



**2020**



## **MONTANA'S STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL GOVERNOR'S REPORT**

- 1939** Individuals served by Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS)
- 3286** Individuals served by Independent Living Services
- 417** Individuals served by Older Blind Services
- 254** Individuals served by Extended Employment Services
- 1394** Individuals served by Pre-Employment Transitions Services

### **VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION & BLIND SERVICES (VRBS) SUCCESSFUL JOB PLACEMENTS**

<b>2020</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>2018</b>	<b>292</b>

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For more information on VRBS, please visit our website: [www.vocrehab.mt.gov](http://www.vocrehab.mt.gov).



Top row:	Eliza Kragh, Tom Sullivan, Emma Rooney, Tom Manthey, Sandy Taylor, Marvin Weatherwax, Sr.
Middle row:	Marcy Roberts, Chanda Hermanson, Monique Casbeer, Dale Kimmet, Denise May, Barbara Davis, Michele Letendre
Bottom Row:	Scott Eychner, Renea Keough, Kathy Hampton, Cheri Reed-Anderson, Katherine Meier

**Mission:** 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 for Montana’s State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) for 2020. The Montana State Rehabilitation Council advises Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS) to improve policies, programs, and delivery of services to consumers through a collaborative effort.

This report highlights the activities and accomplishments of the SRC and includes success stories of vocational rehabilitation consumers from the following categories: Tribal, Pre-ETS, Blind and Low Vision Services (BLVS). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the SRC was not able to hold meetings in person this year, but instead we met virtually by Zoom.

The SRC’s accomplishments in 2020 include the following from our four committees:

- Education and Membership have been working hard on recruitment, and seven new SRC members have been appointed. The committee has been busy updating the new member orientation PowerPoint slides to make them more friendly and easier to follow. A survey was sent out to all SRC members in May which confirmed that the SRC was in compliance with regulations for having over 51% of the members with a disability.
- Planning and Review had a recommendation from the chair to look at other states’ annual reports on the national SRC website. The committee reviewed the proposed changes to the

governor's report and voted to leave it in its current format. The case story categories will stay the same from last year and include Tribal, Pre-ETS, VRBS, and BLVS.

- Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment: At the advising of this committee, VRBS contracted with Montana State University Billings-Montana Center for Inclusive Education to develop new consumer satisfaction surveys.
- Policy, Procedure and Personnel Development: worked with VRBS to collaborate with Stout Rehabilitation Institute to assist in rewriting the program's Administrative Rules. Once completed, the SRC will get a chance to review and offer feedback. The committee reviewed and advised on 13 new VRBS Procedures this year. Several VRBS procedures are currently in progress and once completed, they will be sent to SRC for review.

The SRC held a joint meeting in May with the State Independent Living Council. In June, the SRC was invited and participated in the VRBS strategic planning session. The purpose of the strategic planning session was to map out the future vision and goals for the VRBS program. It was facilitated by Kirsten Smith with Bloom Consulting.

The VRBS program continues to serve thousands of Montanans with disabilities statewide by providing supports to help them thrive in their community. The success stories in this report are made possible through the dedication of VRBS staff, providers, local businesses, and other key stakeholders who offer their steadfast support.

*Respectfully,*

*Tiffany Costa, SRC Chairperson*

## **VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION BLIND SERVICES (VRBS) SUCCESS STORY**



Disability Type: Autism Spectrum Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Community Partners Involved: Career Connections, Social Security Administration,

Employment Goal Achieved: Laundry Attendant

Services Provided: Vocational Counseling & Guidance, Job Readiness Training, Work Clothes, Job Search Assistance, Supported Employment

Length of time in program: 3 years

Mr. P applied for services with VRBS in 2016 and at that time he had only ever worked in a sheltered workshop in New York doing data entry. Mr. P particularly struggled with boundaries relative to maintaining appropriate conversations with others and debilitating obsessions as a result of his disabilities.

Through vocational counseling and guidance provided directly by his rehabilitation counselor, Mr. P was able to set and meet goals related to being on time for appointments and work, improved focus on task completion, and expressing himself in a socially appropriate manner. Upon seeing all the progress Mr. P was making, his VR counselor referred Mr. P to Career Connections to begin seeking work experiences and eventually paid employment.

Mr. P expressed a strong desire to work in an upscale, affluent community. After a few unsuccessful attempts at employment and ongoing training related to appropriate workplace conversations. Mr. P was able to obtain a position as a laundry aid at Firebrand Hotel, a luxury hotel in Northwest Montana. Through the diligent and collaborative efforts of VRBS staff, Career Connections, and strong natural supports at Firebrand Hotel, Mr. P has now been successfully employed at the hotel since August of 2018 and shares, "I am very satisfied with where I am at. This job is ideal for my wants and needs."

## BLIND AND LOW VISION SERVICES (BLVS) SUCCESS STORY

Disability Type: Macular Degeneration and Diabetes

Community Partners Involved: MonTECH, Veterans Administration, Montana Association for the Blind,

Employment Goal Achieved: Home Maker

Services Provided: Adaptive Cooking, Assistive Technology Devices & Aids, Assistive Technology Services & Training, Diabetic Management, Leisure Skills, Low Vision Exams/Screening/Evaluation, Low Vision Training, Orientation and Mobility Training, Peer or Facilitated Support Group

Length of time in program: 2.5 years

Mrs. K was referred to VRBS Older Blind Program (OBP) by the VA due to onset of Macular Degeneration for training on low vision adaptive equipment and orientation and mobility (O&M) skills. As a result of collaboration between the VA, MonTECH, and VRBS, Mrs. K was able to try out multiple assistive technology devices ultimately learning, obtaining, and mastering the following adaptive equipment:

- Voice glucose monitor and insulin pen allowing her to independently monitor her blood sugar to keep her diabetes under control;
- Long white cane with O&M training allowing her to independently navigate the mall, walk herself to a local supermarket, cross streets, and enjoy community events such as going to the farmer's market;
- iPad to assist her with scheduling, emailing, printing, downloading and reading eBooks, listening to podcasts, and watching TV;
- iPhone allowing her to add contacts to her phone, manage her voicemail messages, take pictures of her grand kids, text and pair a wireless keyboard;
- OrCam, a portable, artificial vision device that allow visually impaired people to understand text and identify objects through audio feedback, describing what they are unable to see via a camera mounted on a pair of glasses; and,
- Pen Friend for her to label items by her voice facilitating access to recipes and medications

Mrs. K, with additional adaptive mechanisms and tools, has continued to garden, knit, sew and paint as well and reports her life is far from boring!



## HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION SUCCESS STORY

Disability Type: ADHD and other congenital disabilities

Community Partners Involved: Big Sky High School, Medicaid, Social Security Administration, Opportunity Resources Inc, Summit Independent Living Center, Free Cycles, Murdoch's, Mountain Line

Employment Goal Achieved: Greenhouse Laborer

Services Provided: Vocational Counseling & Guidance, Pre-ETS Work-Based Learning Experiences, Job Search Assistance, and Supported Employment

Length of time in program: 3 years

Mr. S, a young man with multiple disabilities, applied for VRBS as a 10th grader at Big Sky High School. While in high school, Mr. S participated in multiple Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) funded by VRBS. Particularly, Mr. S participated in interviewing and soft skills training that improved his interpersonal skills and participated in paid work-based learning experiences at Free Cycles and Murdoch's in Missoula.

At Free Cycles, Mr. S assisted with assembling and repairing donated bicycles to be sold or gifted to community members in need. Mr. S picked up on the hands-on tasks extremely quickly and was a huge asset to Free Cycles, assembling numerous bicycles over the course of his work experience. After Free Cycles, Mr. S completed another work experience at Murdoch's where he also worked doing assembly. He did so well in that position that they eventually ran out of work for him to do.



Shortly after Mr. S graduated high school, VRBS assisted him with obtaining a seasonal position at Lowe's where he watered plants and assembled barbeques and other products. When the seasonal job ended, there was not a permanent opening for an assembler, but Mr. S had become such a valued member of the Lowe's team that they offered him a permanent position as a Loader working 15-20 hours per week making over \$11.90/hr. VRBS also assisted Mr. S with getting connected with Para Transit, which he uses to independently travel to and from work. His VRBS case was closed successfully in June of 2019. Shortly Mr. S earned Employee of the Month at Lowe's and was given a \$50 gift card for this accomplishment.

## **VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION/TRIBAL VR SUCCESS STORY**

Disability Type: Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Substance Use Disorder

Community Partners Involved: Indian Health Services, Medicaid, Social Security Administration, Fort Peck Community College, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Employment Goal Achieved: Library Assistant

Services Provided: Vocational Counseling & Guidance, College Training, Work Experiences, and Job Search Assistance

Length of time in program: 7.5 years

Mr. A was struck by a car resulting in TBI, physical impairments, issues with short term memory, and limitations with sustained focus/attention. He also struggled with substance abuse issues. Throughout his time with VRBS, Mr. A experienced many ups and downs including a few relapses on his recovery. Each time he relapsed, it was believed his case would need to be exited unsuccessfully, however Mr. A always came back and asked to keep working towards his employment goal.

Mr. A's passion was to work with and help people. As such, he chose to pursue an Associate's degree in Human Services from Fort Peck Community College. Due to his disability, Mr. A was only able to complete 2 classes per semester and class by class, Mr. A continued to tenaciously work towards his degree. In 2016, after 4 years and 8 semesters, he accomplished his AA degree.

Unfortunately, after completing his education, Mr. A was unable to immediately find employment and struggled with ongoing health issues. Nonetheless, he remained hopeful and determined to find employment and in September 2018 he began a work experience in the college library. He worked hard at the college library, even volunteering his time to be there when he didn't have to be. Mr. A made himself so indispensable, that the college decided to hire Mr. A on permanently and in February of 2019, his VRBS case was successfully exited.

## **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.

## **SRC ACHIEVEMENTS:**

- Actively recruited 7 new members to serve on the Council including Business Representatives and Disability Advocates among others.
- The SRC advised the VRBS program staff on the creation of a new Consumer Satisfaction Survey.
- Ten Council members participated in a Strategic Planning session that developed 3-year goals and strategies for the VRBS program.
- Reviewed and analyzed 13 new Procedures of the VRBS program.
- Collaborated with the program on the writing of the VRBS portion of the WIOA Combined State Plan.
- Used virtual platforms to continue to meet quorum requirements and progress in our work during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Met collaboratively with the State Independent Living Council.
- Continued to participate in the Windmills module workshops.
- Committees worked on current SRC projects: Planning and Review; Consumer Satisfaction & Needs Assessment; Education & Membership, and Policy, Procedure, & Personnel Development.

