorado General Assembly, to implement Employment First policies and practices. Further, the outcome of these activities to expand employment opportunities for Colorado citizens with disabilities, including individuals with significant disabilities who may have previously not been considered for competitive integrated employment.

The SRC Employment First Committee leads Colorado’s Employment First efforts through administration of the Employment First Advisory Partnership (EFAP), also created through Senate Bill 16-077. The Employment First Committee determines EFAP membership, develops monthly EFAP meeting agendas and assures EFAP has adequate resources to fulfill its mission.

### Current Members:

Jen Mendenhall, Chair (Active through July 31, 2024)

John Bailey

Josh Davies

Katie Oliver

Kristin Corash

Yolanda Webb



## 2024 Employment First Committee Work Summary:

### Accomplishments

- Focused on increasing vendor capacity and understanding the vendor process through additional trainings.
- Discussed action plans to recruit new SRC/Employment First members from parents, potential employers and healthcare professionals.
- Supported Employment First Advisory Partnership(EFAP) by creating meeting agendas, discussing the future role of EFAP and how to increase EFAP awareness throughout Colorado.
- Collaborated with new DVR support staff to become more efficient with meetings, goal setting and agendas.

### Recommendations

- Continue committee trainings about Employment First, vendor units, school to work transition planning and aging populations.
- Include technology with all employment options.
- Increase focus of working with youth and student engagement within CDE and local school districts.
- Engage with and learn from focus groups - aging populations, incarcerated populations, mental health, youth and students, underserved rural communities and technology for employment.
- Plan for succession leadership in committees and EFAP.

## Customer Satisfaction and Program Evaluation Committee

The Customer Satisfaction Committee represents the SRC related to planning the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) and partners with DVR to complete CSNA activities. This committee is responsible for reviewing, analyzing and bringing forward recommendations related to the overall customer experience. The committee evaluates program and performance data to evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program, advising the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation on service improvement to adequately meet the needs of Coloradans with disabilities in achieving their employment goals.

### Current Members:

Sherrell Bethel, Chair

Brenda Mosby (Active through July 31, 2024)

John Bailey

Lloyd Lewis (Active through September 1, 2024)

Micheal Bolarinwa

Bobbi Rosa

## 2024 Customer Satisfaction and Program Evaluation Committee Work Summary:

This year, the Customer Satisfaction Committee focused on developing surveys and gathering data to support DVR's Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment. We designed a short survey, which was shared with the full council. Council members were then asked to engage their organizations by hosting focus groups based on the survey we created.

The objective was to assess how community organizations represented on the council perceive DVR's work, highlight DVR's strengths, and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, the committee developed a separate survey to distribute to the general public.

Once all the data from both surveys is collected, we will use the findings to provide informed recommendations to DVR.

## Planning, Policy, and Education Committee

This committee is responsible for assisting in the development of Colorado's combined State Plan, working with DVR to set up public meetings, analyzing bills presented in the General Assembly which directly relate to the provision of vocational rehabilitation services, and advising on policy and procedure.

### Current Members:

Timothy Postlewaite, Chair

Michael Bolarinwa

Jennifer Mendenhall (Active through July 31, 2024)

Lisa Taylor

Jennifer Penhale (Active through July 31, 2024)

Charlotte Morgan

## Planning, Policy, and Education Committee Work Summary:

### Policy Review

In the 2023-2024 year, the Policy committee reviewed updated DVR policy related to Mistreatment, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation. The Policy committee also worked together with the Customer Satisfaction committee to review and make recommendations around policy to address case closure due to bullying behavior that will improve the safety of both the people we serve and the staff at DVR.

Throughout the year, the Policy committee collaborated with the Colorado Council on Aging to explore the intersectionality between aging adults and the disability community. There are numerous benefits when it comes to getting older Coloradans into the workforce, including lower taxes for Coloradans. Another benefit is that older workers play a critical role in training younger generations to help businesses thrive. This led to SRC identifying a focus of serving older adults better as their annual goal. The policy committee has worked with the full SRC to develop survey and focus group

questions that can support the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Analysis, and recommendations to DVR.

In the next year, the Policy committee would like to focus on increasing community involvement to include the following communities: Justice-involvement and Corrections, Transportation, and Healthcare.

### **Educational Topics**

In an effort to continue education on matters related to DVR and disabilities in the workplace, the committee organized educational speakers to present on a variety of topics. The committee worked with subject matter experts to provide information and answer questions in the quarterly full SRC meetings. The topics for this year included the work of DVR's Quality Services Unit, Office on the Aging, the Business Relations Unit, Youth and Transitions, and the Employment First Advisory Partnership. The Policy Committee will continue to seek feedback from SRC members on the areas of interest they'd like for future educational topics.

### **Additional Committee Work**

The committee continues to recommend updates and changes to the SRC website. SRC members continue to update their biographies as membership changes and grows.





# 3

## DVR Overview



**COLORADO**

**Division of Vocational  
Rehabilitation**

Department of Labor and Employment

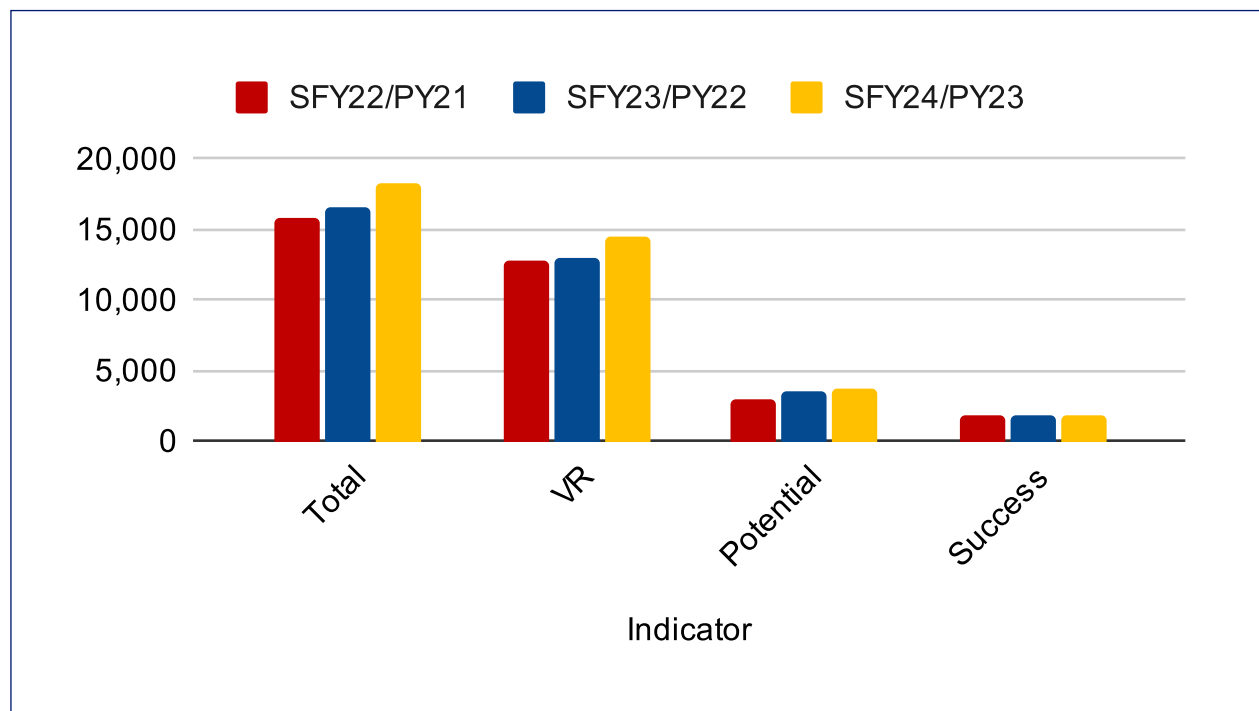
# DVR Overview By the Numbers

Indicator	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Total Individuals Served (both VR and YP)	15,841	16,574	18,244
VR Individuals Served	12,884	12,986	14,460
Potentially Eligible (YP) Individuals Served	2,997	3,588	3,784
Successful Employment Outcomes (VR)	1,855	1,875	1,845
Rehabilitation Rate (VR)*	52.46%	52.80%	51.12%
Average Wages From Employment outcomes (VR)	\$17.53	\$18.73	\$20.05
New Applications (VR)	5,180	5,513	6,787

\* Percentage of individuals closed after receiving services under an IPE who achieved a successful employment outcome.

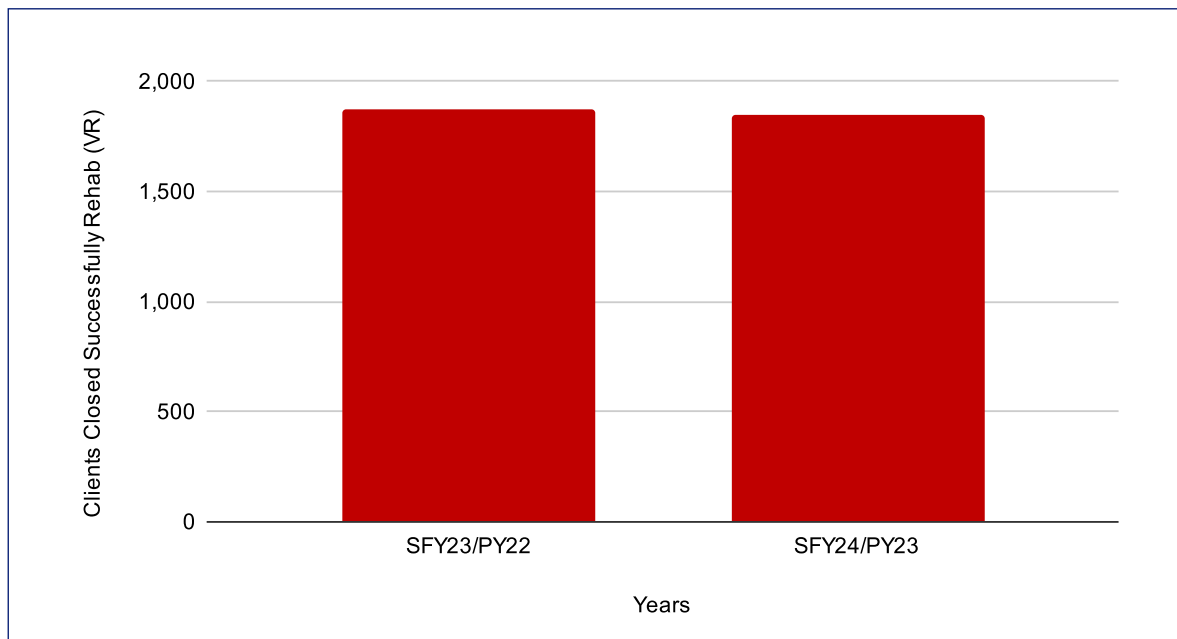
## Acronyms:

- Vocational Rehabilitation = (VR)
- Potential Eligible Student = (YP)
- State Fiscal Year = (SFY)
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act = (WIOA)
- WIOA Program Year = (PY)



## Clients Closed Successfully Rehabilitated (VR)

Colorado Labor Market Info	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Clients Closed Successfully Rehab (VR)	1,855	1,875	1,845
Employment in the 4th Quarter after Exit	49.87%	53.82%	55.95%
Average Hourly Wage (VR) at Successful Closure	\$17.53	\$18.73	\$20.05
Average Hours Worked Per Week (VR) at Successful Closure	28.0	27.9	28.6
Estimated Total Earnings (VR)	\$49.38M	\$53.48M	\$57.88M
Average Weekly Salary (VR)	\$511.95	\$548.53	\$603.33
Estimated Average Annual Salary (VR)	\$26,621	\$28,524	\$31,373
SSI/SSDI at Application	1,932	1,847	1,998
SSI/SSDI at Successful Close	615	647	552



## Colorado Labor Market Info

Colorado Labor Market Info	June 2023	June 2023	June 2024
Private Nonfarm Payroll Average Hourly Wage	\$34.21	\$35.27	\$37.98
Private Nonfarm Payroll Average Hours Per Week	33.2	33.3	34.2

## Disability Category

Disability Category	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Acquired Brain Injury	4.24%	4.20%	4.06%
Autism	11.99%	13.19%	13.80%
Behavioral Health	40.17%	40.17%	40.43%
Blind/Low Vision	5.93%	5.86%	5.74%
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	12.25%	12.22%	11.94%
Intellectual & Developmental Disability	13.54%	12.95%	10.94%
Physical Disabilities	22.08%	21.09%	21.01%
Other	20.33%	21.48%	21.44%

## Occupations of Successfully Rehabilitated Clients

Occupations of Successfully Rehabilitated Clients	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Administrative Support Workers	502	437	481
Service Workers	444	398	415
Laborers & Helpers	233	258	187
Professionals	245	302	279
Operatives	139	150	158
Sales Workers	106	133	119
Craft Workers	73	70	85
Executive/Managerial	73	78	69
Technicians	37	47	50
RSA Special Occupations and Miscellaneous	1	2	0
Other	2	0	2

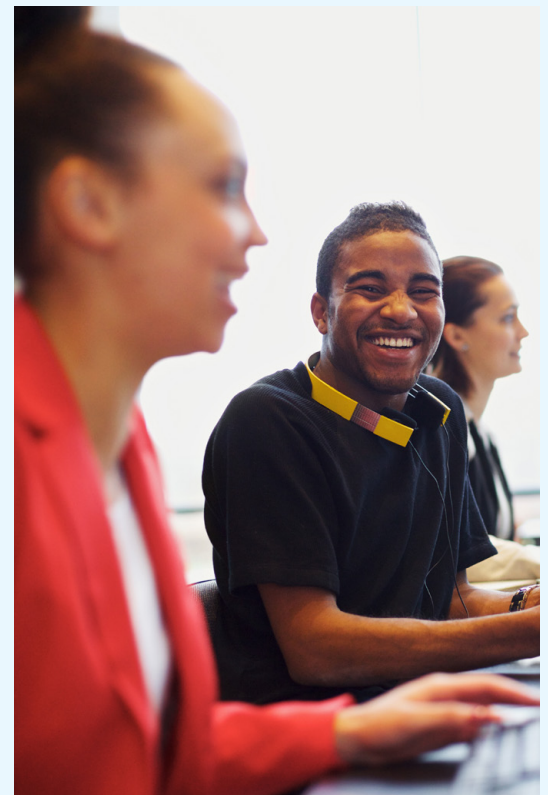


## Occupations of Successfully Rehabilitated Clients Age 55+

Occupations of Successfully Rehabilitated Clients Age 55+	SFY24/PY23
Administrative Support Workers	86
Service Workers	82
Laborers & Helpers	22
Professionals	87
Operatives	49
Sales Workers	29
Craft Workers	23
Executive/Managerial	24
Technicians	10
RSA Special Occupations and Miscellaneous	0
Other	0

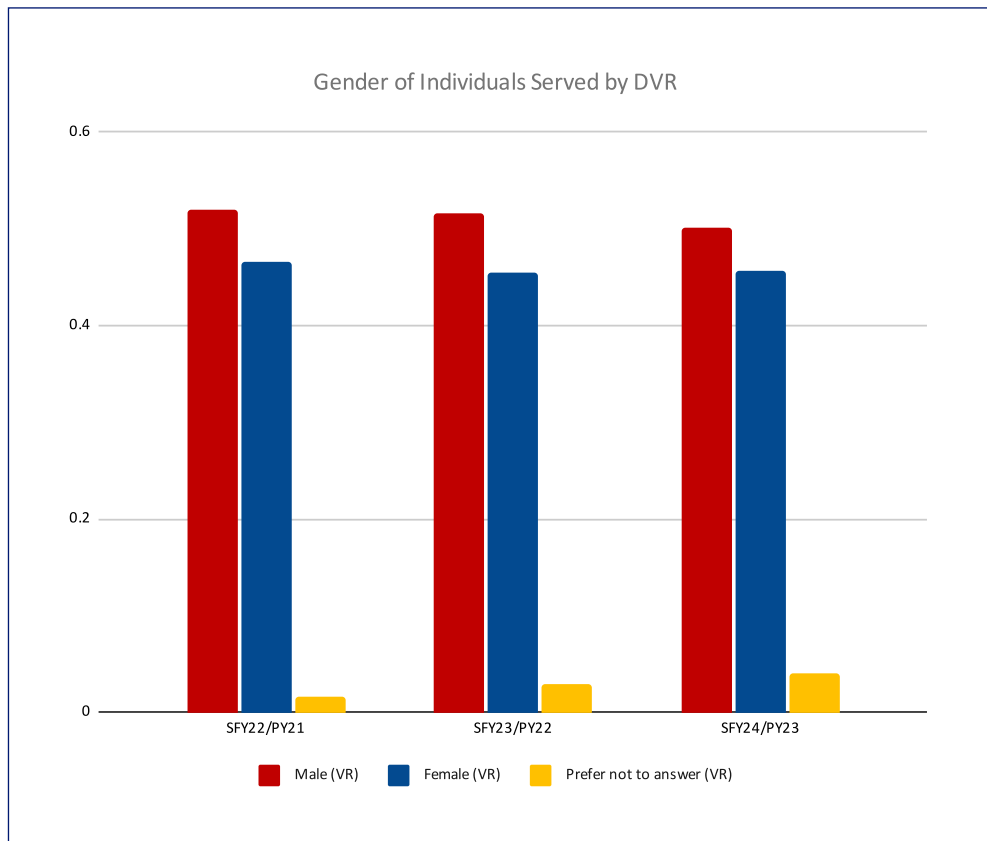
## Top 10 Employers – SFY24/PY23

Top 10 Employers	Employments
Walmart Associates Inc	64
Dillon Companies Inc	53
ARC Thrift Store	32
Safeway Stores Inc Admin Office	28
Amazon Com Services Inc	25
Denver Public Schools	15
Walgreen Company	14
Lowes Home Center LLC	11
TJX Companies Inc	10
Colorado State University	9
Goodwill Industries of Denver	9
TARGET CORPORATION	9



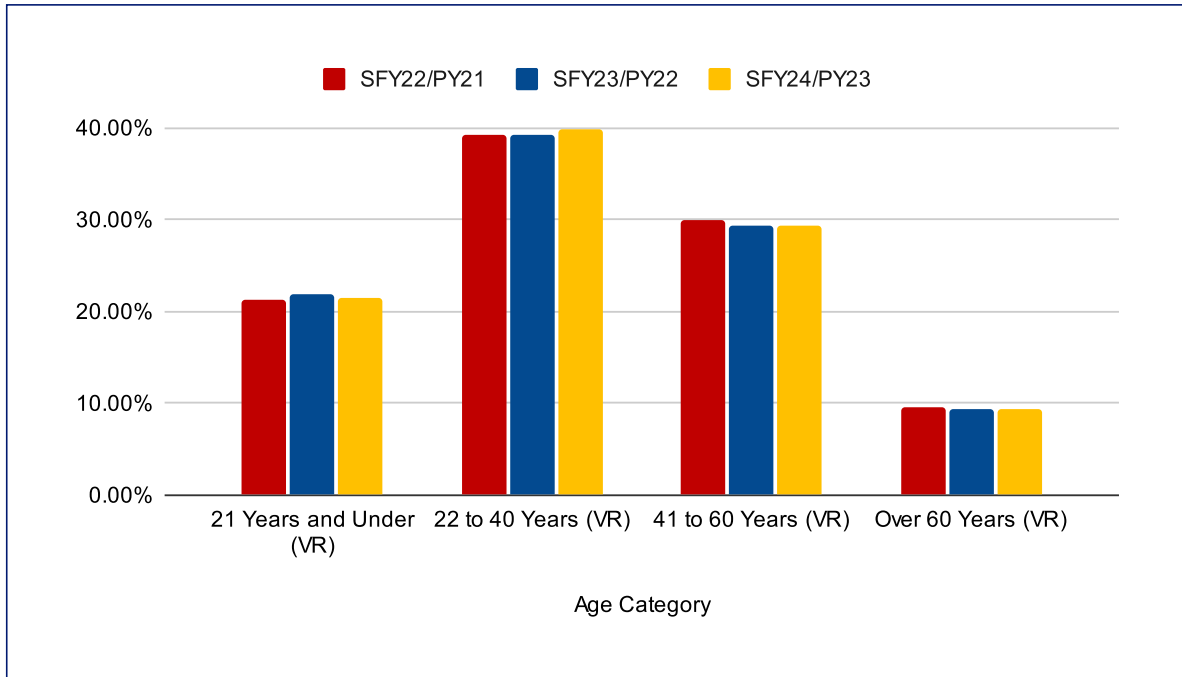
# Gender

Gender	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Male (VR)	51.95%	51.55%	50.20%
Female (VR)	46.54%	45.54%	45.62%
Nonbinary or another gender (VR)			0.10%
Prefer not to answer (VR)	1.51%	2.91%	4.07%



## Age Category

Age Category	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
21 Years and Under (VR)	21.19%	21.92%	21.44%
22 to 40 Years (VR)	39.20%	39.27%	39.85%
41 to 60 Years (VR)	29.94%	29.41%	29.41%
Over 60 Years (VR)	9.66%	9.41%	9.29%



## Race

Race	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
American Indian or Alaska Native Only (VR & YP)	1.79%	1.83%	1.96%
Asian Only (VR & YP)	1.84%	1.79%	1.81%
Black or African American Only (VR & YP)	6.67%	6.74%	6.29%
Middle Eastern Only (VR & YP)	0.32%	0.36%	0.35%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander Only (VR & YP)	0.37%	0.36%	0.38%
White Only (VR & YP)	82.44%	81.38%	80.01%
Two or more races (VR & YP)	3.31%	3.25%	3.88%
Did not self-identify (VR & YP)	3.27%	4.30%	5.32%

## Race American CoMunity Survey Compared with DVR

Race American CoMunity Survey Compared with DVR	ACS 2023 1-Year Estimates Colorado With Disabilities	DVR SFY24/PY23 (VR and YP)
American Indian or Alaska Native Only	1.32%	1.96%
Asian Only	2.03%	1.81%
Black or African American Only	4.08%	6.29%
Middle Eastern Only	no data available	0.35%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander Only	0.22%	0.38%
White Only	72.85%	80.01%
Two or more races	13.67%	3.88%
Some other race alone	5.82%	no data available
Did not self-identify	no data available	5.32%

## Ethnicity

Ethnicity	SFY21/PY20	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Hispanic or Latino (VR & YP)	20.81%	21.36%	22.29%	22.94%
Non-Hispanic and Non-Latino (VR & YP)	79.19%	78.64%	77.71%	77.06%

## Successful Closures Working At Plan

Successful Closures Working At Plan	SFY21/PY20	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Working at Plan	43.43%	39.19%	40.32%	44.99%
Not Working at Plan	56.57%	60.81%	59.68%	55.01%

## Earning Stats At Plan For Those Working At Plan

Earning Stats At Plan For Those Working At Plan	SFY21/PY20	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Ave Hourly Wage (VR) Reported at Plan	\$17.94	\$17.92	\$18.51	\$19.97
Ave Hours Worked Per Week (VR) Reported at Plan	28.90	29.02	28.33	29.34
Estimated Total Earnings (VR) Reported at Plan	\$18.90M	\$20.80M	\$21.94M	\$26.62M
Average Weekly Salary (VR) Reported at Plan	\$552.39	\$550.15	\$558.01	\$616.89
Estimated Average Annual Salary (VR) Reported at Plan	\$28,724	\$28,608	\$29,017	\$32,078

## Earning Stats At Plan For Those Working At Plan

Earning Stats At Plan For Those Working At Plan	SFY21/PY20	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Ave Hourly Wage (VR) Reported at Close	\$18.64	\$19.78	\$20.22	\$21.66
Ave Hours Worked Per Week (VR) Reported at Close	31.58	31.19	30.43	31.65
Estimated Total Earnings (VR) Reported at Close	\$20.90M	\$23.75M	\$25.02M	\$30.73M
Average Weekly Salary (VR) Reported at Close	\$610.90	\$628.32	\$636.34	\$712.03
Estimated Average Annual Salary (VR) Reported at Close	\$31,767	\$32,673	\$33,090	\$37,026
% Change Ave Hourly Wage (VR) Reported at Close vs Plan	3.90%	10.40%	9.21%	8.44%
% Change Ave Hours Worked Per Week (VR) Reported at Close vs Plan	9.29%	7.50%	7.41%	7.87%
% Change Estimated Total Earnings (VR) Reported at Close vs Plan	10.59%	14.21%	14.04%	15.42%
% Change Average Weekly Salary (VR) Reported at Close vs Plan	10.59%	14.21%	14.04%	15.42%

% Change Estimated Average Annual Salary (VR) Reported at Close vs Plan	10.59%	14.21%	14.04%	15.42%
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## Earning Stats At Close For Those NOT Working At Plan

Earning Stats At Close For Those NOT Working At Plan	SFY21/PY20	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Ave Hourly Wage (VR) Reported at Plan	\$15.13	\$16.09	\$17.72	\$18.73
Ave Hours Worked Per Week (VR) Reported at Plan	27.4	26.01	26.25	26.18
Estimated Total Earnings (VR) Reported at Plan	\$19.33M	\$25.63M	\$28.47M	\$27.15M
Average Weekly Salary (VR) Reported at Plan	\$433.75	\$436.94	\$489.20	\$514.44
Estimated Average Annual Salary (VR) Reported at Plan	\$22,555	\$22,721	\$25,439	\$26,751

## Outcomes by Disability Category Stats – SFY24/PY23

Disability Category Stats - SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
Acquired Brain Injury	\$1.56M	\$545.77	\$28,380
Autism	\$4.40M	\$410.62	\$21,352
Behavioral Health	\$16.41M	\$575.97	\$29,951
Blind/Low Vision	\$2.67M	\$703.14	\$36,563
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	\$21.43M	\$761.89	\$39,618



Intellectual & Developmental Disability	\$3.65M	\$307.50	\$15,990
Physical Disabilities	\$8.04M	\$552.15	\$28,712
Other	\$12.60M	\$548.13	\$28,503

## Outcomes by Disability Category Stats for Age 55+ – SFY24/PY23

Disability Category Stats for Age 55+ – SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
Acquired Brain Injury	\$.22M	\$377.26	\$19,618
Autism	\$.20M	\$1,302.05	\$67,707
Behavioral Health	\$2.69M	\$601.21	\$31,263
Blind/Low Vision	\$.61M	\$651.25	\$33,865
Deaf/Hard of Hearing	\$9.48M	\$726.63	\$37,785
Intellectual & Developmental Disability	\$.25M	\$278.48	\$14,481
Physical Disabilities	\$2.04M	\$536.66	\$27,907
Other	\$1.03M	\$682.36	\$35,483

## Outcomes by Race Stats – SFY24/PY23

Race Stats – SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
American Indian or Alaskan Native only	\$.60M	\$573.00	\$29,796
Asian only	\$1.20M	\$623.51	\$32,423
Black or African American only	\$2.98M	\$546.24	\$28,405
Middle Eastern or Arab only	\$.40M	\$597.77	\$31,084
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander only	\$.24M	\$584.44	\$30,391
White only	\$47.97M	\$602.95	\$31,354
Two or More Races	\$1.29M	\$467.31	\$24,300
Did not self-identify	\$3.20M	\$778.82	\$40,499

## Outcomes by Ethnicity Stats – SFY24/PY23

Ethnicity Stats — SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
Hispanic or Latino	\$12.81M	\$596.48	\$31,017
Non-Hispanic and Non-Latino	\$45.07M	\$605.31	\$31,476

## Outcomes by Region Stats — SFY24/PY23

Region Stats — SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
BLVS Region	\$2.03M	\$828.99	\$43,107
REGION 1	\$8.76M	\$579.17	\$30,117
REGION 2	\$18.20M	\$621.75	\$32,331
REGION 3	\$17.75M	\$575.78	\$29,940
REGION 4	\$11.14M	\$610.15	\$31,728

## Outcomes by Homeless Stats — SFY24/PY23

Homeless Stats — SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
Did not self-identify			
Is homeless	\$.98M	\$647.97	\$33,694
Is not homeless	\$56.91M	\$602.62	\$31,336

## Outcomes by Exoffender Stats — SFY24/PY23

Exoffender Stats — SFY24/PY23	Total Yearly Earnings	Average Weekly Salary	Average Annual Salary
Did not self-identify	\$1.88M	\$538.94	\$28,025
Has a criminal offense history	\$5.90M	\$613.02	\$31,877
No criminal offense history	\$50.11M	\$604.91	\$31,455

## WIOA CPM

WIOA CPM	SFY21/PY20	SFY22/PY21	SFY23/PY22	SFY24/PY23
Employment Rate 2 Quarters Post Exit	51.72%	52.11%	57.45%	55.91%
Employment Rate 4 Quarters Post Exit	48.84%	49.86%	53.82%	55.95%
Median Earnings 2 Quarters Post Exit	\$4,355	\$5,205	\$5,146	\$5,037
Measurable Skill Gains Rate	31.55%	29.21%	25.37%	39.98%
Credential Attainment Rate	25.40%	29.22%	33.12%	31.17%
Retention Rate with Same Employer 2 and 4 Quarters Post Exit	67.21%	72.46%	71.72%	76.13%



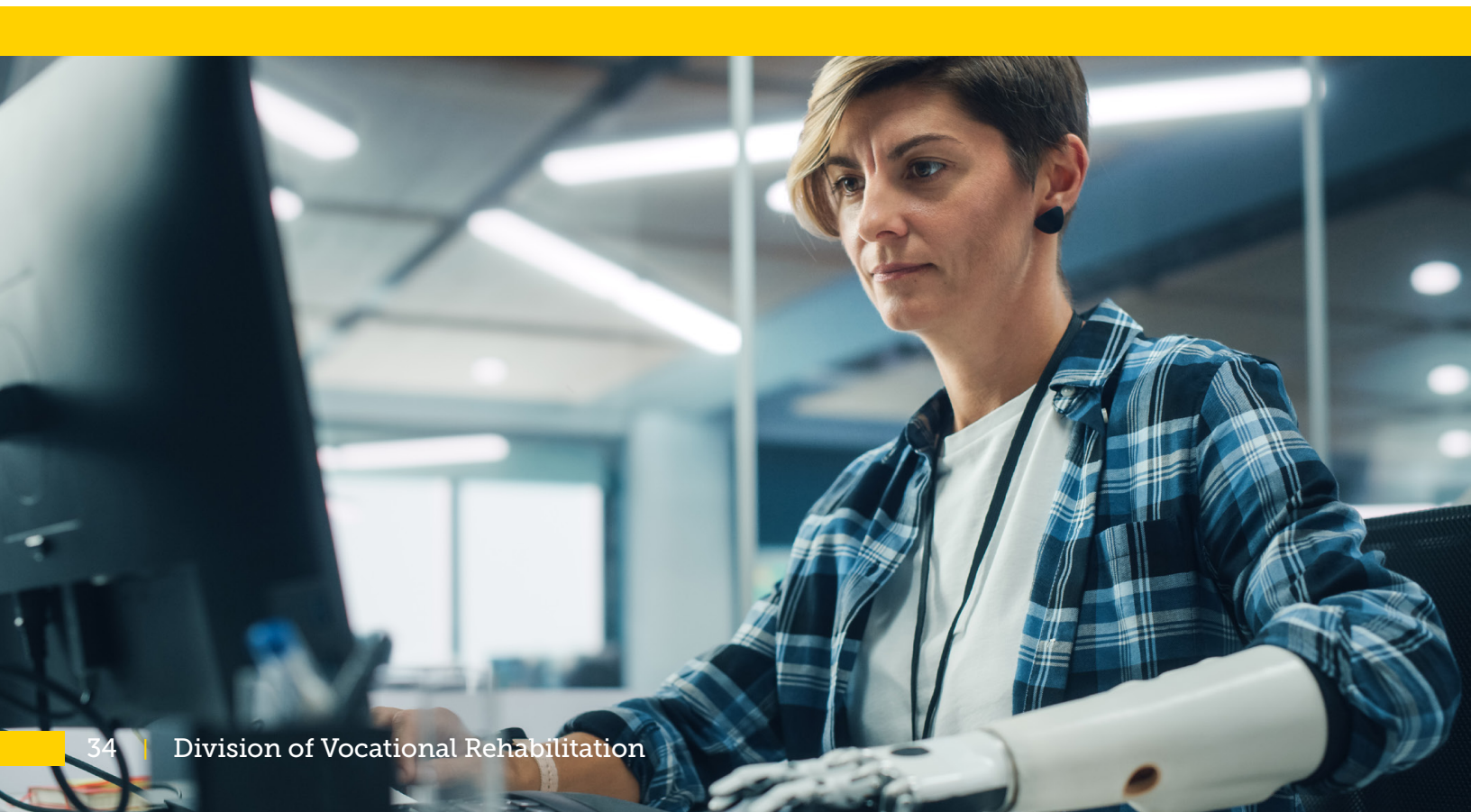
# The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) Services

DVR supports individuals with disabilities to prepare for, obtain, advance in, and maintain employment by providing a range of services based on individual employment needs and goals.

Rehabilitation Counselors work closely with each person to determine an employment goal and identify and arrange for the services that will be needed to achieve this goal.

## Services that may be provided to youth and adults through DVR:

- One-on-one vocational rehabilitation counseling and guidance
- Pre-employment Transition Services to students with disabilities
- Physical and behavioral health treatment
- Training services, including vocational, academic, and personal adjustment
- Job related services, including, job-seeking skills training, job placement, and job coaching
- Specialized services for individuals who are blind, deaf, and deaf-blind, including interpreter services, note-taking services, and reader services
- Rehabilitation technology services, including assistive technology devices, assistive technology services, and rehabilitation engineering services to address barriers encountered with employment
- Supportive services, such as maintenance, transportation, personal assistance services, and services to family members may also be provided if necessary.



# DVR Goals and Strategies

Colorado’s 2020-2023 Combined State Plan was approved in June 2020, taking effect July 1, 2020. The two-year modification was approved in June 2022, taking effect July 1, 2022. In the VR Services Portion of the Plan, DVR identified the following priorities focused on the people receiving DVR services, DVR staff, and DVR partners:

- **People We Serve:** DVR innovates with intention to improve individualized and person-centered services and supports that lead to increased prosperity through a dual customer approach.
- **Staff:** DVR’s leaders support and equip DVR staff to be agile and able to integrate positive change, while proactively providing staff strategies to foster flexible, efficient service delivery.
- **Partners:** DVR adapts to processes, technologies, and disciplines that help staff create and enhance relationships with our communities, vendors, employer partners, stakeholders, and the people we serve.

Aligned with these priorities, DVR identified the following goals:

- DVR will work with partners and stakeholders to reduce the prosperity gap for people with disabilities by increasing quality employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities.
- DVR will increase the number of successful closures and the average wages of individuals closed successfully, annually. In State Fiscal Year 2024, DVR fell short of this goal, achieving 1845 successful closures, compared to 1875 in SFY 2023 and an average wage of \$20.05 per hour, which was \$1.32 per hour more than SFY 2023.
- DVR will meet or exceed negotiated targets for WIOA Common Performance Measures. DVR met or exceeded nearly all of its negotiated targets during the 2023 Program Year (SFY 2024).

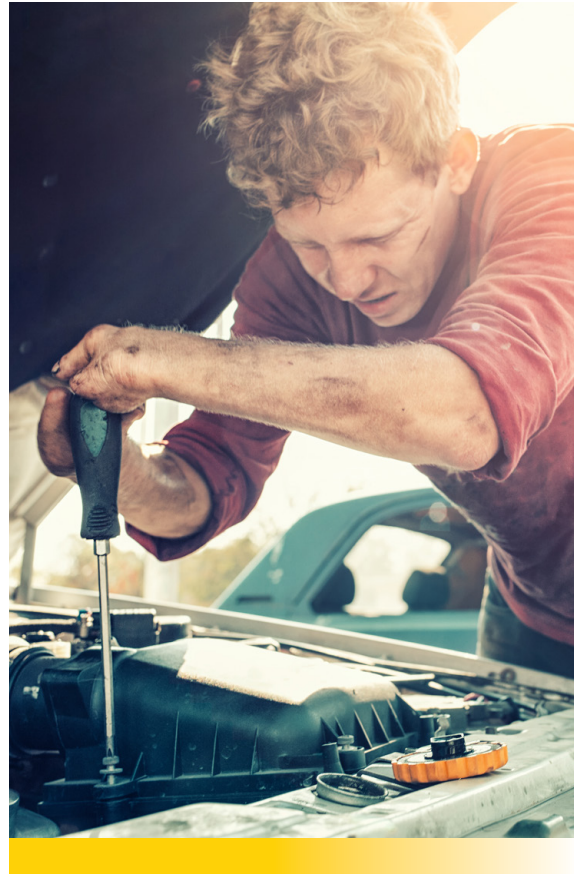
Measure	Actual Performance	Target
Employment in the 2nd Quarter after Exit	55.91%	52.8%
Employment in the 4th Quarter after Exit	55.95%	50.8%
Median Earnings in the 2nd Quarter after Exit	\$5,037	\$4,633
Credential Attainment	23.3%	26.5%
Measurable Skill Gains	38.7%	35.0%

These priorities persist into the 2024-2027 Colorado Combined State Plan, which was approved in June 2024.

# Field Services

Colorado's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) works in partnership with Coloradans to provide individualized services leading to sustained employment for people with various types and degrees of physical and mental disabilities. Professional staff and extensively trained Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselors are strategically located in offices and local communities throughout Colorado, traveling when necessary to serve the entire state.

DVR's staff is highly committed to excellent customer service and assists individuals with disabilities to obtain vocational success and increased self-sufficiency through individual assessment & evaluation, vocational counseling and guidance, holistic planning, and provision of many other services necessary to become successful in employment. Approximately 120 VR Counselors/VR Counselor Interns across the state provide individualized vocational rehabilitation services during this process and assist customers to address employment barriers and realize their career goals.



In May of 2022, DVR implemented a Strategic Staffing model that incorporates an interdisciplinary team approach to providing services. Currently, this model is implemented in at least one of DVR's field offices per region. This included implementing a new position, the Initial Engagement and Eligibility Technician. This model has resulted in the last year to increase engagement and rapport between persons we serve and DVR staff, build trust within DVR teams, and decrease the amount of time from application to an Individualized Plan for Employment within offices that participated.

To meet the needs of a diverse population, DVR has ensured that there are VR Counselors who are knowledgeable about a variety of disabilities and employment industries throughout the state. All VR Counselors hold a Master's Degree in Rehabilitation Counseling or a closely related field, participate in an extensive multimodal DVR Training Academy upon hire, and have opportunities for a variety of continuing education necessary to ensure their ongoing professional development. DVR also has several staff around the state who are fluent in American Sign Language and Spanish; other language needs are met through the use of interpreting services to ensure effective communication.

Each of DVR's field offices has a supervisor who, in addition to providing leadership, coaching and guidance to the staff, takes the lead in cultivating partnerships with area employers, workforce centers, schools, and other public and private service agencies within the community. DVR works in partnership with the business community to provide services to employers such as disability awareness training, on-site job assessments, referral and support of qualified employees, and professional consultation.

When working with customers across the state who are seeking successful employment, DVR staff continually strive to provide an environment that is welcoming, respectful, and responsive to the needs of Colorado's citizens. DVR maintains a hybrid approach to service delivery to best meet the needs of individuals by providing services virtually, in the community or in person.

# Youth Services and Transition

The Youth Services and Transition Unit (YSTU) leads DVR in coordinating effective and efficient pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) and vocational rehabilitation services for students and youth with disabilities. The unit includes four positions: two Youth Services and Transition managers. One manager focuses on Pre-ETS and Employment First initiatives for youth, while the other concentrates on school-to-work programs and coordinated student outcomes. The remaining two roles are dedicated to enhancing the quality and diversity of services available to youth with disabilities in Colorado, offering on-demand training for students and service providers. These positions also play a key role in providing ongoing support and guidance to DVR staff working with youth and local education partners.

## Disability Innovation Fund (DIF) Grant – Pathways to Partnership

The Colorado DIF team has been focused on laying the groundwork for progress, with the initial efforts during the first year centered around implementing key grant components. These activities included forming the planning and advisory committee, recruiting the Grant Manager, developing the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and creating statements of work and contracts for our identified contractors.

As outlined in the Work Plan, the unit is eager to enhance the effectiveness and availability of vocational services for students with disabilities by implementing an Interdisciplinary Team approach. This team will include a DVR Counselor placed directly in the school district or BOCES, responsible for coordinating and delivering vocational services to students with disabilities. Additionally, the unit will focus on developing work-based learning opportunities and apprenticeship pathways within the local community, supported by Pre-Employment Transition Services, Benefits Counseling, and job placement services provided by Centers for Independent Living.

Training will be offered not only to families of students with disabilities but also to all stakeholder partners, providing education, support, and guidance on the availability and importance of employment as the first and preferred option for students with disabilities, achieved through coordinated services.

These efforts will build upon Colorado's Sequencing of Services (SOS) Framework and the six core student outcomes, which help local interagency transition teams identify available programming and services, as well as define the roles and responsibilities of schools, community partners, students, and families. DVR's collaboration with Utah State University will be pivotal in integrating the DIF and SOS initiatives, through the creation of web-based resources tailored for youth and their families.



## Project SEARCH

The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a multi-agency collaboration that includes local employers, school districts, community service providers (such as Case Management Agencies), and DVR's Youth Services and Transition program. This distinctive school-to-work initiative operates entirely in the workplace, blending classroom instruction, career exploration, and job skills training. Upon completing the program, students with significant intellectual disabilities are placed in complex, rewarding jobs, achieving a 75% success rate. The program has also influenced business culture, fostering more inclusive attitudes toward hiring individuals with disabilities and expanding the types of jobs they can succeed in. This year, the focus has been on refining the operational framework, dedicating time to revising contracts, creating training modules for all partners (including DVR staff working with Project SEARCH). DVR is exploring new partnership opportunities for Project SEARCH sites and aiming to open additional career pathways for students in Colorado's emerging industries, beyond healthcare and hospitality.

## School to Work Alliance Program

The School to Work Alliance Program (SWAP) is a collaborative partnership between DVR and local school districts or Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES), with support from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and administered by YSTU. SWAP assists young adults in making the transition from school to work, through increased community linkages and new patterns of service leading to successful employment outcomes. In SFY24 there were 39 SWAP contracts covering 68% of Colorado's districts. SWAP served 4,125 youth with disabilities experiencing mild to moderate barriers to employment between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024. Of those youth served, 3,345 received Pre-ETS and 1,683 were placed into individualized plans for employment. These youth improved work skills, explored their career interests, and obtained work experience leading to competitive integrated employment. In SFY24, SWAP contributed to 325 successfully rehabilitated outcomes for DVR.

## Blind and Low Vision Services

The Blind and Low Vision Services (BLVS) unit manages vocational rehabilitation services for individuals who are blind/vision impaired; the Business Enterprise Program authorized by the Randolph-Sheppard Act; the Personal Adjustment Training program; the Independent Living for Older Individuals who are Blind services grant for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; and the Howard Fund.

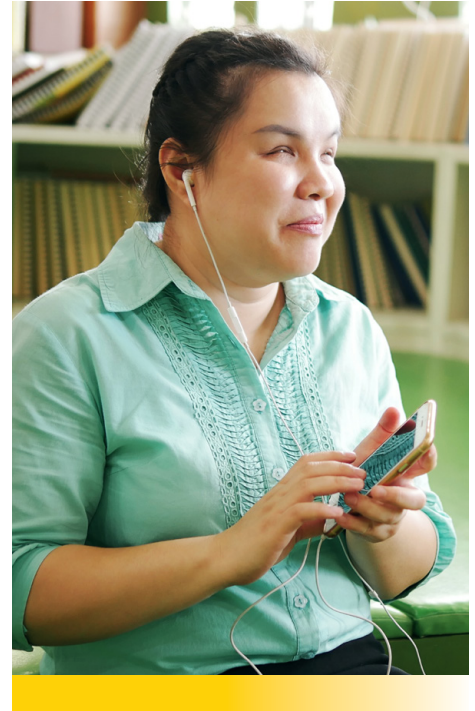
During FFY24, 73 individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind became competitively employed across the state as a result of the services received from DVR. The cumulative average hourly wage at closure was \$22.18.

In an effort to improve services, BLVS is changing their staffing model by adding an Administrative Assistant who will support the Counselors within the BLVS unit. People we serve will now work with the Rehabilitation Technician to complete their application and prepare eligibility documentation. Counselors will focus their efforts towards providing services. The goal is to decrease the time from application to service delivery and improve the quality of service delivery.

## Personal Adjustment Training

After completing a pilot project and seeking feedback from a variety of stakeholders, the PAT Center service delivery model changed to that of a hybrid (in person and remote), intensive workshop model. This model has proven to be successful as evidenced by an increase in the numbers served, customer satisfaction, and employment outcomes.

Over the past year, the assistive technology team has made significant strides in addressing the demand for assistive technology training for the individuals they serve. After struggling to meet training needs, the team successfully secured and filled a new FTE, and is currently working to fill the final position needed to establish a fully staffed team. The computer lab is now fully operational, equipped with both Office 365 and Google Workspace as well as various typing programs, enhancing the resources available for training. With these tools in place, the team plans to expand group class offerings to better prepare individuals for successful job searches and future employment.



PAT staffing remains a challenge. While we have been able to identify multiple qualified candidates to fill our VRT and O&M vacancies, they have not been satisfied with the salary. Other incentives like hybrid work, flexible work location (anywhere in the state), paid intern options, signing bonuses, step pay system and the state benefit package have not been enough to recruit PAT staff. Through these staffing challenges, staff have worked very hard to make sure that those we serve have not been impacted by staffing shortages, and have also supported creative ideas to support training while short-staffed. DVR continues to explore various strategies to address our recruitment challenges.

Further, the team continues to provide virtual group discussions and training, Employment Matters classes (2 ten-week courses per year) to address blind-specific employment issues, and has revamped many of our evaluation and assessment tools to more efficiently and thoroughly capture necessary training and equipment needs for the people we serve. The Colorado Springs team has successfully piloted a service delivery model based on training areas that will be utilized throughout the rest of the unit in the coming year. We were also successful in updating and increasing vendor rates which has directly supported our team's ever-increasing caseload sizes.

Personal Adjustment Training is a specialized training program to assist people who are blind or visually impaired in becoming independent at home, in the community, and in employment. Training is tailored to each individual's unique needs, experiences, and employment goals. Training is either provided in the home and local community or at the Denver Metro training center.

Training may include the following instructional areas: Adaptive Communications, Assistive Technology, Daily Living Skills, Low Vision, and Orientation and Mobility.

## Business Enterprise Program

It is safe to say that the Business Enterprise Program (BEP) has rebounded from the effects of the pandemic. Notably, the Blind Vendors collectively increased gross sales to a record high of \$10,538,731. The BEP cash fund has also continued to grow over this past year, allowing BEP to increase their annual budget.

The State Licensing Agency (SLA) secured a new military contract providing one Blind Vendor a living wage through the increased income. The SLA is working to secure a second military contract through direct negotiation. Should the SLA successfully secure this contract, it will offer one Blind Vendor the prospect of earning a sustainable living wage, while significantly increasing the State Licensing Agency's revenue stream.

The SLA has restructured positions within the program in hopes to recruit and retain qualified staff, and better support the needs of Blind Vendors. Previously BEP was composed of a BEP Manager, Program Assistant, Trainer, and 3 Business Consultants. We have restructured the Business Consultant positions and created a new Project Manager position, revised Business Consultant position, and a new Food Service and Quality Assurance Specialist position. We look forward to assessing the impact of this change in the upcoming year.

The SLA continues to engage in active participation with the CEC and update state administrative rules and policies. This process has been delayed due to time constraints of contractors. We anticipate submitting the new rules and policies to the Rehabilitation Services Administration for review and approval by March 2025. This important work will lay the foundation for Colorado's BEP to become one of the most progressive, innovative and successful programs in the nation.

The Business Enterprise Program (BEP) makes awards through the Randolph-Shepard Act to qualified blind business people for food service operations in these buildings, plus some privately owned facilities. Currently, these facilities consist of large cafeterias, small cafeterias, military dining halls, snack bars, convenience stores, micro-markets, vending machine routes, rest area maintenance, and commercial janitorial services.

## **Independent Living for Older Individuals who are Blind**

The Older Individuals who are Blind (OIB) program has continued to provide quality and caring services to individuals statewide who are age 55 and older, are blind or visually impaired, and whose primary goal is to regain or maintain independence in their own home. DVR just completed the first year of a three-year contract with five subrecipients throughout the state.

The Colorado OIB program also just completed its first year with a new funding structure and procedural manual. The goal is to increase access to Orientation and mobility services, as well as vision rehab therapy. These services are vital to increasing and maintaining independence. We continue to monitor these new systems closely and seek feedback from the subrecipients and the people we serve. In Federal Fiscal Year 2024, the OIB program provided services to over 780 eligible OIB individuals, which is over an 18% increase in individuals served from 2023. Despite facing hurdles, the OIB subrecipients in Colorado continue to provide exceptional services to this underserved population in our state.

In Federal Fiscal Year 2025, the Colorado OIB program will see its first increase in funding (other than cost of living and formula adjustments) in over a decade by allocating Social Security Reimbursement Funds to the OIB program.

## **Howard Fund**

The Howard Fund provides grants to individuals and organizations in Colorado to help them acquire equipment and services directly related to blindness and vision impairment. The board continues to receive applications and awards grants. This past year the board awarded 26 grants in the amount of \$66,038.49. The SFY24 ending budget was \$456,969.95. Awards have included the purchase of

assistive technology, low vision aids, adaptive equipment, and training. The board continues to explore options to sustain the fund.

## Employment First

DVR believes that anyone who wants to work can work, and employment should be the first and preferred option for individuals with disabilities. DVR has continued to focus on developing a variety of strategic partnerships to build the infrastructure necessary to effectively serve individuals with the most significant disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment outcomes. Colorado's Employment First Advisory Partnership (EFAP) has been instrumental in identifying the gaps within systems, services, and training for partners that make up an individual's service team. DVR continues to provide both internal and external Employment First Trainings and Technical Assistance Activities to support understanding and development of best practices to support all Coloradans with their competitive integrated employment goals.

The Supported Employment Unit was able to complete 151 Supported Employment/Employment First training and technical activities during SFY24. During SFY24, DVR increased rates for service provision of both Supported Employment and Customized Employment in efforts to build provider capacity in these areas. This assists with pushing forward Employment First and Competitive Integrated Employment for all Coloradans.

DVR continues to increase service provision for benefits planning/counseling. From SFY23 to SFY24, the number of individuals receiving benefits planning and counseling services grew significantly, increasing by approximately 18.7%. In SFY23, 883 individuals accessed these services, and by SFY24, that number had risen to 1,048, reflecting the growing demand and impact of these vital resources. DVR continues to train and educate staff on the importance of benefits planning/counseling services to ensure that individuals with benefits can make an informed decision surrounding their career goals and benefits.

### Supported Employment Partners & Programs:

In SFY24, our Supported Employment team had the honor of presenting to numerous audiences including:

- National Rehabilitation Association on Inclusive Higher Education
- Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center on SEEKS and Benefits Counseling
- A multistate collaboration on using YesLMS, a learning management system geared towards VR professionals, which allows the sharing of materials
- Innovation Inspiration Expo - UW Stout on Braiding Funding with waiver funds, and Sequencing of Services for youth
- National Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) on Inclusive Higher Education, SEEKS, Subminimum Wage, and a panel focused on different opportunities that currently exist and can potentially be expanded to support individuals with diverse disabilities who want to pursue training opportunities and employment

The team is recognized as leading subject matter experts on Inclusive Higher Education, Braided Funding, ending subminimum wage, and the importance of benefits counseling, and are frequently asked to present on Colorado's successes.

**151**

**service providers  
completed training  
to provide supported  
employment  
services.**



Colorado Department of Healthcare Policy & Financing (HCPF), Office of Community Living (OCL), and Case Management Agencies (CMA)

Community Centered Boards serving persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) are critical partners in DVR's effort to assure the availability of quality vocational rehabilitation services throughout the state. Many strides have been made to more effectively sequence and coordinate services between DVR and the multiple partners involved in the provision of supported employment services. Continued focus on quality services and outcomes for the people seeking supported employment services has been promoted and assisted by DVR's Supported Employment Coordinator/Trainer.

DVR & OCL partner each year providing training and facilitating opportunities for partnership across agencies and community organizations. DVR and OCL completed two virtual roundtables, for Case Management Agencies and local DVR offices to provide information and updates, foster collaboration, and generate discussion for best practices. DVR and OCL have worked closely to navigate the change from Community Center Boards (CCBs) overseeing individuals medicaid waivers to Case Management Agencies (CMA). Over the past year, DVR also continued to partner closely with OCL on the implementation of Senate Bill 18-145, addressing the minimum qualifications of providers of supported employment services. In addition, DVR has assisted in guiding DVR providers on the qualifications and process of performance-based certification. During SFY24, 151 service providers completed the training to meet the minimum qualifications to provide supported employment services.

## **Behavioral Health Administration (BHA)**

BHA and DVR have developed the Mental Health Supported Employment Program that operates under a formalized interagency agreement, providing access to supported employment services to individuals with significant behavioral health disorders. This partnership involves local agreements with fourteen Community Mental Health Centers throughout the state to provide supported employment services, including job development, job seeking skills, job coaching, and ongoing support. The program has resulted in increased competitive integrated employment opportunities for these individuals.

BHA and DVR are members of the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) International Learning Community and provide training and support to providers statewide. IPS is the most researched evidence-based practice in the behavioral health industry, leads to higher competitive integrated employment outcomes, and is cost effective. The IPS practice principles focus on rapid engagement, integrated team approaches, benefits planning, long term support, and competitive integrated outcomes. IPS also focuses on serving youth with mental health disabilities in employment and education.

Through this partnership, DVR & BHA facilitate mentoring and training through the Mental Health Consortium Group and DVR's Supported Employment Steering Committee for Mental Health, in addition to hosting an annual IPS conference. DVR also participates in monthly technical assistance calls as part of the International IPS Learning Community and the Colorado IPS Leadership Team. In partnership with the BHA, DVR's Supported Employment Trainer Coordinator participated in 11 IPS Fidelity reviews.

Continued focus on quality services and outcomes for the people we serve seeking supported employment services has been promoted and assisted by DVR's Supported Employment Coordinator/

Trainer. A large area of focus during SFY24 was to support employment specialists in continuing to adjust to returning to the community since the restrictions for COVID-19 were lifted. IPS is a community based service which yields best results when providers are out in the community.

In SFY24, DVR built on the successes of the previous year, delivering an even greater impact in the lives of those we serve. DVR's IPS reach expanded as we supported 1,015 individuals, a 6.4% increase over the 954 people we assisted in SFY23.

But the true measure of success lies in the outcomes achieved together. This past year, DVR celebrated 154 successful closures, marking an impressive 22.2% growth in positive outcomes. This surge reflects not only the resilience and determination of those we serve but also the unwavering commitment of this team to remove barriers and unlock potential.

IPS supported  
**1,015**  
individuals,  
a 6.4% increase  
from FY23

## Professional Learning and Development Unit

The Professional Learning and Development (PLD) Unit plays a pivotal role in driving organizational development and culture through alignment of professional development strategies with agency vision and priorities. PLD's mission is to build a culture of continuous learning where individuals and teams are empowered and have pathways and tools for success

PLD is accomplishing this through four focus areas that were identified through a year-long process of gathering data, interviewing stakeholders, and analyzing quality assurance reviews. These areas are on process refreshers, current best practices, confident counseling, and transformational leadership.

Additionally PLD designed, developed and implemented a self-paced virtual academy that centered on a practitioner-based approach. Immersive Impact New Counselor Academy served 26 new counselors who successfully graduated and went on to work with their specific caseloads.



## Self-Employment

During SFY24, DVR served 263 individuals in our self-employment program. This is an increase of 5.6% over the 249 individuals served during SFY23. Of these individuals, 77 entrepreneurs achieved a successful outcome and another 21 individuals having achieved their earnings goal and working toward a successful employment outcome. Of the individuals who achieved a successful employment outcome during this reporting period, those individuals were earning an average of \$30.21 per hour. This is an increase in average hourly earnings of 19.91% when compared to state fiscal year 2023. DVR has supported individuals with launching businesses in a variety of markets, including but not limited to: Woodworkers and Carpenters; Lawyers, Mental Health Counselors, Direct Services, Web Developers, Animal Care, and Entertainment. DVR's self-employment program continues to grow and evolve to ensure that it remains a successful and supportive model to assist the individuals that DVR serves.



263

individuals served  
in our DVR  
self-employment  
program

A graduate from the Self Employment program was recently approached by the Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) to make a short film about the impact of DVR's self employment program. The film will be released in December 2024.

Nine to 5 jobs don't work for everyone. DVR's Self-Employment program supports and trains future entrepreneurs whose strengths, skills, priorities, and capabilities are better suited to the flexibility of running their own business. Through business exploration, business plan development, start-up grants, and assistance for existing business owners, DVR is helping to grow the next generation of entrepreneurs.

## Business Relations and Outreach Services

DVR's Business Relations Unit (BRU) utilizes a dual customer approach to connect businesses with qualified individuals with a variety of disabilities. The BRU offers a unique set of services for employers at a local, state, and national level, including: employee recruitment and candidate screening, comprehensive needs analysis, ADA consultation, disability etiquette and awareness training, retention services for existing employees, as well as the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) compliance. DVR's Business Relations Unit is seen as a leader in the business services, the philosophy of Skills-Based Hiring, as well as partnerships with partner organizations such as Workforce Centers and Apprenticeship Colorado.

The BRU provides a robust and innovative offering of disability-related educational content to business and community partners with the purpose of assisting business customers with implementing policies and practices that lead to more supportive, inclusive, and diverse workplaces, as well as to address the #1 barrier to success for individuals with disabilities in the workplace, implicit bias. These educational offerings include disability awareness and etiquette, ableism, reasonable accommodations, strategies for implementing skills-based hiring strategies, the Americans with Disabilities Act, accessibility, and others. This strategy is utilized as an effective service at supporting business partners in implementing the perspectives and practices that in turn provide for more opportunities for successful employment matches for the individuals that DVR serves.

The BRU is active in participating in sector partnerships across the state, and is represented on the Colorado Workforce Development Council's State Technical Assistance Team (STAT) for sector partnerships. The BRU is integrated into local Workforce Center Business Services Teams with the goal of partnering to develop employment opportunities in the community for individuals across

the greater workforce development system. The BRU is actively engaged with Apprenticeship Colorado, Colorado's State Apprenticeship Agency (SAS), toward increasing exposure to, development of, and participation in apprenticeship opportunities for individuals with disabilities across the state. During SFY24, DVR was recognized as a Qualified Apprenticeship Intermediary (QAI) by Apprenticeship Colorado for both Talent and Industry, making DVR one (1) of only eleven (11) organizations to receive this designation for both and the only disability-focused organization to receive the QAI designation. The BRU is represented on the CDLE Business and Career Services Executive Committee and Business Services Leadership Team with the purpose of cross-system integration and partnership of both Workforce and DVR resources at the state and local levels

DVR, in collaboration with our Workforce Partners, has continued the Disability Program Navigator (DPN) initiative with the program continuing to evolve and serve individuals with disabilities across the state. The DPN program is a contracted partnership with Colorado Local Workforce Areas and DVR in order to create a Navigator position in each local workforce area in order to expand services available to people with disabilities by creating a new pattern of service toward increasing program co-enrollment, service and resource braiding; as well as increasing the access and involvement of people with disabilities in Colorado's workforce initiatives. During SFY 2024 the DPN program resulted in Navigators assisting with the co-enrollment of 168 within both Workforce and DVR services. This represents a 48.67% increase in co-enrollments from SFY23. Through this program, 23 individuals achieved a successful employment outcome during SFY24. This brings the total number of individuals who achieved a successful employment outcome within this program since the launch of the program in January 2022 to 78 individuals with disabilities. During SFY25, the program will be expanding statewide with a total of 11 Navigators representing every workforce area across the state.

The BRU is implementing its new strategic priorities, which align with the Governor's priority for expanding skills-based practices. This service delivery model promotes and implements Skills-Based Hiring Practices with Colorado businesses statewide. During SFY24, the BRU maintained its focus on delivering skills-based hiring services statewide by continuing to ensure all unit members received training as a certified trainer for skills-based hiring, including professional development toward enhancing the Unit's working knowledge within the discipline. As a result, during SFY24, the BRU trained 347 business customers on one of the core competencies of Skills-Based Hiring, surpassing the established annual goal of 190 businesses trained. For SFY25, the BRU has set a goal of training 360 business customers on the Skills-Based Hiring practices statewide.



The BRU trained  
**347 business customers**  
on the Skills-Based  
Hiring practices



BRU served  
**6,258**  
targeted  
businesses

BRU provided  
**847**  
unique  
retention  
services in  
order to ensure  
individuals  
with disabilities  
remained in the  
workforce

BRU assisted  
on a total of  
**790**  
employment  
opportunities  
for individuals  
served by DVR

The BRU is focused on providing direct business services support to State Government entities through their State As a Model Employer (SAME) Development Specialist position. The SAME Development Specialist position has been focused on engaging State Departments to learn about their workplace culture, current recruitment and retention strategies, as well as professional development opportunities to develop individualized collaboration goals for each Department, with the goal of recruiting and retaining more individuals with disabilities into state government careers. This includes collaborating on, and when appropriate, sharing best practice strategies learned through CDLE's current Disability Hiring Preference Pilot. During this fiscal year, the SAME Development Specialist work has provided services to Departments such as the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE), Department of Corrections (DOC), Office of the Governor, Department of Personnel Administration (DPA), Department of Revenue (DOR), Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS), Department of Natural Resources (DNR), Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), Colorado Department of Public Safety (CDPS), Department of Regulatory Agencies (DORA), Community College System, Department of Agriculture (DOA), and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE).

During SFY24, the BRU served 6,258 targeted businesses, surpassing the goal of 4,096 businesses served during this time. In addition, the BRU assisted on a total of 790 employment opportunities for individuals served by DVR. Of these employment opportunities, only 26 (3.29%) ended prior to case closure and only 14 (1.77%) of those cases resulted in the individual's case being closed unsuccessfully. This speaks to the power of an effective business services strategy in supporting the individuals served by DVR in achieving successful employment outcomes. The BRU also provided 947 unique training offerings at no cost to these employers, often helping businesses to meet mandatory diversity requirements. The BRU provided 847 unique retention services in order to ensure individuals with disabilities remained within the workforce. BRU assisted 24 individuals in obtaining employment through the State of Colorado, proving the State as a Model Employer is effective. In addition, the BRU is broadening the reach of Colorado DVR by engaging with partner organizations for the purpose of assisting the people we serve with exploring, obtaining, retaining, and advancing in employment. These organizations include, but are not limited to, the School to Work Alliance Program, local community mental health employment specialists, local Workforce Centers, Department of Corrections, sector initiatives, Community Centered Boards, Independent Living Centers, school districts, Economic Development, Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) members, county commissioners, chambers of commerce, and more.

Recently, a Business Outreach Specialist with the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) was honored at a Red Carpet Ceremony and Ribbon Cutting for the Northern Colorado DVR office, hosted by

the Fort Collins Chamber of Commerce. Recognized for efforts in fostering inclusive workplaces and championing opportunities for individuals with disabilities, DVR's commitment to advocacy leaves an indelible mark on the community. The event celebrated DVR's remarkable contributions to building a more inclusive future.

## Office of Independent Living Services

The primary role of DVR's Office of Independent Living Services (Office) is to execute and oversee contracts with all nine of Colorado's certified Centers for Independent Living (CILs). These contracts provide state and federal funding to CILs in order for them to provide independent living services to Coloradans of any age, who self-identify as having any disability, living in any of Colorado's 64 counties. CILs are unique in that they must operate in adherence to "independent living philosophy" as it is outlined in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. The Office verifies that CILs adhere to this philosophy through a thorough review and certification process, where the Office validates (among many other things) that over 50% of CIL staff and CIL board members are, themselves, people with disabilities. This requirement is the cornerstone of independent living philosophy and ensures that consumers (service recipients) are being served by people with similar lived-experience. Consumers are empowered to make informed decisions about which independent living services can help them achieve their own self-identified goals. These goals, called independent living goals, vary greatly by individual, but all lend themselves to aiding people with disabilities to live as independently as possible in the community of their choosing.

The top five goals over the last three years have remained constant: Community Based Living; Personal Resource Management; Education/Vocation; Self Advocacy/Empowerment; and, Self Care. In SFY 2024, Colorado's CIL network served an average of 2,159 consumers per month. The CILs provide five core services: Information and Referral; Independent Living Services Training; Individual and Systems Advocacy; Peer Support; and, transition services.

### The Office works to:

- Increase the visibility and understanding of the independent living services
- Develop partnerships between federal and state agencies, advisory councils, community-based service networks, and CILs
- Partner with the CILs to build service capacity and ensure contract compliance with federal and state fiscal requirements
- Serve as the fiscal sponsor for the governor-appointed Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC), whose role is to develop and monitor Colorado's federally required State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL)
- Administer two federally funded five-year research studies called:
  - ▶ Securing Employment and Economic Keys to Stability (SEEKS), funded by National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR)
  - ▶ Interagency Cooperative Action Network (ICAN), funded by SSA



During SFY 2024, the Office hosted four meetings with Colorado’s Administration for Community Living (ACL) partners. These partners include SILC, CILs, the Developmental Disabilities Council, Disability Law Colorado, JFK Partners, Assistive Technology Partners, MindSource, Projects of National Significance, State Unit on Aging, and the ACL Region Administrator.

## **Securing Employment and Economic Keys to Stability (SEEKS)**

SEEKS is a federally funded research project managed by the Office of Independent Living Services. This project is testing an intervention to increase gross income, employment and social participation of people with disabilities. As the project merges from year 4 to year 5, the SEEKS team is happy to inform that SEEKS reached its enrollment goal on April 30, 2023, with 190 participants enrolled and a 77% take-up rate.

Our team and stakeholder groups are committed to advancing an accurate message to promote informed choice about expectations around disability benefits and work. The next phase of the project is to continue to serve participants and to collect data. We are excited to share more accomplishments and many lessons learned soon. The SEEKS intervention is testing a three-pronged service-based intervention. Enrollees in the study are people with disabilities aged 18-60 who are applying for SSA disability benefits while concurrently working/seeking employment with a trained employment specialist and benefits counseling advocates.

SEEKS’ participants are surveyed every six months to determine the effect the intervention has had on their:

- Employment and education outcomes,
- Monthly income, and
- Feelings of social isolation.

SEEKS uses a Stakeholder Advisory Team to inform research and implementation activities. Members include individuals with lived experience with disability and representatives from federal and state agencies. Some activities and accomplishments related to the overall progress in implementing the SEEKS project during FY 2023 are highlighted below:

- Individuals from Black, Native American, and Hispanic communities are represented in the SEEKS project at the same or higher rate than they are in the general Colorado population.
- Developed products to be disseminated: a training program with fact sheets that addresses state and local benefit programs and compilation of facts about the advantages of having people with disabilities in the workforce.
- Project complies with Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board (COMIRB) requirements.
- Presented nationally at the national APSE (Association of People Supporting Employment First) conference in June 2023. SEEKS shared insights gained

from the project on unconscious bias in employment services and offered strategies to combat it.

- The Office created videos of SEEKS participants sharing their experiences with bias as they've re-entered the workforce.

## Interagency Cooperative Action Network (ICAN)

ICAN is a federally funded research project managed by the Office of Independent Living Services. This project is testing an intervention that promotes self-sufficiency by helping people enter, stay in, and return to the labor market. This study aims to serve members of BIPOC communities in applying for or appealing SSI/SSDI applications and the goal is to increase their economic resources by getting SSI/SSDI, employment, benefits planning, and ABLE accounts - an intervention built off of what the team learned through the SEEKS project.

The ICAN project has a particular emphasis on Cultural and Linguistic Competence and in Year 1 of the project an agreement with a Cultural and Linguistic Competency Training was executed. In Year 1 of the project, this trainer has trained the ICAN administrative team and members of the Planning and Advisory Team on the CLAS Standards 1 through 15. The trainer and administrative team are currently working to put together an impact statement for the project and a strategic plan for doing outreach to BIPOC communities in Colorado.

## National Expansion of Employment Opportunities (NEON)

In November 2023, the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) selected Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) as one of the CORE States for the NEON (National Expansion of Employment Opportunities Network) initiative. During this period of implementation, Colorado DVR was awarded up to 300 hours of technical assistance in removing a barrier to employment, to be used by August 31, 2024. ODEP's interest is to increase competitive integrated employment (CIE) opportunities for people with disabilities, including those with significant disabilities, and provide support to agencies and organizations attempting to support and advance CIE efforts.



Colorado DVR collaborated with over twenty stakeholders, including state agencies (Department of Labor and Employment, Department of Health Care Policy and Financing, Department of Human Services, Office of the Lieutenant Governor), service providers, including family led organizations, Colorado APSE, Employment First Advisory Partnership, Office of Employment First, people with disabilities and businesses to secure this award. Together, we identified that benefits planning is tantamount to informed choice regarding employment and when armed with facts, more Coloradans with disabilities will choose competitive integrated work. We believe that engaging people with disabilities and families in benefits planning services will remove fears about losing health insurance and necessary support services, thereby removing the barriers about entering and staying employed. Our aim through this project is to focus on increasing benefits planning awareness to include how people with disabilities access the Benefits Planning services they need to increase economic independence, and be fully employed.

**Building the life you want. Keeping the Benefits you need.** This report highlights the three outcomes we set to achieve with the technical assistance provided by subject matter experts funded through ODEP. As we continue this work, a primary focus is ensuring that the Benefits Planning message is shared with all communities to include marginalized, underserved, and non-English speaking communities.

## Colorado SILC

The Colorado SILC is a federally mandated, Governor-appointed, 15-member council whose primary objective is to write, implement, and monitor a State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL). During the reporting year, the SILC implemented a new SPIL that covers the time period of FFY2025 through FFY2027. Keeping in line with independent living philosophy, over 50% of the members of the council are individuals with lived experience as a person with a disability. The SILC's membership represents diverse disability types, cultural groups, and geographical regions of Colorado. Through the work they do developing and implementing the SPIL, the SILC aims to advance independent living in Colorado.

**The goals set forth in the currently approved SPIL are as follows:**

1. The Colorado IL Network will promote and advocate for the integration, inclusion and equity of all Coloradans with disabilities across communities, lifespan and cultures
2. The IL Network will promote the voice of individuals with disabilities in improving the affordability, attainability and access to integrated housing in their respective community
3. The Colorado IL Network will support Coloradans with disabilities across communities, lifespan and cultures to explore options and make informed choices about benefits planning.

One of the highlights this year was planning and organizing for the Colorado Youth Leadership Forum which took place in July 2024. The CO-YLF is an innovative, four-day conference for Colorado high school juniors, seniors, and young adults under 26 with disabilities, aimed at preparing attendees for their transition into adulthood. Students serve as delegates from their communities and are given the opportunity to cultivate their potential leadership, citizenship, and social skills.



# 4

## Celebrating Success



**COLORADO**

**Division of Vocational  
Rehabilitation**

Department of Labor and Employment

# Celebrating Success

## John Wilson

### We won.MOV

John Wilson's journey with DVR began in high school, where his counselor helped him explore exciting career pathways and secure the accommodations he needed to thrive academically. After graduation, DVR supported John's dreams of higher education, offering guidance and financial resources to help him find the perfect school. Today, John is breaking barriers as a student-athlete, attending college on a rugby scholarship, supplemented by DVR's support for tuition, room and board, and next, job placement. John is currently in his second year of his Bachelor of Sciences degree in Health Sciences, specializing in Sports Medicine/Physical Therapy, from St. Mary's College of California. He made history as the first Deaf student at St. Mary's University to win a Rugby Championship.



## Jason Kuster

Jason has been a DVR participant for over seven years. Starting with Pre-Employment Transition services in high school, followed by Inclusive Education training, and now as a recent graduate seeking permanent employment, Jason's story is a powerful example of how both Pre-ETS and traditional VR services work together to promote success for youth with disabilities.

In 2020, Jason was diagnosed with Ewing Sarcoma, a rare form of cancer affecting just 3 out of every 1 million people. He took a year off from school to undergo intense chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation. In the fall of 2021, despite ongoing treatment, Jason returned to college, balancing classes with part-time work in the dining hall.

In February 2022, when his cancer returned, Jason continued his education remotely when treatment prevented him from attending in person. His professors and employer were supportive, working with his treatment schedule to help him stay on track.

Jason completed his Inclusive Education program in May 2024 and earned Student Employee of the Year for the second time. Throughout his college years, despite everything he endured, Jason worked on campus all four years and finished his program in just eight semesters.

Now back in Northeast Colorado, Jason is preparing for his driver's test and taking on a few summer jobs. He has also reconnected with the job placement provider he worked with five years ago, this time aiming for a permanent, full-time position.

## Jordan Roger

When a DVR counselor was invited to Jordan's Individualized Education Plan meeting, she was met by only his mother and grandmother—no Jordan.

Later, Jordan and his mom came to the office for their first meeting, Jordan barely spoke, offering just a few words and making little eye contact. However, during the IEP meeting, it had been discovered that his middle school teacher, who he had worked closely with, was in the process of signing up as a vendor to provide Employment services. Jordan was able to connect with his previous teacher and begin pre-employment transition services, like exploring a paid internship and completing work adjustment training.



Through their work together, Jordan returned to a local Youth Gardeners program, an organization he had worked with during his transition program. This step marked a turning point in the process, and from there, Jordan's journey with his Employment Specialist began to truly take off. Jordan has had the opportunity to try different career pathways and find out what works best for him. He recently sold his hand made dragons at the Youth Gardener's Farmer's Market booth, making nearly \$200, which has built his confidence to new levels, and led him to consider exploring self-employment while he gains more work experience.

## Lisa Fouts

Lisa's DVR journey highlights a transformative partnership. Referred to DVR while seeking clarity about SSDI benefits, Lisa was struggling to re-enter the workforce. However, from the moment she connected with the DVR team, her life began to change.

Working closely with DVR staff, Lisa secured two successful job opportunities. Her first job, though exciting, became challenging due to ongoing medical issues. Undeterred, Lisa reached out to the program again and was met with unwavering encouragement. She gained confidence in her abilities and the tools necessary to find a part-time position that suited her needs.

Within just three days of meeting with DVR, Lisa found a job that aligned with her disabilities and allowed her to maintain her SSDI benefits. The company's flexibility has enabled her to work within her limitations, offering a sustainable path forward. Lisa was also able to better understand her benefits through Benefits Counseling.

Lisa's experience underscores the immense impact of the team's dedication and teamwork. She credits their efforts with helping her avoid a potentially dire situation and empowering her to regain stability and hope. Lisa is deeply grateful for the life-changing support she received and attributes her success to the program's commitment to helping individuals with disabilities thrive in the workforce.

Lisa's  
DVR journey  
highlights  
a transformative  
partnership





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