

2021 MONTANA'S STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

GOVERNOR'S REPORT

- 2124 Individuals served by Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS)
- 2950 Individuals served by Independent Living Services
- 304 Individuals served by Older Blind Services
- 256 Individuals served by Extended Employment Services
- 1036 Individuals served by Pre-Employment Transitions Services

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION & BLIND SERVICES (VRBS) SUCCESSFUL JOB PLACEMENTS

- 2021: 145
- 2020: 162
- 2019: 213

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For more information on VRBS, please visit our website:

www.vocrehab.mt.gov.

STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

Members: Eliza Kragh, Kathy Hampton, Scott Eychner, John Gorton & Renea Keough, Tom Manthey, Marcy Roberts, Brian Tocher, Jean Schroder, Emma Rooney, Denise May, Chanda Hermanson, and Barbara Davis

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

MESSAGE FROM THE STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

It has been an honor to serve as the Chair of Montana's State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) for 2021 helping to uphold the SRC mission to advise the Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS) program, improve policies, programs and delivery of services through a collaborative effort with other agencies.

This report will highlight the accomplishments of the SRC including:

- Actively recruiting 3 new members to serve on the Council including, a Parent Training and Information Center staff, an Education Professional and a Disability Advocate
- Reviewing and analyzing 7 new Procedures of the VRBS program
- Using a virtual platform to meet quorum requirements and progress in our work during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Meeting collaboratively with the State Independent Living (IL) Council
- Facilitating a Town Hall meeting with the State Independent Living Council chair for the purposes of soliciting community input on the VRBS and IL programs

- Partnering with Local Economic Development Corporations (LEDC) in Anaconda and Butte and engaging in employer presentations and small business collaboration
- Utilizing LEDCs to obtain knowledge regarding current and future growth, collaborate and brainstorm ideas regarding worker shortages and share information about VRBS client workforce
- Revising and updating the SRC member manual and creating a user-friendly online version for inclusion on the Department of Public Health and Human Services website
- Creating a case story submission form and scoring rubric to implement guidelines and clarify expectations for submitting, reviewing, and selecting the Case of the Year and stories to be included in the Governor's Report
- Reviewing and scoring 41 case story submissions and selecting 4 to be included in the Governor's report.
- Completing 1 of 7 modules for VR 101 and planning to complete the remaining modules in future quarterly meetings

On behalf of the SRC, we are pleased to provide you with success stories of VRBS consumers in 4 categories including: Tribal Vocational Rehabilitation, Pre-Employment Transitions Services, Blind and Low Vision Services and General Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

In addition to the aforementioned accomplishments, the SRC worked closely with VRBS leadership in 2021 regarding the waiting list for services. The SRC and VRBS are pleased to announce that Category 1, serving those with most significant disabilities, is open and will remain open to individuals with most significant disabilities.

VRBS and IL continue to serve thousands of Montanans with disabilities, providing support necessary to assist individuals in preparing for, gaining, and maintaining employment. With the ongoing dedication of the VRBS staff, providers, local businesses, and collaborative efforts with community partners, VRBS continues to meet and exceed expectations. The year 2021

brought challenges like we have never seen before, yet we expedited new ways to do business, served individuals where they are while recognizing the need for flexibility in our day-to-day work and in our communities. We did it!

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION BLIND SERVICES (VRBS) SUCCESS STORY



Figure 1 Photo of a man sitting on a horse

Disability Type: CNS Vasculitis

Community Partners Involved: University of Montana (UM), UM Office of Disability Equity, MonTECH, Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) Project

Employment Goal Achieved: High School Teacher

Services Provided: Vocational counseling and guidance, social security benefits counseling, graduate school training, speech to text software and textbooks, teaching certification

Length of time in Program: 5.5 years

Heath came to VRBS in 2014 after receiving a diagnosis of Central Nervous System Vasculitis that affected his speech,

memory, and dexterity. Heath had been told by his doctors and that he could no longer work and was distraught with this prognosis. Although he didn't know what he was able to do with his newly acquired disability, he told his VR counselor "I can't imagine not working." His counselor encouraged him to set goals, continue treatment, and coordinated with his doctor to take his vocational rehabilitation one step at a time. Heath completed a vocational evaluation and became determined to return to the workforce as a high school teacher. He stated, "I must have goals and structure, and sitting around is not an option any longer." He met with UM Office of Disability Equity to secure needed accommodations while completing training. He met with MonTECH to explore technology options, including speech-to-text software. Heath started slowly as he continued to work through medical treatment, fatigue, cognitive rehabilitation, and his ability to write and type. In 2019, Heath earned a Master's degree in education and passed his licensure exams. With the assistance of a benefits counselor, he created a plan to work his way off Social Security benefits. Heath gained employment as a high school teacher where he teaches a broad range of classes in business and social studies. His work as a teacher allows him and his wife the opportunity to run a summer business as backcountry guides. After years of uncertainty, Heath is back to work and back on his horse.

BLIND AND LOW VISION SERVICES (BLVS) SUCCESS STORY



Figure 2 photo of a man wearing a hard hat sitting on rocks

Disability Type: Night Blindness

Community Partners Involved: U of M-Western

Employment Goal Achieved: Wildland Firefighter

Services Provided: Vocational counseling & guidance, college Training, in-house job search assistance

Length of time in Program: 5.5 years

Lucas started with BLVS in his senior year of high school. When his VR counselor first met Lucas, he had only one goal in mind-to join the military. He had talked to a recruiter who told him he would not pass the military vision test. Over the next year, Lucas thought about what he was missing out on, the military career he dreamed of, and any other vocations he had considered that also required eye exams.

Lucas started his freshman year at U of M-Western and as time went by, he began to consider other goals and was able to let go of his military dream. He decided to get his degree in psychology with an Associate's in forestry. He graduated with his degree and

worked together with his VR counselor to find jobs in his field. Lucas eventually accepted a job as detention officer with his local sheriff's office.

After six months in the detention center, Lucas decided it wasn't the career for him. He went on to become a volunteer firefighter, which gave him the training and experience to begin a career with the USDA Forest Service as a wildland firefighter. Lucas says "I now love my job and couldn't imagine doing anything else."

HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION SUCCESS STORY



Figure 3 photo of a young female student standing in a hallway

Disability Type: Learning Disability and Anxiety Disorder

Community Partners Involved: Family Outreach, Helena High School

Employment Goal Achieved: Burger King Crew Member

Services Provided: Work-Based Learning Experiences, Classes on Workplace Readiness

Crystal was entering her senior year of high school when she began Pre Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS). She had prior employment experience before starting Pre-ETS, but had lost those three jobs due to her impulsivity and inappropriate social skills on-the-job. She needed training in appropriate workplace behaviors and communication skills.

Crystal enrolled in a summer Pre-ETS class offered by Family Outreach. The focus of the class for her was to work on proper communication skills with her supervisors and co-workers. These areas caused her trouble and she was fired from previous employment. She participated in roleplaying with her trainers to practice proper phrases to use when asking for things, expressing her needs, and most importantly when expressing her frustrations regarding work tasks.

After a couple of weeks of class, her Pre-ETS Specialist enrolled her in a Work Based Learning Experience at Taco Bell. This work site was chosen because the onsite trainer had a good relationship with the manager and was able to really identify what communication skills and behaviors were causing Crystal problems at a work site. Once these areas of need were identified, the onsite trainer focused on building these skills so Crystal would be more successful, and she was ultimately offered a part-time position at Taco Bell.

Crystal maintained her employment at Taco Bell for just under 1 year until the store she was working for began renovations and reduced their store hours. Crystal decided she wanted more consistent work hours, so she put in her resignation with Taco Bell and gained employment at Burger King where she has been working for the last 5 months. She also recently began taking classes at Helena College pursuing her ultimate career goal of Elementary Educator.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION/TRIBAL VR SUCCESS STORY



Figure 4 photo of two hands working on an engine

Disability Type: Learning Disabilities

Community Partners Involved: MSU Northern (MSU-N), MSU-N Disability Student Services

Employment Goal Achieved: Diesel Mechanic

Services Provided: Vocational Counseling and Guidance, College Training, Textbooks and Mechanic Tools

Robert is a tribal member of the Salish Kootenai Tribe, and he applied for services through VRBS in April of 2016 as a senior in high school. He wanted to get a degree in diesel mechanics through MSU-N. He needed assistance with paying for school and implementing needed learning accommodations through the college to be successful academically. Despite his learning disability, he did well in the beginning, completing two years with a 3.5 grade point average (GPA). Then, he began to struggle, failing 3 of 5 classes. Robert was in jeopardy of losing his funding for college through VRBS. He and his counselor at VRBS met several times to discuss and plan how he could get back on track towards his vocational goal. Robert's counselor advocated to get

him re-enrolled at MSU-N and they worked together to re-establish his learning accommodations at the college. Due to Roberts hard work and drive to be successful, he returned to school, made use of all the accommodations available to him, and completed his degree in the Fall of 2019. His case was closed successfully as a Diesel Mechanic shortly thereafter.

STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Access and Quality.** Montanans with disabilities can access high-quality competitive, integrated employment.
 - Increase the number of clients served by VRBS and the percentage of VRBS clients employed, retained, and promoted in competitive, integrated jobs.
 - Improve the quality of VRBS services.
 - Increase the percentage of clients meeting and exceeding WIOA performance indicators.

2. **Youth Engagement.** Montana youth with disabilities are effectively engaged in vocational exploration and work readiness training.
 - Increase participation of students (14-21) with disabilities engaged in high quality Pre-ETS.

3. **Equity.** All people with disabilities are engaged and valued for their abilities and contributions to our workforce, with extra emphasis on reaching underserved and unserved populations.
 - Increase resources for people who are Deaf or hearing impaired.
 - Increase blind and low vision supports.
 - Increase resources and access to rural and migrant communities as well as language minorities.

- Increase collaboration with 121 American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Programs and resources to American Indians on reservations and in urban settings.
- Increase support for people with disabilities in institutional settings.
- Increase support for youth in foster placements.

4. **Coordination.** Montana's Workforce system is coordinated to effectively support people with disabilities and their employers.

- Increase coordination with partner organizations.
- Enhance coordination with businesses/employers.
- Enhance eligibility and navigation processes for clients.

5. **Organizational Sustainability.** VRBS is a stable, sustainable organization.

- Increase fiscal stability, staff professional development, staff engagement and satisfaction.