

2023 Annual Report - State Rehabilitation Council

Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS)

Mission Statement:

Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services promotes opportunities for Montanans with disabilities to have rewarding careers and achieve maximum personal potential.

State Rehabilitation Council Mission Statement:

The State Rehabilitation Council advises Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services to improve policies, programs, and delivery of services through a collaborative effort with other agencies.

Chairperson's Statement

As the Chair of the Montana State Rehab Council (SRC), I am pleased to submit our annual report summarizing the notable achievements and activities of our council over the past year. We are honored to continue our commitment to enhancing the lives of Montanans with disabilities through our work.

In the year 2023, the Montana State Rehab Council accomplished several significant milestones and initiatives that we believe will have a lasting impact on the individuals we serve and the broader community. Allow me to provide you with an overview of our key highlights from the past year:

One of the most significant achievements of the SRC in 2023 was the endorsement of the official opening of Category 3 on January 19th.

The SRC invested in enhancing our governance capabilities by completing Robert's Rules training under the guidance of Jim

Nuys. Additionally, we participated in online training for Robert's Rules through the State of Montana portal, ensuring more effective and informed decision-making within the council.

In May, the SRC engaged in a joint meeting with the State Independent Living Council (SILC) in Helena. Following this meeting, several SRC members have actively participated in the SILC's Olmstead Committee, strengthening our commitment to inclusive practices and promoting the independence of individuals with disabilities.

The SRC diligently worked on finalizing and voting on changes to our council's manual, ensuring that our governing documents remain up-to-date and reflective of best practices.

We are pleased to report that we successfully recruited four new members to the SRC in 2023, including Gabrielle Broere, Joleen Weatherwax, Barb Lowney, and Tommy Roberts, who bring diverse perspectives and valuable expertise to our council.

We carefully reviewed 46 case stories and selected four compelling stories for inclusion in this report (see pages 4 & 5), highlighting the positive impact of the VRBS programs on the lives of Montanans with disabilities.

Our SRC Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment committee have begun working with VRBS staff on the Request for Proposal process for outsourcing the management of the consumer satisfaction survey, ensuring a robust and impartial assessment.

We received an in-depth overview of Pre-Employment Transitions Services, including federally reported data, to better understand and improve these critical services for transition-aged youth with disabilities.

The SRC actively participated in the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment data collection process through interviews and focus groups, contributing valuable insights to inform the state's disability services landscape.

In August, during our SRC meeting, we fostered a partnership with Job Corps to support economic development opportunities for individuals with disabilities in our state.

The SRC remained dedicated to supporting and encouraging 2023 Core Partner trainings conducted across the state, emphasizing collaboration among VRBS, Job Service, and Adult Education agencies.

In conclusion, the Montana State Rehab Council is proud of the progress we have made in the past year. These accomplishments reflect our commitment to advancing the lives and opportunities of Montanans with disabilities and ensuring that our state continues to be a place of inclusivity, equality, and empowerment.

We remain steadfast in our dedication to our mission, and we look forward to building on these achievements in the coming year.

Sincerely,

Lacey Keller

Montana's State Rehabilitation Council

Disability Employment and Transitions Division Data

4071 Individuals served by VRBS

2212 Individuals served by Pre-Employment Transition Services

293 Individuals Served by Extended Employment

3077 Individuals served by Independent Living

373 Individuals served by Older Individuals who are Blind program

349 Individuals successfully placed in jobs by VRBS

VRBS Success Stories

Vocational Rehabilitation Services Success Story

Disability Type: Specific Learning Disabilities in reading and math

Community Partners Involved: Libby High, Pioneer Automotive, & MSU-Northern

Employment Goal Achieved: Mechanic

Services Provided: Pre-ETS, work-based learning experience, Job Search Assistance, Short Term Job Supports, 4-year College Training, Information and Referral, & Vocational Counseling and Guidance.

Ethan and his vocational rehabilitation counselor (VRC) met while he was a junior in high school under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for significant difficulties in reading, writing, and math, with many scores at the grade school level. He wanted to be a mechanic, with coordination of his IEP team he took welding and

automotive classes. With the support of VR, Ethan felt he could even take a shot at college. His summers after his junior and senior year, VR set up work experiences with an automotive repair shop as a trainee. Ethan quickly grasped more advanced concepts in auto-repair. The experience would prove to be extremely valuable for his future. After high school graduation, Ethan married his Highschool sweetheart and enrolled in college. VRC and Ethan worked closely with MSU-Northern to ensure he was set up for the best possible success by networking Ethan with all the supports through disability services, tutors and family housing for him and his wife. VR helped cover the cost of transportation and U-Haul for his move. Completing the general education courses was no easy task for Ethan, however he was determined and utilized supports to succeed. After attaining his associates, Ethan was concerned that he was not able to complete a bachelors due to advanced coursework. Through discussion with VRC, Ethan felt motivated to try. While finishing up his last year, Ethan landed a job with Department of Transportation (DOT). His employer reported he was "one of the best mechanics they have ever had." Ethan graduated with a bachelor's degree and moved to Columbia Falls to continue his career as a Diesel Mechanic. An optimistic 16-year-old kid with significant barriers, but with the support of VR and his unparalleled motivation, he went on to graduate a bachelor program in one of the best diesel programs in the country, catapulting him into a high-quality career. Ethan for the W-I-N!

High School Transition Success Story

Disability Type: Autism

Community Partners Involved: Montana Youth Transitions, Montana Youth Leadership Forum, Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation, Bainville High, Rural Electric of Montana

Services Provided: Vocational Counseling and Guidance, Information and Referral, Job Exploration Counseling, Work-Based Learning Experience, Instruction in Self-Advocacy, and Counseling on Post-Secondary Options

Drae participated in all five of the Pre-ETS through his high school Pre-ETS contract (Bainville) from fall of 2021 to present. He applied for VR Services through the Havre Office in April of 2022. Since then, he has worked with his Pre-ETS Specialist Rebekah to finalize his IPE. There were several meetings to determine a job goal for Drae, as he was unsure of his goals and allowed his mother to do a majority of the talking in meetings. As time progressed and meetings became more frequent, Drae started talking for himself: sharing his goals and hopes for the future. He also took over with scheduling his appointments. We utilized several resources to determine his exploratory job goal: virtual job shadow, community and church members, in-laws, and even looking at the various jobs that people in the community and abroad were doing. Drae learned of several careers on his trip to Washington, DC for the youth leadership tour that he received through a scholarship from Rural Electric.

Drae attended MYLF in the summer of 2022. During this time, Drae spoke on the floor of the senate and made several friends.

He is continuing into MYLF II. Drae also maintained multiple summer jobs and remained organized with meeting his work deadlines. Drae was then nominated and chose to attend the CSVAR conference in Texas in October. He presented and shared his story about his experiences with Pre-ETS, MYLF, and overcoming obstacles. He received a standing ovation. Drae has now shared that he is interested in counseling and mental health as a possible job goal. He has made great strides in his self-advocacy, decision making, and is working towards gaining more independence. Drae will be graduating in May of 2023 and is anticipating continuing his education thereafter.

Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation Success Story

Disability Type: Spinal Cord Injury resulting in Quadriplegia

Community Partners Involved: UM, Excelsior Consulting, MonTECH, Work Incentive Planning, Deb Conwell, Office of Disability Equity, & TRIO

Employment Goal Achieved: Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor

Services Provided: Vocational Counseling and Guidance, Information and Referral, Benefits Counseling, 4-year College Training, Graduate Training, Rehabilitation Technology, & Job Search Assistance

Mitchell applied for VR services in 2011, requesting assistance with finding employment and completing his college degree. Mitchell grew up on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, and sustained a spinal cord injury in a car accident when he was 15 years old, which left him almost completely paralyzed from the

neck down. He was enrolled at UM when he started working with VR and aspired to being a journalist. After taking some psychology classes, he realized his true passion was for helping others, and decided to become a counselor instead.

While in college, Mitchell worked closely with his Ve of Disability Equity, TRIO Support Services and MonTECH (for assistive technology needs). Mitchell also worked with Excelsior Consulting to search for employment.

Despite multiple setbacks, Mitchell graduated from the UM with bachelor's degrees in psychology and forensic anthropology in 2016 and applied for the graduate counselor education program at UM in 2018. Mitchell graduated with his Master of Arts in Counselor Education in December of 2021 and was hired by All Nations Health Center as a counselor after completing an internship with them. As of December 2022, he is working full-time at All Nations as a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor. In addition to being a counselor, Mitchell is an amazing artist, creating art that celebrates his cultural heritage as well as breathtaking Montana landscapes and has been featured in more than one newspaper article for his artistic endeavors.

Mitchell persevered every step of the way, throughout his journey, not letting anything stop him from achieving his goal. He is a talented, hardworking individual, and a true inspiration.

Blind Low Vision Success Story

Disability Type: Visually Impaired, Hearing Impaired, Reactive Attachment Disorder, facial deformity

Community Partners Involved: Montana School for the Deaf and Blind (MSDB), UM, UM Disability Support Services, Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP)-REC MT, Employer, Extended Employment Program, and Family

Employment Goal Achieved: Occupational Therapy Aid

Services Provided: Guidance & Counseling, Pre-ETS, Benefits Counseling, Information & Referral, On-the-Job Training, Supported Employment, O&M, Rehab Technology, College, Transportation, Extended Services

Patricia, a young woman with multiple disabilities including vision loss, began working with BLV early into her high school career while attending MSDB. Initially, she received Pre-ETS services, including instruction on self-advocacy, work-based learning experiences, and career exploration. Patricia eventually graduated high school and transitioned to UM to pursue an associate degree. While at UM, BLV collaborated with the disability support services and CRP-REC MT, to support her in the classroom as well as her campus employment. During this time, BLV also provided assistive technology and orientation and mobility training on campus and at work to ensure she could get around safely and access public transportation. It took Patricia extended time to complete the AA degree and upon completion, Patricia began pursuing employment. BLV provided job placement services including On-the-Job Training (OJT) at an Occupational Therapy (OT) business with assistance and supports from REC MT. The OJT was very

successful, REC MT was phenomenal in meeting all Patricia's support needs as well as the employer's, and Patricia was offered permanent employment as an OT Aid. Throughout the case, BLV collaborated extensively with REC MT, UM, the employer, and Patricia's family, and also directly provided vocational guidance and counseling, information and referral, and benefits counseling. Upon exit from VR, Patricia transitioned to the Extended Employment (EE) program for ongoing employment supports. Patricia has maintained her employment as an OT Aid for over a year. She is valued as an employee by her employer and has been called upon her to provide in-service training to the staff regarding vision loss, disability etiquette, and other disability awareness.

Statistics from the Montana Department of Labor and Industry

The Montana Department of Labor & Industry has provided a brief summary of Montana's population with disabilities as it relates to the workforce, including labor force participation, employment, and earnings. Data is from the American Community Survey 2022 1-year estimates. This memo focuses on the population aged 18-64 due to data availability.

In 2022, there were 78,576 Montanans with disabilities aged 18-64. Of this population, 40,705 were employed, 2,913 were unemployed, and 34,958 were not in the labor force. Labor force participation rates are significantly lower among Montanans with disabilities than Montanans without disabilities (figure 1). About 56% of Montanans with disabilities participate in the labor force, compared with 84% of Montanans without disabilities. Montana's

labor force participation rate for people with disabilities is higher than the U.S. average of 49%.

The unemployment rate for Montanans with disabilities at 6.7%. This rate is over double the rate for Montanans without disabilities, at 2.6%. Montana's unemployment rate for people with disabilities is lower than the U.S. average of 9.3%.

Montanans with disabilities are less likely to work full-time year-round than Montanans without disabilities, at 49% compared with 69% respectively. Fewer hours worked explains some of the difference in income levels between the two groups. Median earnings for people with a disability was \$22,376. Median earnings for people without a disability was \$39,248 (figure 2).[1]

In 2022, nearly 25% of Montanans with disabilities (19,180 people) had income in the past 12 months that was at or below the poverty level, compared to 9.8% for Montanans without disabilities. This represents over double the rate of poverty for Montanans with disabilities. As such, the population with disabilities makes up about 26% of the population at or below poverty levels, despite representing 12% of the population 18 to 64.

What is Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE)?

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) is defined as work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is:

Compensated at or above minimum wage and comparable to the customary rate paid by the employer to employees without

disabilities performing similar duties and with similar training and experience;

Receiving the same level of benefits provided to other employees without disabilities in similar positions;

At a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities; and

Presented with opportunities for advancement similar to other employees without disabilities in similar positions.

SRC Recommendations to VRBS

Maintain VRBS Technician positions within the program to assist with expediting the VRBS process from application to plan.

Develop advancement opportunities for VRBS Technicians to VRBS Counselor positions through mentorship, state agency support and private partnership opportunities.

Maximize VRBS Counselor retention by monitoring caseloads, paying attention to feedback, creating a flexible policy model, promote communication and collaboration and monitor job satisfaction ratings and employee engagement.

Improve communication between VRBS staff, client, parents, case manager, instructors and other key players when case transfers occur to ensure client's engagement in the program is maintained.

Increase recruitment of qualified candidates to fill vacancies throughout the agency by establishing a recruitment strategy to help identify, hire and retain employees and expand talent networks.

Increase referral and transition services among WIOA partners and other community programs to improve client services and program performance outcomes.

Improve focus on community partnerships to ensure that the diverse needs of the individual clients are met through wraparound coordinated services.

Consistently provide region/area specific resources to clients throughout all phases of the program from intake through exit.

Monitor Community Rehabilitation Providers' activities with VRBS clients and provide needed tools to increase the number of client successful closures annually.