



VocRehabVermont



2020

Needs Assessment

OUR MISSION

To help Vermonters with disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain meaningful careers and to help employers recruit, train, retain and promote employees with disabilities.

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Part 1: INTRODUCTION

1: PURPOSE OF THE COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The Rehabilitation Act (1973) as amended under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) and the Vermont State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) to jointly conduct a needs assessment every three years. The assessment is intended to form the basis for the DVR annual State plan and strategic planning activities. The development of this needs assessment in partnership with DVR is one of the primary responsibilities of the SRC.

Federal regulations require that:

The State plan shall include the results of a comprehensive, statewide assessment, jointly conducted by the designated State unit and the State Rehabilitation Council every three years, describing the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing within the state, particularly the vocational rehabilitation services needs of:

- Individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services;
- Individuals with disabilities who are minorities and individuals with disabilities who have been unserved or underserved by the vocational rehabilitation program; and
- Individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment system.

The report must also include:

- An assessment of the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the state; and
- An assessment of the rehabilitation needs of youth and students including:
 - Their need for pre-employment and other transition services; and
 - The extent to which pre-employment and other transition services provided under this Act, are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.), to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

This report includes data from a variety of sources, including DVR's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) reporting database, information from the United States Census Bureau, the American Community Survey, as well as surveys conducted by DVR.

2: BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF VERMONT DVR

The Vermont DVR has twelve district offices that provide employment services to individuals with disabilities and one central administrative office. Vermont DVR follows all federal requirements for determining eligibility, assessment, developing an Individual Plan for Employment, training and other employment preparation services, placement services, and post-employment support.

Additionally, DVR provides transition services to youth; a program for youth with severe emotional/behavioral disabilities and corrections involvement; the Vermont Assistive Technology and Reuse Program; and assistance to individuals with disabilities who are offenders or who are veterans. DVR also funds supported employment services to designated agencies serving youth with severe emotional/behavioral disturbance through the JOBS programs.

3: THE IMPACT OF WIOA ON VERMONT DVR

Since the 2017 Needs Assessment, DVR has continued restructuring the Vermont program in response to the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA brought two major changes to the VR program: the implementation of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and the implementation of the Common Performance Measures. Both have had substantial impacts on how DVR provides services.

a) Pre-ETS

WIOA required that state agencies spend a minimum of 15% of the Title I VR Basic Award on Pre-ETS services. Pre-ETS can only be provided to students with a disability, defined as:

- Students in high school who are on an IEP, a 504 plan or are 504 eligible; and
- Are between the ages of 14 and 21.

Pre-ETS are generally defined as preparatory services for students to assist them in moving from high school to careers and/or post-secondary education. Pre-ETS includes five required services: job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling around postsecondary education, workplace readiness training, and self-advocacy training.

Vermont DVR fully supports Congressional intent in shifting VR resources to Pre-ETS. We believe early intervention with students has the potential to have a significant long-term impact on outcomes. However, it is also important to recognize that reassigning 15% of VR resources from adults to students has had an impact on services for adults. Consequently, some of the data in this Needs Assessment reflects the impact of this shift on services and outcomes.

b) WIOA Common Performance Measures

The WIOA Common Performance Measures have dramatically changed the way the VR program is measured. Prior to WIOA, vocational rehabilitation programs were measured primarily on short-term employment outcomes such as employment at closure and earnings at closure. The new measures emphasize long-term qualitative outcomes over short-term placement numbers. The Common Performance Measures are as follows:

- Employment rate two quarters post program exit
- Employment rate four quarters post program exit
- Median earnings two quarters post program exit
- Credential attainment
- Measurable skills gain
- Employer satisfaction

Vermont believes the Common Performance Measures are a major improvement over the standards and indicators, because they encourage VR agencies to focus on career development and higher wage employment. In response, DVR has implemented major system change in effort to realign practice and services to meet these new measures.

4: IMPACT OF FEDERAL REALLOTMENT FUNDING ON VERMONT DVR

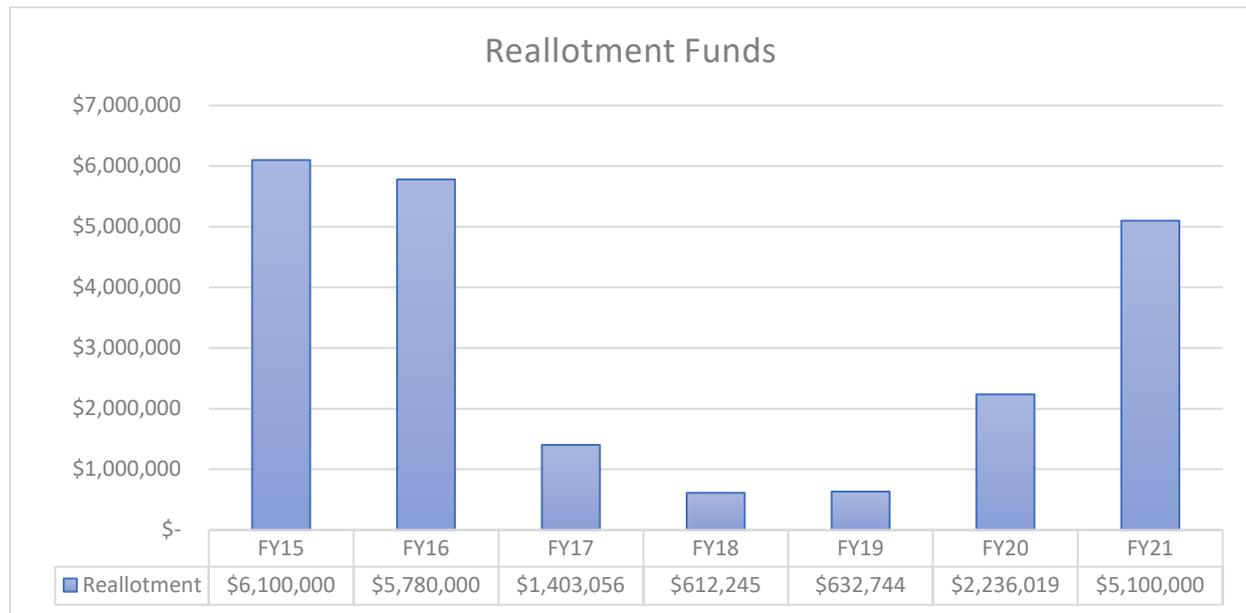
Reallotment is the process by which the Federal Rehabilitation Services Administration distributes grant funds that states cannot match. States with the ability to match can request and receive unused funds. Prior to 2009, reallotment funds were generally very limited and Vermont received awards of less than \$100,000 annually. However, with the great recession of 2008, many states were unable to match their grant awards. Because Vermont was in an over-match situation, DVR was able to draw down between three and six million dollars per year. In FFY 16 and FFY 17, the amounts requested by states exceeded those relinquished. The formula used by RSA to determine distribution of reallotment funds favored larger states, and Vermont's award was reduced to \$1.4 million in FFY 16 and \$612,000 in FFY 17.

This substantial reduction (about 25%) in funding resulted in a loss in capacity of the Vermont VR program. This included the elimination or reassignment of 10 FTE VR counselors. As a result, the data in the following sections will show a reduction in the overall number of individuals served from 2017 to 2019. It also consequently resulted in a significant reduction in the number of individuals achieving an employment outcome.

Because of the impact of COVID on other states, Vermont DVR received \$5.1 million in reallotment funds for FFY 2020, a substantial increase. These funds present an opportunity for DVR to make investments in services for consumers.

However, because reallotment funds are “one time” awards, the division will invest them in time-limited programs and initiatives that can be reduced easily should reallotment funds decrease in the future. The following chart shows the significant fluctuation in reallotment funding since 2015:

Chart 1. Changes in Reallotment Funding



Part 2: BACKGROUND

1: VERMONT’S ECONOMY AND WORKFORCE

Vermont is a rural state with a small population – 624,000 people in a geographic area of 9,609 square miles. Just fewer than 325,000 are employed with a median household income of \$60,076. One quarter of the population lives in Chittenden County in the northwestern part of the state. Four of the five largest cities and towns are in Chittenden County, Burlington being the largest with a population of 42,899.

Vermont has an annual growth rate of less than 0.3% as compared to the national average of 0.6%. Since 2010 Vermont’s overall population has only increased by 0.1% or 555 people. Overall, the population is aging, with the total percentage over age 65 increasing from 14.6% in 2010 to 18.7% in 2018.

According to Vermont Department of Labor (VDOL) data, the total workforce declined from 359,000 to 340,000 between 2010 and 2020. This loss of workers is reflected in an approximately 3% unemployment rate in the state in 2020, before the COVID pandemic hit, and presents a significant challenge to Vermont employers. It also presents a risk to the Vermont economy as a whole.

2: IMPACT OF COVID ON THE WORKFORCE AND LABOR MARKET

The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly had a dramatic impact on the labor market in the short term. Between March and April 2020, the unemployment rate increased from 3.1% to 16.5%. However, in August 2020 the unemployment rate dropped back down to 4.8%. This was due in part to the State’s successful efforts to limit the COVID infection rate that has allowed for significant reopening of businesses. It is too early to determine the long-term impact of COVID on the Vermont labor market, especially given the possibility of a second wave in the fall and winter. It seems likely, however, that it will have an impact into 2021 and beyond.

Anecdotally, referrals to VR have dropped during the pandemic. Also, some active consumers are reporting that they want to delay their job searches because of health concerns. Other VR consumers are continuing their employment plans and are actively seeking employment. VR Business Account Managers report continued demand for employees from their local business contacts.

3: AVAILABILITY OF EMPLOYMENT-RELATED SERVICES TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Vermont DVR is by far the largest provider of employment services for individuals with disabilities in the state. Services are provided directly as well as through grants to community rehabilitation partners. These partnerships allow DVR to effectively use its resources and expand its reach to other populations. The JOBS program is a partnership between the Departments of Corrections (DOC), Mental Health (DMH), Children and Families (DCF), and DVR to provide supported employment and case management services for at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities. The Vermont DOL also provides some services to individuals with disabilities. The 14 Designated Agencies across Vermont provide supported employment services to individuals with severe and persistent psychiatric disabilities and those with developmental disabilities. Below is a table of current employment services providers for individuals with disabilities.

Table 1. Numbers Served by Employment Service

Organization	Population Served	Persons Served
Vermont DVR (12 district offices)	Youth and adults with disabilities (except for blindness and vision loss)	6,610 in SFY 2020
Vermont DBVI (4 district offices)	Blind and visually impaired youth and adults	244 in SFY 2020
JOBS Program (12 sites statewide)	Youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities	289 in SFY 2020
Designated Agencies (10 programs)	Individuals with severe and persistent psychiatric disabilities	685 in SFY 2019
Designated Agencies (14 programs)	Individuals with developmental disabilities	1,353 in SFY 2019

Part 3: VERMONT DVR SERVICES TO INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

1: DVR POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

The following tables and one chart provide demographic data for all closed cases for SFY 2016 and compares that data to SFY 2019.

Table 2. Total Number, Age, Sex and Racial/Ethnic Demographics

All Closed VR Cases by Population Characteristics	SFY 16 Closures	SFY 16 Percent	SFY 19 Closures	SFY 19 Percent	% Change in # of Closures	Change in % of Closures
All Closures	4207	100%	3117	100%	-35%	0%
Sex						
Female	2024	48%	1359	44%	-49%	-5%
Male	2181	52%	1733	56%	-26%	4%
Other	2	0%	20	1%	90%	1%
Age at Application						
Under 25	1,341	32%	977	31%	-37%	-1%
25-44	1597	38%	1118	36%	-43%	-2%
45-64	1172	28%	920	30%	-27%	2%
65+	97	2%	102	3%	5%	1%
Minority Status						
Racial / Ethnic Minority	192	5%	246	8%	22%	3%
White	4015	95%	2871	92%	-40%	-3%

Some areas of note include:

- The total number of closures has dropped by 35% since 2016. This is primarily the result of the loss of reallotment funds that caused the loss of capacity.
- DVR has increased the percentage and total number of individuals who are from racial or ethnic minority groups. This might reflect the changing demographics of the state.
- DVR served more men than women in 2016, 52% and 48% respectively. This disparity increased to 56% and 44% by 2019. DVR currently has no obvious explanation for this shift in the gender demographics of the population we serve.

Table 3. Education and Employment Status

All Closed VR Cases by Population Characteristics	SFY 16 Closures	SFY 16 Percent	SFY 19 Closures	SFY 19 Percent	% Change in # of Closures	Change in % of Closures
Work Status Prior to Initial IPE						
Competitively Employed	1067	25%	678	22%	-57%	-4%
Not competitively employed	3140	75%	2439	78%	-29%	4%

All Closed VR Cases by Population Characteristics	SFY 16 Closures	SFY 16 Percent	SFY 19 Closures	SFY 19 Percent	% Change in # of Closures	Change in % of Closures
Education Prior to Initial IPE						
Less than HS or GED completion	943	22%	711	23%	-33%	0%
HS completion or equivalent	1969	47%	1326	43%	-48%	-4%
Some post-secondary education	813	19%	487	16%	-67%	-4%
BA	277	7%	180	6%	-54%	-1%
MA+	113	3%	86	3%	-31%	0%
Unknown	92	2%	327	10%	72%	8%

Some areas of note include:

- Slightly fewer VR consumers are entering the program with a job.
- The education level of VR consumers at application/IPE has not changed significantly since 2016. Two thirds of VR consumers have a high school diploma or less.

Table 4. Disability Type, Presence of Substance Abuse Issues, and Order of Selection Category

All Closed VR Cases by Population Characteristics	SFY 16 Closures	SFY 16 Percent	SFY 19 Closures	SFY 19 Percent	% Change in # of Closures	Change in % of Closures
Disability Group						
Cognitive	1010	24%	712	23%	-42%	-1%
Mental	1596	38%	1171	38%	-36%	0%
Physical	1199	29%	778	25%	-54%	-4%
Sensory	222	5%	198	6%	-12%	1%
No Disability noted (no disability determination done)	180	4%	258	8%	30%	4%
Substance Abuse Co-Occurring						
Has Substance Abuse Issue	525	12%	345	11%	-52%	-1%
No Substance Abuse noted	3682	88%	2772	89%	-33%	1%
Significance of Disability						
Most SD	3765	89%	1921	62%	-96%	-28%
SD	257	6%	938	30%	73%	24%
Not SD (On Order of Selection)	5	0%	0	0%		0%

Some areas of note include:

- The disability type at application for DVR consumers has not changed significantly since 2016. Also, the percentage of consumers reporting a substance abuse issue at application has not changed significantly.
- The percentage of consumers falling into Category 1 in the Order of Selection has dropped significantly. However, this is the result of a revision in the Order of Selection criteria implemented by DVR and the State Rehabilitation Council in SFY 17.

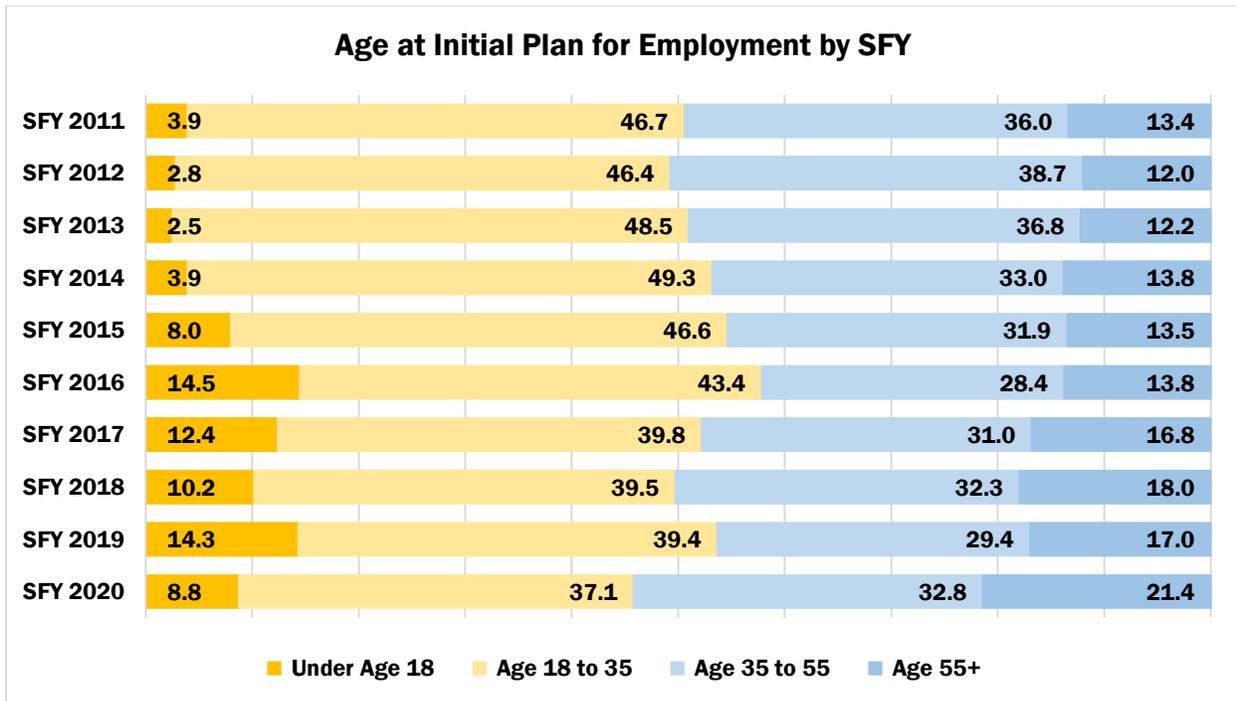
Table 5. Veteran, TANF, Corrections, and SSI/SSDI Status

All Closed VR Cases by Population Characteristics	SFY 16 Closures	SFY 16 Percent	SFY 19 Closures	SFY 19 Percent	% Change in # of Closures	Change in % of Closures
Veteran						
Veteran	120	3%	95	3%	-26%	0%
No Veteran Status noted	4087	97%	3022	97%	-35%	0%
Corrections Involvement						
Corrections	69	2%	598	19%	88%	18%
No Corrections Involvement noted	4138	98%	2519	81%	-64%	-18%
Welfare Participation						
TANF Participant	497	12%	126	4%	-294%	-8%
No TANF participation noted	3710	88%	2991	96%	-24%	8%
SSDI Eligible						
SSDI recipient	830	20%	596	19%	-39%	-1%
Not SSDI recipient	3377	80%	2521	81%	-34%	1%
SSI Eligible						
SSI recipient	768	18%	567	18%	-35%	0%
Not SSI recipient	3439	82%	2550	82%	-35%	0%

Some areas of note include:

- The percentage of consumers who are involved with corrections increased from 2% to 19% between SFY 16 and SFY 19. This translates to one in five consumers falling in this category. We believe the increase is the result of better tracking of this data in the AWARE case management system that was implemented in September 2017.
- The percentage of participants who are TANF beneficiaries has dropped significantly from 2016 (12%) to 2019 (4%). This is because the Vermont TANF program funded DVR services for beneficiaries at one time. This program ended in 2016 and accounts for the decline in referrals.
- The percentage of participants receiving SSI/SSDI benefits has remained very stable since 2016.

Chart 2. Age at Initial Plan for Employment by SFY



The implementation of Pre-ETS has greatly increased the proportion of youth aged 18 or younger served by DVR. This is not surprising because DVR shifted counselor capacity to serve high school students as mandated by WIOA. Overall, the VR caseload is getting younger, with 53.7% under age 35 in SFY 2019. SFY 2020 saw a substantial drop in high school students under 18 signing a plan. We are certain this is the result of COVID closing all the schools in March 2020, which significantly impacted DVR Transition Counselors’ ability to engage eligible students.

2: DVR PROCESS FLOW

The following charts are intended to show the overall process flow within the DVR program including timelines. The intent is to identify patterns that might need to be addressed within the DVR State Plan.

Chart 3 shows the total number of applications, certifications of eligibility, new plans developed, and case closures from 2015 to 2019. This chart shows the overall downward trend of all the primary process measures. As noted, the loss of reallotment funding, which led to a decrease in counselor capacity, is the primary reason behind the decline.

Chart 3. Total Applications, Certifications, Plans and Closures

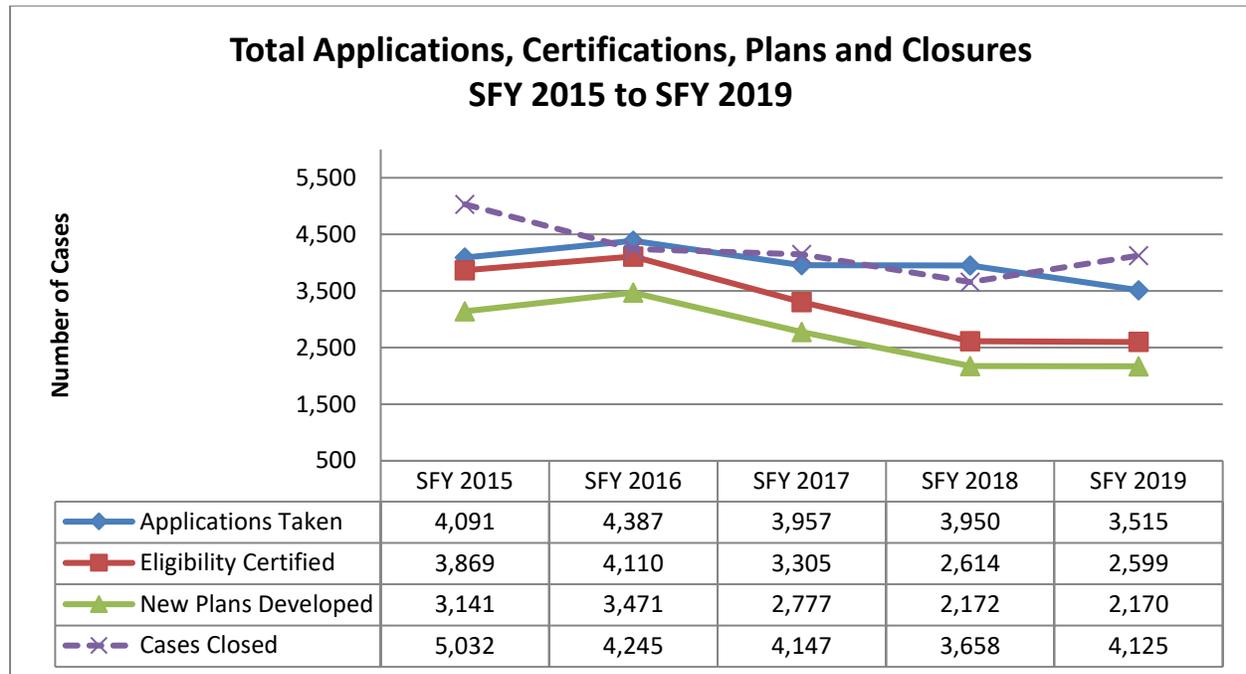
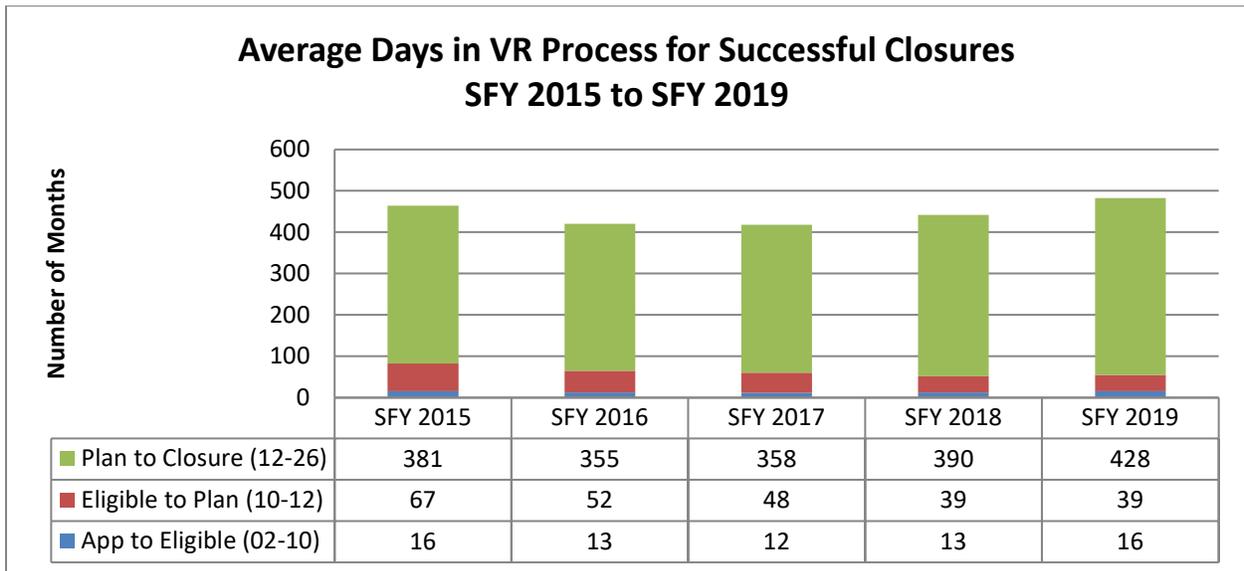


Chart 4 shows the average time spent within case statuses for the period SFY 2015 to SFY 2019. Overall, this data shows that DVR cases are moving promptly from application to eligibility to plan. The federal requirement is an eligibility determination within 60 days of application, and a plan within 90 days of eligibility. DVR’s averages are well below those thresholds.

This data does show the average amount of time between plan and employment closure increasing. We believe this is good news and the result of practice changes within DVR in response to the Common Performance Measures. DVR has been encouraging counselors to help consumers consider longer-term career goals. Plans for longer-term quality employment generally take longer and often involve education and training. We see it as a positive trend that cases are open longer after a plan has been developed.

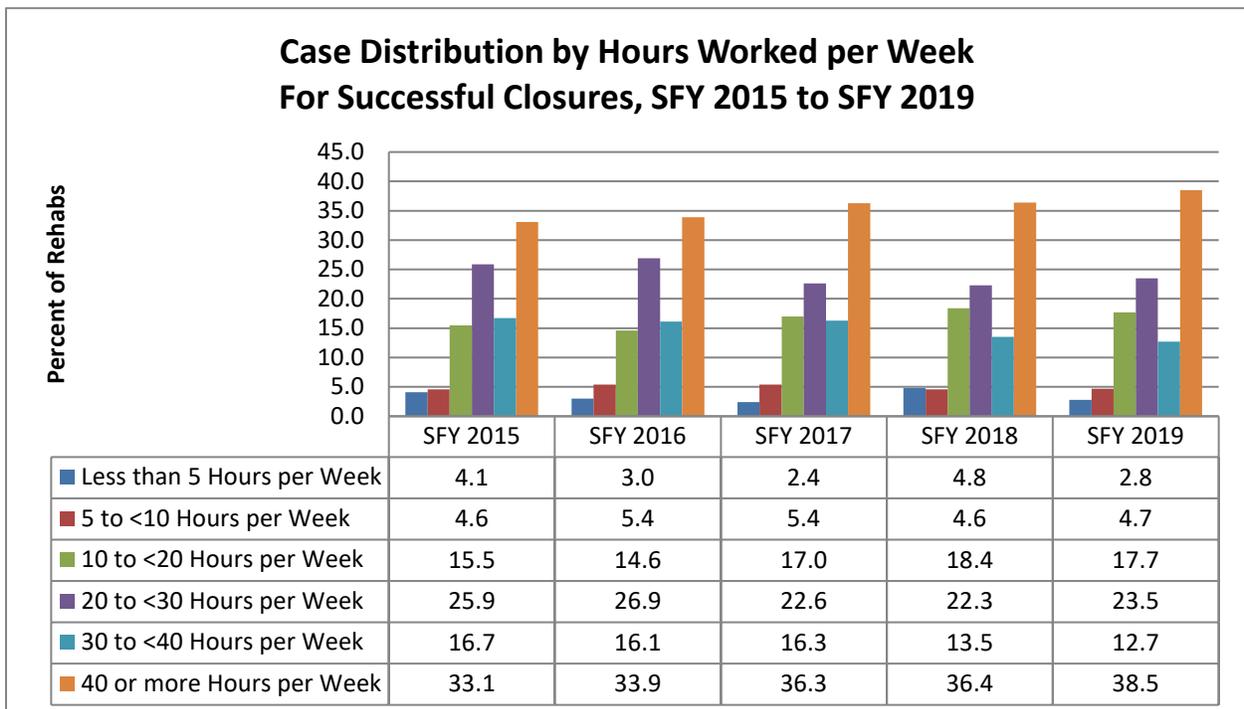
Chart 4. Average Days in VR Process for Successful Closures



3: DVR OUTCOMES

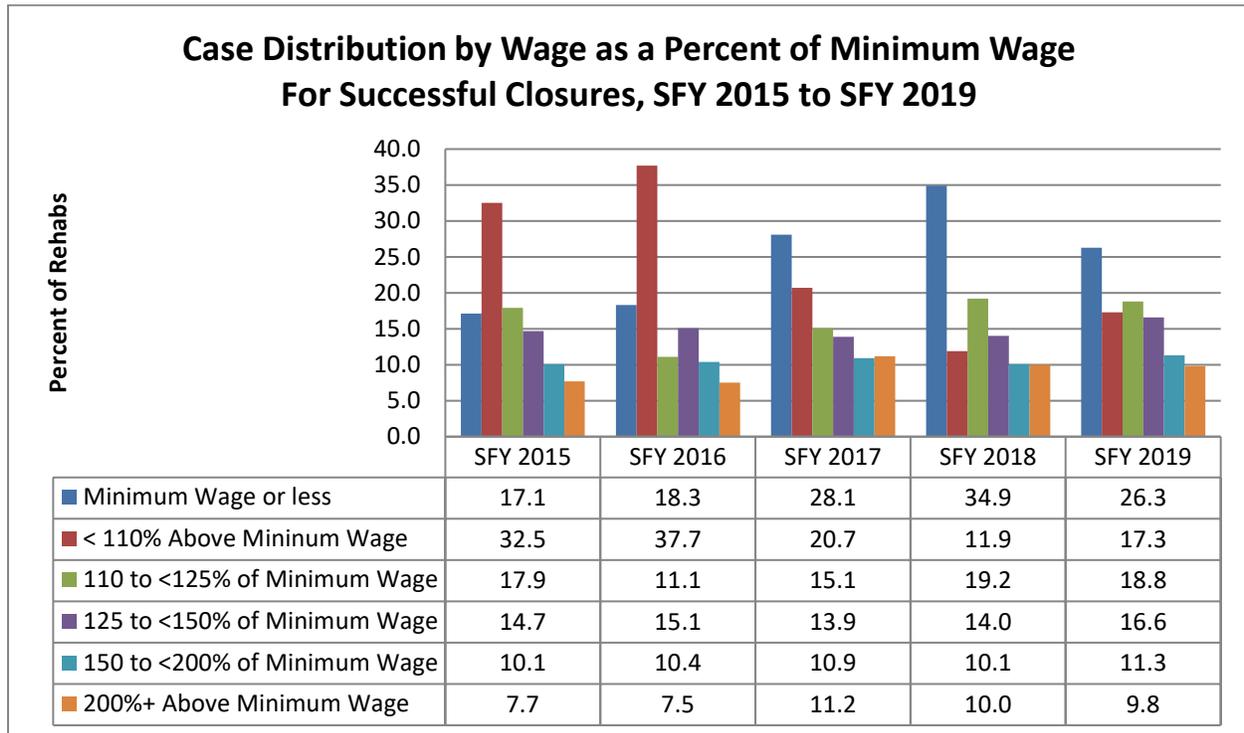
Chart 5 shows a gradual increase in the percentage of consumers working full time from SFY 15 to SFY 19. This has probably been helped by the low unemployment rate in Vermont during this period. We also expect this to be influenced by DVR’s focus on higher quality careers over job placement.

Chart 5. Case Distribution by Hours Worked per Week



DVR has seen a gradual increase in the average hourly wages at closure from SFY 15 to SFY 19. Chart 6 shows that in SFY 15 32.5% of DVR consumers were closed at 125% of minimum wage or better. By SFY 19 that number had increased to 37.7%. We believe the very low unemployment rate in Vermont contributed to this increase.

Chart 6. Case Distribution by Wage as a Percent of Minimum Wage

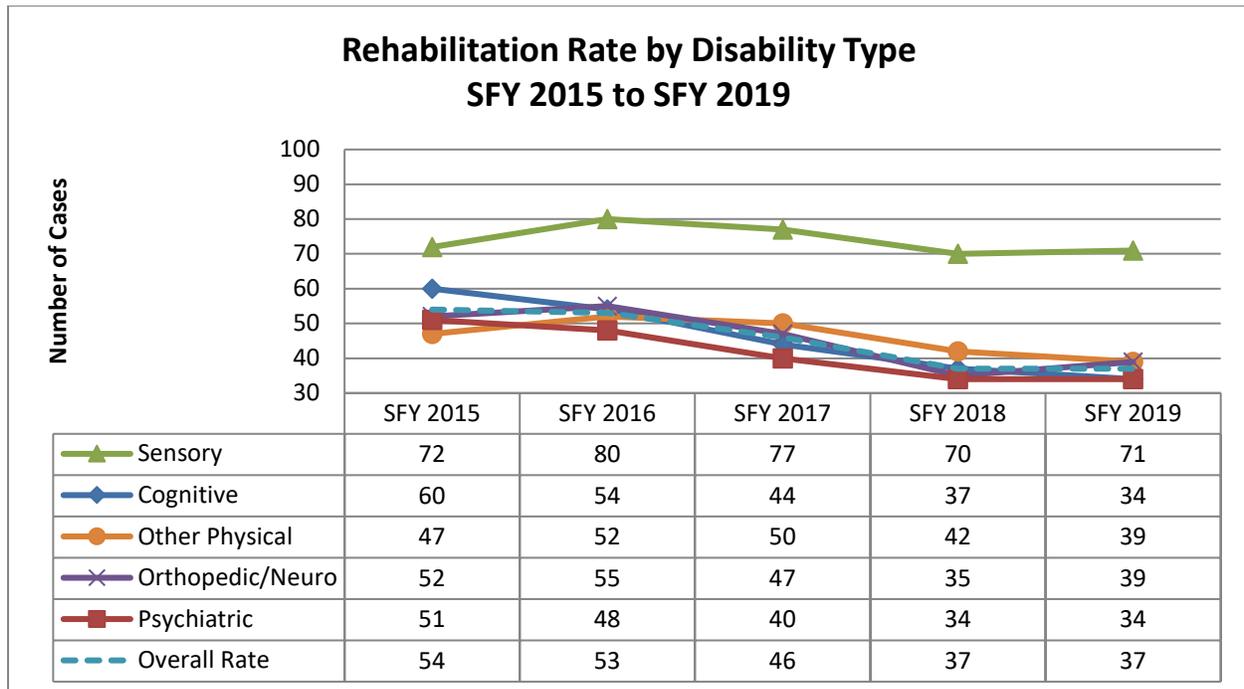


DVR saw a significant drop in the rehabilitation rate in SFY 18 and SFY 19. We believe this is a temporary phenomenon and is the result of the division implementing the AWARE case management system in SFY 18. DVR closed a significant number of cases as part of a caseload clean-up process necessary to implement AWARE. We expect the rehabilitation rate to return to its historic norms of 50% to 55% in the next three years.

Regardless of the above phenomenon, individuals with a psychiatric disability are historically less likely to achieve an employment outcome than other groups. This has been a consistent finding in prior DVR Needs Assessments.

VR staff report that psychiatric disabilities are largely unseen which makes them more difficult for employers to understand, and therefore harder to accommodate. Employers may not get that a reasonable accommodation for an invisible disability may be different than the chair, ramp, or assistive technology one might need for a physical disability. One way to address this is for DVR staff to help more customers think about and prepare for disclosure discussions related to accommodations.

Chart 7. Rehabilitation Rate by Disability Type



DVR’s measures changed under WIOA to the Common Performance Measures, which are:

- Employment Rate Two Quarters Post Program Exit
- Employment Rate Four Quarters Post Program Exit
- Median Earnings Two Quarters Post Program Exit
- Measurable Skills Gains
- Credential Attainment
- Employer Satisfaction

Because the measures are extremely lagging, it has taken four years for the outcome data to be developed. For the first time DVR has both state and national data across three of the measures as seen in Table 6 below:

Table 6. Common Performance Measures

Measure	National Average SFY 18	Vermont Results SFY 18	National Average SFY 19	Vermont Results SFY 19
Employment Rate 2 Quarters Post Exit	N/A	N/A	50.4%	49.0%
Employment Rate 4 Quarters Post Exit	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Median Earnings 2 Quarters Post Exit	N/A	N/A	\$3,875	\$3,516
Measurable Skills Gains	21.1%	37.8%	23.4%	54.9%
Credential Attainment	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

These measures are still very new, and we expect it may take two or three more years before the data is reliable enough to make comparisons. However, we are concerned that the median wage data is below the national average. Our hope is that the DVR Careers Initiative will lift median wages over time.

Part 4: **ASSESSMENT OF THE REHABILITATION NEEDS OF YOUTH AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

The DVR Needs Assessment must include:

- An assessment of the rehabilitation needs of youth with disabilities, and students with disabilities, including their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services.
- An assessment of the needs of individuals with disabilities for transition services and pre-employment transition services, and the extent to which such services provided under this Act are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.).

1: **PREVALENCE**

a) **Students with Disabilities**

The State of Vermont has fifty-seven supervisory unions serving students in primarily rural communities. During the 2019 to 2020 school year, 5,002 Vermont high school students were served. All were either on an IEP or 504 plan and therefore met the definition of a student with a disability.

b) **Youth with Disabilities**

According to American Community Survey (ACS), 7.5% of youth ages 16 to 20 (3,450) reported having a disability. The ACS does not provide data for youth ages 14 to 24 who report having disability, which is the WIOA definition. However, extrapolating the ACS data for youth ages 16 to 20 would suggest that there are approximately 8,600 youth with disabilities in Vermont. It is important to note that the ACS uses primarily self-reported data and youth may be less likely to self-identify as a person with a disability. Therefore, this number may be an underestimate of the actual prevalence.

c) **Employment Rates for Youth with Disabilities**

The 2018 ACS update provides data on the employment rate of youth with disabilities ages 16 to 20. As Table 7 shows, youth with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than their counterparts without disabilities at the national level. However, at the state level there is almost no difference.

This is good news as it is well documented that early work experiences for students and youth are the best predictor of future employment. This is likely a function of the strong Vermont job market. However, it may also be a function of DVR's and Vermont high schools' support of work-based learning experiences for students.

Table 7. Employment Rates for Youth with and without Disabilities

Population	Total	Employed Count	Employed Percentage
US Youth without Disabilities	21,515,100	8,455,434	39.3%
Vermont Youth without Disabilities	45,104	20,702	45.9%
US Youth with Disabilities	1,355,451	345,640	25.5%
Vermont Youth with Disabilities	3,696	1,619	43.8%

d) Postsecondary Education Outcomes for Adults with Disabilities

The ACS does not provide post-secondary education outcome data stratified by age group. However, it does provide highest level of education achieved for adults with and without disabilities. As the data in Table 8 indicates, adults with disabilities are much less likely to achieve a BA degree or higher than adults without a disability. Post-secondary completion has been associated with substantially level earnings over the lifespan. In the modern global and high technology economy this trend is likely to become more pronounced.

Table 8. Adults with and without a Disability Achieving a BA Degree or Higher

Population	Total	BA Degree or Higher Count	BA Degree or Higher Percentage
US Adults without Disabilities	164,707,900	54,353,607	33.0%
Vermont Adults without Disabilities	320,700	127,318	39.7%
US Adults with Disabilities	19,703,800	2,758,532	14.0%
Vermont Adults with Disabilities	45,600	7,342	16.1%

2: VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES FOR STUDENTS AND YOUTH

a) VR Pre-Employment Transition Services

Once Pre-ETS was announced in October 2014, Vermont DVR moved quickly to come into compliance with the new requirement. To meet the new mandate, DVR created a cadre of VR counselors who work exclusively with high school students. Currently, DVR has 13.5 FTE VR Transition Counselors serving students out of a total of 51.6 FTE counselors. This is approximately 26% of DVR's counselor capacity.

DVR has been revisiting this approach recently to determine if it is the most effective way to provide transition services. We are concerned that DVR may be losing too many youth after high school exit because they transition to an Adult VR counselor. It may be more effective to adopt a model where VR Transition counselors continue serving students after high school exit.

b) **Staffing of Pre-ETS Required Services**

The 13.5 VR counselors providing Pre-ETS services were deployed statewide to serve all 60 supervisory unions in the state. VR Counselors were outposted to an average of five high schools each, to ensure statewide access for eligible students. The daily presence of VR counselors in local high schools allows them to build strong working relationships and coordinate services with school staff.

DVR also contracted with our primary CRP, VABIR, to support 13 youth employment specialists to provide Pre-ETS services. The school-based counselors and youth employment specialists essentially work as a team. The focus of the youth employment specialists is workplace readiness training, arranging for work-based learning experiences and instruction in self-advocacy.

c) **The Number and Proportion of Students Receiving Pre-ETS Services and/or VR Services**

The number of students receiving Pre-ETS and/or VR services has steadily increased between SFY 2016 and 2019.

Table 9. Students with Disabilities Served, Age 14 through 21 at Referral

Period	Students Served
SFY 2016	1,672
SFY 2017	1,994
SFY 2018	2,373
SFY 2019	2,341

During the 2018/2019 school year, 2,341 students with disabilities were enrolled in Pre-ETS and/or VR services out of a potentially eligible population of 5,106. This means 45.8% of potentially eligible students were receiving Pre-ETS and/or VR services during the school year.

d) **Pre-ETS Services Provided by Category**

Table 10 outlines the reported services provided in SFY 2019 by category.

Table 10. Pre-ETS Services by Category

Pre-ETS Service	Number of Students Receiving Service
Career Exploration	1,065
Post-Secondary Enrollment Assistance	957
Self-Advocacy Skills Training	227
Work Based Learning	396
Workplace Readiness Training	883

We believe the above table significantly under-reports the actual services provided because of the challenges involved in collecting this data in the AWARE case management system. DVR is working on improving data collection to develop a more accurate picture of services provided.

e) **VR Services for Youth who have Exited High School**

VR Transition counselors transfer students to an Adult VR counselor prior to high school exit. This generally occurs in the last semester of the student's senior year but may occur earlier based on circumstance. As noted, DVR is considering returning to a model where VR Transition counselors continue to serve youth after high school exit, should they apply for VR services.

Of the 1,385 out-of-school youth served in SFY 2019:

- 333 (24%) participated in some type of post-secondary training or education.
- 199 (14%) participated in a work-based learning experience.

We believe that DVR should work to increase the number of youth participating in post-secondary education and training. Completion of credentialed programs is a very effective way for youth to access higher wage employment.

f) **Supported Employment Services for Youth**

In addition to core VR services, DVR partners with other state agencies to fund the JOBS program. The JOBS Program is an innovative supported employment and intensive case management service for youth with SED (Serious Emotional Disturbance) who have left or dropped out of school. The program is voluntary and uses work as a means to reach this challenging population. Once engaged, youth are assisted in transitioning from school, prison, or the streets and supported in accessing services to help them reach their individual goals and achieve greater independence. The funding comes from a combination of state funds and Medicaid match from Vocational Rehabilitation, Mental Health, Corrections, and Children and the Department for Children and Families.

In addition to community and state partners, JOBS programs involve employers in meeting the needs of youth through intensive job development, placement, and on and off-site training support. Employment is a non-stigmatizing service that youth want and need. JOBS programs differ from other traditional employment models by providing intensive case management services to assist with other areas of need including legal issues, benefits counseling, homelessness, drug/alcohol abuse, and probation and parole.

g) **Supported Employment for Youth with Disabilities**

Vermont has a very strong supported employment infrastructure for youth with developmental disabilities that has been recognized both nationally and internationally. Employment retention for eligible students who exit high school with a job is a priority for the Developmental Disabilities Services Division (DDSD) and is included in their System of Care Plan. This creates a strong incentive for schools and DVR to help youth with developmental disabilities find employment before they exit high school.

DVR and DDSD collaborate to identify students who have a developmental disability and are likely to graduate. The June Graduates survey assists DDSD and DVR to effectively plan for transitioning students district by district. It also allows DDSD to predict caseload funding needs statewide.

DVR has also partnered with DDSD to provide post-secondary education options for individuals with developmental disabilities. Vermont has four post-secondary programs for individuals with developmental disabilities including Project Search, SUCCEED, and College Steps. In general, DVR funds tuition and ancillary supports and DDSD funds staffing costs.

h) **The Number and Proportion of Youth Receiving VR Services**

Transition and Pre-ETS services naturally overlap to a significant degree. As noted, the VR Transition counselors are exclusively serving the student population in partnership with the contracted VABIR Youth Employment Specialists. Youth who have exited high school are served by a VR counselor specializing in youth and young adults or a general counselor. The total number of youth served by VR has increased modestly since 2016, most likely due to the increase in students served under Pre-ETS.

Table 11. Youth with Disabilities Served, Age 14 through 24 at Referral

Period	Persons Served
SFY 2016	3,202
SFY 2017	3,445
SFY 2018	3,721
SFY 2019	3,726

Based on the ACS data, DVR estimates there were 8,600 youth with disabilities in the state of Vermont in 2018. DVR served 3,726 youth with disabilities during SFY 2019. This suggests that DVR is serving up to 43% of the eligible population. As noted earlier, DVR suspects the ACS data may underestimate the true number of youth with disabilities because young people often do not want to identify as having a disability.

i) **The Coordination of VR Pre-ETS and Transition Services with Services Provided Under IDEA**

DVR coordinates VR services with services provided under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) at both the state and local level.

STATE LEVEL

The Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) and DVR have agreed to meet quarterly to discuss the coordination of services within local school districts. In general, those meetings include the following:

- The DVR Director
- The DVR Transition Program Director
- The AOE Special Education Director
- The AOE Postsecondary and Transition Coordinator

In addition to the above, DVR and AOE have frequent ad hoc meetings related to transition services and to plan joint initiatives.

LOCAL LEVEL

A primary responsibility of the VR Transition counselor is to coordinate services with the schools. VR Transition counselors spend the bulk of their time in schools, working directly with special education staff and teachers to provide services to students. This strong on-the-ground presence allows VR Transition counselors and school staff to build close and collaborative working relationships.

In order to improve transition outcomes for students, DVR took the lead in forming core transition teams in all twelve districts in 2016. The purpose of the core transition team is to bring DVR, schools, and community agencies together to improve collaboration around services for transitioning students. The core teams include:

- Local school staff
- DVR
- Developmental services providers
- Children's and adult mental health providers
- The Department of Labor youth staff
- Other youth programs

The core transition teams are well established in all 12 DVR Districts and are meeting monthly. DVR, AOE, and DOL also sponsor an annual core team event pulling together schools, community agencies, and state staff to focus on improving transition services. In 2019, over 300 people attended the event.

3: SUMMARY FINDINGS

a) Strengths of the Vermont System

- In the school year 2018/19, almost half (45.8%) of all eligible students received Pre-ETS services statewide. This suggests DVR has been very successful in making Pre-ETS services accessible to potentially eligible students.
- Overall, youth with disabilities appear to be accessing DVR services at a high rate (up to 43% of the eligible population). This data suggests DVR has been successful in making services accessible to youth.
- DVR has a strong collaborative partnership with AOE at the state level. At the local level, almost all Vermont high schools are working in partnership with DVR to facilitate the provision of and access to Pre-ETS and transition services.
- Vermont has a good infrastructure to provide supported employment for youth with developmental disabilities and emotional/behavioral disabilities.
- Vermont has well-established core transition teams in all 12 DVR Districts to facilitate local coordination of transition services.

b) Areas for Development in the Vermont System

- Post-secondary education and training opportunities are key for students and youth with disabilities to access higher wage jobs and develop long-term career opportunities. Despite this fact, only 24% of out of school youth are participating in such programs. DVR should develop strategies to expand opportunities for youth.
- Related to the above area of need, very few youth served by DVR access apprenticeship or other “earn while you learn” programs leading to credentials. Apprenticeship and similar programs have an excellent track record of helping youth achieve higher wage employment.
- A significant number of youth disengage from DVR services post high school exit. We believe part of the issue is that school-based DVR Transition counselors hand off these cases to Adult DVR counselors at high school exit. We think students will be more likely to remain engaged if DVR Transition counselors keep the youth cases post high school exit. DVR is planning a restructuring in 2021 to make this possible.

Part 5: **CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY**

In the spring of 2019, DVR contracted with Market Decisions, a research firm based in Maine, to survey a random sampling of DVR consumers. This was the seventh survey conducted by Market Decisions, which provides DVR with the opportunity to compare satisfaction levels and look at trends across time. A total of 700 individuals completed the survey by telephone, and the response rate was 27.2%. The Respondent Cooperation Rate was 80.9%. This is the percentage of survey respondents with which there was some form of contact. The Respondent Refusal Rate was 11.3%.

1: **OVERALL SATISFACTION**

Overall, a majority of customers are satisfied with the Division, are satisfied with the services they are receiving, and have not experienced problems. In response to the question “Would you tell your friends with disabilities to go to the Vermont DVR program for help?”, 96% said “Yes” This is an increase from 95% in 2016 and represents a strong measure of overall satisfaction with the program.

The level of overall satisfaction among all customers was 81%; an increase from 79% in 2016. Consumer experience with VR staff and counselors remains a high point for services delivered, with 92% of customers surveyed agreeing that they have had positive interactions with staff. Only 15% of consumers indicated that they experienced problems with the Division or the services the Division provided, which is down 1% from 2016. The largest gain was seen in customers’ satisfaction with their current employment. In 2016, 81% of customers reported being satisfied with their employment and in 2019 the satisfaction rate jumped to 85%.

Chart 8. Overall Satisfaction and Expectations



Historically, the trend of overall satisfaction with the program has been high, with only the 2013 survey showing a significant decline. DVR has continued to make a number of changes in customer service practices in response to that decline, and since then customer satisfaction continues to rise with each subsequent survey.

Another area of strength within the Division continues to be the benefits counseling team. Nearly half of all consumers surveyed (48%) said that they were able to access benefits counseling through DVR; up from 42% in 2016. Of the customers who accessed benefits counseling during their time with DVR, 99% said that they found the services to be valuable, a 3% increase from 2016. A new question added to the survey in 2019 asked customers whether they felt more confident about being able to work or increase their wages after meeting with a benefits counselor; 94% of customers who accessed benefits counseling agreed that they felt more confident.

Since the 2016 survey, DVR has shifted the focus from finding customers a job to supporting them in exploring and entering a long-term career. A new section was added to the 2019 survey to determine whether customers felt their VR counselors were supporting them in exploring career goals. When asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “My VR counselor asked me about my long-term career goals”, 96% of consumers either strongly or somewhat agreed. Nearly 88% of consumers strongly or somewhat agreed that their counselor discussed what additional education or training they would need to pursue the types of jobs they were interested in.

2: AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

As mentioned, only 15% of individuals reported having problems with DVR or DVR services. This was a decline from 16% in 2016 and 21% in 2013. The largest number of complaints were around communication issues, e.g., they had difficulty communicating with staff or counselors. Other areas identified as needing quality improvement were:

- **Support:** Consumers felt that no services were provided or that the services that were provided were of little help. Consumers expressed the need for more support and guidance.
- **Employment:** Consumers did not find employment and said they needed more assistance finding a job.
- **Resolution Efforts:** 22% of the consumers reporting problems with DVR or DVR services felt that DVR worked to resolve their issues.

One area of concern for DVR in the survey was the consumer satisfaction rates for people who identify as Hispanic or Latino. While Hispanic or Latino consumers make up a small fraction of DVR’s consumer base (1.4%), they reported much less satisfaction than all other groups.

According to the survey results, consumers identifying as Hispanic or Latino:

- Have fewer positive responses across the entire spectrum of core metrics.
- Are more likely to experience problems.
- Are more likely to report:
 - They need more information about programs and services.
 - They need more support or services, and had to fight to obtain services or additional guidance.
 - The VR program is ineffective in helping customers or helping customers meet goals.
 - They need transportation assistance and did not receive it.
 - There are issues with accessibility to and the condition of VR facilities.
 - They had to wait to receive services or have not received services.

DVR is planning to reach out to the Hispanic community in Vermont to seek guidance on how to improve services.

Part 6: UNMET NEEDS FOR SPECIFIC POPULATIONS AND PROGRAMS

1: NATIONAL AND VERMONT POPULATION DATA FROM THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY (ACS)

The American Community Survey (ACS) is a large continuous demographic survey conducted by the US Census Bureau. According to the survey there were 88,154 individuals with disabilities living in Vermont in 2018. This represents a 14.2% prevalence rate of the state population compared to 12.6% for the United States as a whole. The distribution by age breaks down as follows:

Table 12. Prevalence of Disability by Age in Vermont

Age	Count	Percentage of Total Vermont Population in Same Age Group
Ages 5 to 15	5,113	7.4%
Ages 16 to 64	44,429	11.0%
Ages 65 and Over	38,621	32.4%

Table 13. Prevalence of Disability by Age Nationally

Age	Count	Percentage of Total US Population in Same Age Group
Ages 5 to 15	2,447,345	5.4%
Ages 16 to 64	20,727,890	10.0%
Ages 65 and Over	17,278,965	33.8%

The prevalence of disability across the lifespan in Vermont seems to mirror the prevalence rates nationally. Because of the small numbers involved in the Vermont data there is greater potential for sampling error. Also, we suspect that the ACS undercounts individuals who may have a qualifying disability for VR services. This is because people may not want to identify as having a disability or just don't consider themselves a person with a disability.

a) Employment Rates of Working-Age Adults

The ACS collects data on the employment status of all Americans. In 2018, Vermont had a higher rate of employment for working age adults than the national average. The rate of employment for people with disabilities in Vermont was also higher than the national average. However, the employment rate for working age adults with disabilities, is about half that of those without disabilities. Overall, the employment rates for both people with and without disabilities have improved since 2016, reflecting improvements in the overall economy.

Table 14. Employment Rates for Working-Age Adults with and without Disabilities

Working-Age Population	Total	Employed Percentage	Employed FT Percentage
US Civilians without Disabilities	166,425,000	80.0%	61.1%
Vermont Civilians without Disabilities	314,000	85.4%	62.8%
US Civilians with Disabilities	19,338,800	37.8%	24.3%
Vermont Civilians with Disabilities	40,800	41.3%	22.5%

The above data indicates that working-age adults with disabilities are much less likely to be working full-time and year-round than people without disabilities. In Vermont, both people with and without disabilities are more likely to be working than the national average. The Vermont data is very consistent with national data in that, overall, people with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than their peers without disabilities.

b) Estimated Penetration Rate of the DVR Program

It is possible to get a broad estimate of the penetration rate for the DVR program using ACS data. That is to say, what proportion of the likely DVR eligible population is accessing the DVR program? The following is a description of the method used to make this calculation.

METHOD

DVR took the working-age population of adults with disabilities and excluded the total identified with a vision disability. Individuals with a vision disability would primarily be eligible for and receive services through the Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired. We then compared the total population of potentially DVR eligible individuals to the actual number served in SFY 2019. This number does not include high school students receiving Pre-ETS services only.

Table 15. Potential Number of Eligible Consumers

Population	Total 2013	Total 2016	Total 2019
Vermont Civilians with Disabilities 18-64	49,029	47,800	43,112
Vermont Civilians with a Vision Related Disability	6,556	6,600	6,991
Total Civilians with Disabilities Potentially Eligible for DVR	42,473	41,200	36,121
Total Number Served by DVR in (not including Pre-ETS)	7,513	8,827	6,610
Estimated Proportion of Potential Eligible Individuals Served by DVR	17.6%	21.4%	18.3%

The above data shows that in SFY 2019 an estimated 18.3% of the eligible population was receiving services from DVR. This is a very high participation rate in the program in Vermont and reflects well on the reputation of DVR in the community.

c) Adults of Working Age Receiving Social Security Disability Benefits

Another way to assess potential unmet need is to look at population data for adults receiving Social Security Administration (SSA) disability benefits. Individuals who receive Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits are categorically eligible for vocational rehabilitation services.

To be eligible for SSI or SSDI benefits, an individual must be deemed too severely disabled to work at a substantial level. In general, individuals who receive SSI or SSDI benefits have more significant barriers to employment than individuals with disabilities who are not eligible for these benefits.

The most accurate way to assess the level of participation of SSI and SSDI recipients in vocational rehabilitation services by state is through the SSA Ticket to Work program. State VR and Blind agencies are required to report to SSA the names of beneficiaries for whom the Ticket is “in use.” This data is used to determine payment to VR agencies under the Ticket to Work or Cost Reimbursement programs.

Table 16. SSA Disability Beneficiaries Served, August 2020

	Total Working Age SSI and SSDI Population	Number Who Have Received VR Services ¹	Percentage Served
National	13,214,245	329,883	2.5%
Vermont	32,224	4,415	13.7%

Based on Ticket to Work data, Vermont DVR is serving almost five times more SSI and SSDI beneficiaries than the national average. Individuals receiving SSI/SSDI tend to have the most significant disabilities. The high rate of beneficiary participation in the DVR program is a testament to the Division’s commitment to serve people with the most severe disabilities.

2: INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE MINORITIES AND ELIGIBLE FOR DVR SERVICES

The ACS provides data on disability and race by state. Overall, 3.8% of Vermonters are from an ethnic minority. The following table shows the ACS estimates of the incidence of disability by race.

¹ This includes individuals served by both the General VR and/or Blind Agency.

Table 17. Incidence of Disability by Race to Adults Ages 18 to 64

Race	Total Number of Working Age	Percentage Reporting a Disability ²	Estimated Potential VR Eligible Consumers
White	364,100	11.1%	41,415
Black/African American	4,300	5%	215
Asian	10,600	3.5%	371

The disability rates for African Americans and Asians in Vermont are much lower than the national average. However, the estimates for the Vermont non-white populations with disabilities are from sample sizes of less than 40 people and too small to be statistically reliable. As a result, this data may substantially understate the actual rate of disability in these groups.

In SFY 2019, 8% of DVR closures were for individuals from an ethnic minority. Given this data it appears that individuals with disabilities from ethnic minorities are accessing the DVR program at a higher rate than individuals who are white.

As noted in Section V, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, we found no difference between racial and ethnic groups in overall satisfaction, except for individuals who identify as Hispanic or Latino (1.4% of the sample). They reported less satisfaction with DVR services in several areas. DVR is exploring this feedback and looking for strategies to address the concerns.

3: THE NEED FOR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

a) Overview

The State of Vermont has a well-established infrastructure of supported employment services for adults with developmental disabilities through the Developmental Disabilities Services Division (DDSD) program, and adults with psychiatric disabilities through the Community Rehabilitation and Treatment (CRT) program. The long-term supports are funded through the DDSD Medicaid Waiver and CRT Medicaid case rate, respectively. Participation in these programs is limited to individuals who meet the eligibility requirements for the CRT and DDSD programs. For DDSD services, in addition to receiving Medicaid Waiver services, an individual must also meet the DDSD System of Care Priorities.

DVR also supports the JOBS supported employment program for youth. The JOBS program is a partnership between the Departments of Corrections (DOC), Mental Health (DMH), Children and Families (DCF), and DVR to provide supported employment and case management services for at-risk youth with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

² Includes individuals with visual disabilities

b) Adults with Psychiatric Disabilities

COMMUNITY REHABILITATION AND TREATMENT (CRT) PROGRAM

DVR and the Department of Mental Health jointly funded supported employment for adults served through CRT from the late 1980s until SFY 2016. CRT provides intensive community-based services for adults with major psychiatric disabilities. The program served 2,243 people in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 2019.

Because DVR had to reassign resources to meet the Pre-ETS requirement, the agency decided to end the ongoing funding commitment to CRT supported employment in SFY 16. This funding commitment was approximately \$600,000 per year. It was a very difficult decision for DVR to make given the needs of this population. DVR and DMH worked with the Designated Agencies to help them use Medicaid case rate funding to sustain supported employment capacity in their CRT programs, and nine out of ten were successful. DVR continues to provide additional employment supports including case services, benefits counseling, and coordination around job development.

Table 18. Employment Rate and Average Earnings of CRT Consumers

SFY	Total Number Served	Number Employed	Percent Employed	Total Wages	Wages per Employed Client
FY2010	2,736	552	20%	\$3,658,589	\$6,628
FY2011	2,756	516	19%	\$3,311,628	\$6,418
FY2012	2,701	521	19%	\$3,315,031	\$6,363
FY2013	2,580	526	20%	\$3,497,779	\$6,650
FY2014	2,496	548	22%	\$3,565,033	\$6,506
FY2015	2,420	530	22%	\$3,610,180	\$6,812
FY2016	2,433	537	22%	\$4,070,029	\$7,579
FY2017	2,397	517	22%	\$3,789,487	\$7,330
FY2018	2,342	502	21%	\$4,061,469	\$8,091
FY2019	2,343	485	21%	\$4,101,702	\$8,457

Despite the loss of DVR funding in SFY 16, as shown in Table 18, the CRT programs have been able to sustain an employment rate of 21%. DVR, DMH, and the provider agencies continue to collaborate at the state and local level. DVR continues to provide case service support for CRT consumers in the supported employment program. This includes funding for training placements, transportation, credentialed training, work clothing and other supports. The CRT programs and consumers particularly value the DVR benefits counseling services because most CRT participants receive SSI or SSDI benefits.

c) Adults with Developmental Disabilities

As noted, Vermont has a well-developed infrastructure for providing supported employment to adults with developmental disabilities. In Vermont, ten Designated Agencies and three Specialized Service Agencies provide supported employment to individuals who meet the DDS eligibility and System of Care priorities. In 2011, the Agency of Human Services (AHS) established performance targets for the master grant agreements with the Designated and Specialized Service Agencies, to include an employment rate for working-age adults served through supported employment programs.³ For State Fiscal Years 2017 through 2019, the employment rate target was set at 45%.

Overall, the performance of the agencies in providing access to supported employment is very good. Fifty-two percent (52%) of developmental service consumers of working age were employed in SFY 19. This data point includes individuals with some substantial barriers to employment including significant health conditions and concurrent physical or mental health conditions. This is a remarkably high level for a system that serves individuals with some of the most severe disabilities.

Table 19. Employment Rate by DDS Program

DDS Program	Employment Rate SFY 2017	Employment Rate SFY 2018	Employment Rate SFY 2019
Champlain Community Services	77%	81%	76%
Counseling Service of Addison County	62%	58%	61%
Health Care & Rehabilitation Services of SE VT	50%	51%	52%
Howard Center for Human Services	49%	49%	49%
Lamoille Community Connections	68%	68%	69%
Lincoln Street	69%	71%	71%
Northeast Kingdom Human Services	36%	41%	40%
Northwestern Counseling & Support	39%	38%	35%
Rutland Mental Health Services	33%	36%	39%
Green Mtn Support Services	31%	37%	31%
United Counseling Service of Bennington	39%	43%	44%
Upper Valley Services	56%	56%	54%
Washington County Mental Health Services	45%	49%	46%
Families First	N/A	N/A	57%
Statewide Combined Employment Rate	50%	52%	52%

³ The employment rate is the percentage of working age adults who were employed at any time during the State Fiscal Year.

4: OTHER UNSERVED OR UNDERSERVED INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

a) Older Vermonters with Disabilities

According to ACS data, the percentage of individuals 65 and above reporting a disability was 32.4% in 2018. The percentage of people served by DVR over 65 was 3% in 2019. Generally speaking, individuals over the age of 65 are working longer, not only for financial reasons but because people are living longer and choosing to remain in the workforce. However, it appears that relatively few are seeking DVR services. DVR currently manages the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP). SCSEP has been a good source of referrals of older workers to the DVR program. DVR may need to expand outreach to community partners to make sure older individuals with disabilities are aware of the program.

b) Individuals with Physical Disabilities

DVR suspects that individuals with physical disabilities may be underserved, especially since the number of individuals with psychiatric disorders and substance disorders has increased. It may be that individuals with physical disabilities are not seeking services because their needs are less complex. In addition, DVR recognizes that employers require a more diverse selection of candidates to fill more skilled positions. DVR may need to consider targeted outreach to medical and rehabilitation providers or other community partners to encourage referral.

c) Individuals with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

According to the Vermont Brain Injury Association, an estimated 9,000 Vermonters are recovering from brain injury. TBI is associated with long-term unemployment. Based on field experience, DVR believes a major barrier is lack of access to long-term case management and employment supports. Some individuals with TBI experience similar barriers to maintaining employment as people with psychiatric disabilities and developmental disabilities. We believe individuals with TBI may need ongoing supported employment services to gain and maintain employment. However, in Vermont, there is no source of funding for ongoing supported employment for this population.

**d) Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities Served through Community
Mental Health Outpatient Services**

As noted, the CRT program has evidence-based supported employment services available for adults with psychiatric disabilities. However, individuals served through outpatient services have no access to supported employment. This is despite the reality that some outpatient consumers have very similar barriers and levels of need as those served in the CRT program. Evidence for the level of need includes the fact that 1,800 outpatient consumers in Vermont receive SSI/SSDI and therefore by definition have substantial barriers to employment. DVR is unlikely to be effective supporting these individuals without a long-term supported employment option. In 2019, DVR submitted a grant application to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) to implement supported employment for this population. Unfortunately, the application was not funded. DVR continues to explore options to implement supported employment for this population.

5: INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES SERVED THROUGH THE STATEWIDE WORKFORCE INVESTMENT SYSTEM

DVR and DOL have a strong history of collaboration around serving individuals with disabilities. DVR and DOL cooperate at the local level to serve individuals on mutual caseloads, and in some districts, DVR and DOL are co-located. DVR Regional Managers routinely meet with their local DOL counterparts. DOL staff sit on DVR-led Creative Workforce Solutions teams that coordinate outreach to local employers. DVR counselors and DOL staff frequently share the cost of training programs and other return-to-work activities for individual consumers. DOL staff have consulted with DVR and the state Assistive Technology Program about accessibility for DOL programs and services.

6: NEED FOR CRP PROGRAMS

Because of the small population and rural nature of Vermont, there are very few CRPs in the state. VABIR (the Vermont Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation) is the primary CRP for the DVR program, except for supported employment. VABIR has capacity to serve DVR consumers statewide and has an excellent track record. VABIR also serves individuals without disabilities through the state TANF program.

DVR provides grants to Vermont's Designated Agencies for employment services for individuals with developmental disabilities and individuals with severe and persistent psychiatric disabilities. Easter Seals also has a small presence in Vermont. While DVR is open to supporting the development of new CRPs as well as existing CRPs who come to Vermont, there is limited funding available to support multiple agencies.

DVR partnered with other state agencies, VABIR, and the Designated Agencies, to create an online training program for CRP staff hosted by Community College of Vermont. The program allows cohorts of employment staff to access training statewide. The content is modified to the specific populations served.

Part 7: **MAJOR FINDINGS**

After reviewing the data in the Needs Assessment, DVR and the SRC have identified seven primary findings. These findings are intended to help guide DVR's goals and priorities in the State Plan.

1: DVR NEEDS TO CONTINUE TO DEVELOP STRATEGIES TO RESPOND TO THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DVR CONSUMERS

At the time of writing, the job market is still relatively strong. The Vermont unemployment rate is relatively low, and DVR Business Account Managers report employers continue to see employee demand. As a state, Vermont has done extremely well containing the pandemic, which has likely helped soften the economic impact.

As with many aspects of American life, COVID-19 has impacted how DVR services are provided. DVR has been required to provide services remotely. Direct in-person services like job coaching have been strictly curtailed. Despite these limitations, DVR has been able to adapt quickly to provide remote services from home offices. DVR swiftly ensured all staff had the technology they needed to operate remotely. At the early height of the pandemic, many consumers expressed gratitude that DVR staff were reaching out to them. In the short term, it is not entirely clear how many current and former DVR consumers have lost their jobs or become furloughed. Many DVR consumers are reporting they are putting job search plans on hold.

DVR will continue to look for ways to effectively provide services in a pandemic environment. Depending on the infection rate, this might include expanding some services that are better provided in person. We also expect that as the pandemic recedes, there may be pent up demand for services. Former consumers who have lost jobs may return for assistance, and current DVR consumers who have put their employment plans on hold may be ready to move forward. We also expect some industry sectors to be more impacted by COVID than others. The hospitality industry for example has been hit hard. As that industry opens, they may need employees to replace staff who were furloughed or laid off and may not return. DVR will need to be ready to meet this potential demand. Regardless of what happens, DVR will have to be nimble in responding to situations as they arise.

2: AS THE DVR CASELOAD TRENDS YOUNGER, DVR MUST CONTINUE TO INNOVATE ON HOW TO BEST SERVE MIDDLE AGE AND OLDER CONSUMERS

As noted throughout the Needs Assessment, the DVR caseload has become significantly younger. About 50% of the caseload is under the age of 25. This is the result of the WIOA mandate to reserve 15% of funding to serve high school students with disabilities and is a trend that has been seen nationally in VR programs.

Whenever a federal mandate requires a program to reassign resources and capacity from one age group to another, there is inevitably an impact on the group losing resources. DVR currently has about 25% less counselor capacity to serve consumers over 25 than we did in 2015. While DVR cannot change this reality, we can look for more effective and efficient ways to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities who are over the age of 25. This might include:

- Expanding partnerships with other workforce programs to serve some individuals who need fewer or less intensive services.
- Effective management of caseloads so services are targeted at individuals who are engaged in services and are most in need.
- Supporting adults achieving higher quality and more stable employment so they do not need to reapply for DVR services later.
- Building on the experience of remote services to serve individuals more efficiently.

3: THE NEED TO INCREASE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS AND YOUTH

Students and youth with disabilities are much less likely than their peers without disabilities to enter and/or complete post-secondary education programs. High school students with disabilities are much less likely to participate in post-secondary preparation activities such as dual enrollment. Post-secondary education and credentialed training programs are essential for most youth to access high wage employment. Therefore, DVR needs to implement strategies to increase youth participation in these programs. Youth need an array of options, including “earn while you learn” options such as apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. They also include no-degree credentialed programs such as LNA that are often the starting point of high wage career ladders. This may include being flexible about what counts as a credential. Some credentials such as ServSafe do not count as a credential under the Common Performance Measures but will provide consumers with marketable skills. DVR might need to provide assistive technology, tutoring, and other strategies to help consumers succeed in post-secondary programs. Increasing these post-secondary options will assist youth achieve long-term career success in quality employment.

4: IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES TO ENSURE CULTURAL COMPETENCY FOR DVR STAFF

The demographics of Vermont are changing and the population is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse. In addition, recent events nationally have demonstrated the impact of systemic racism on people of color. These trends emphasize the need for DVR staff training around racial justice and cultural competency. DVR will also implement strategies to recruit a more diverse workforce to better mirror the community we serve. In the 2019 DVR consumer satisfaction survey, DVR found no difference in consumer satisfaction (81% overall satisfaction) by racial or ethnic group, except for people who identify as Latino or Hispanic. Based on a very small sample (9 individuals responded to the survey), this population reported less favorable experiences. While it is important not to draw broad conclusions based on a small number of respondents, DVR will be following up to research what we can do better to serve this population. This might include better access to or more effective use of language interpreters.

5: THE NEED TO IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES

DVR has long recognized that individuals with psychiatric disabilities often face substantial barriers to employment. In addition to their disabilities, there is the stigma of mental illness, combined with the fact that their conditions are invisible to others. The barriers are even greater for individuals with psychiatric disabilities who are offenders. National data suggests that at least 20% of incarcerated offenders have psychiatric disabilities.

DVR has historically taken the lead in promoting employment for people with psychiatric disabilities. DVR was instrumental in bringing the Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model to Vermont. IPS is the most widely accepted evidence-based approach to employment services for individuals with psychiatric disabilities. Unfortunately, IPS is only available to a subset of individuals served through the community mental health system CRT Program. It does not include individuals served through outpatient mental health services.

DVR needs to continue to explore opportunities to expand employment services for this population, in partnership with the community mental health system and the Department of Mental Health. The availability of reallocation funding may offer opportunities to try out new approaches or expand existing promising programs.

6: THE NEED TO PREPARE DVR CONSUMERS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CAREER LADDERS

Entry level employment is often a very important first step for DVR consumers. This is especially true for high school students and youth with disabilities. However, entry level employment should not be the end goal for most DVR consumers. DVR is developing strategies to help consumers move beyond entry level employment. This might include developing tools and strategies to help consumers envision themselves in higher level careers and how they will get there. It will involve expanding access to post-secondary training and education options. It also includes consistent follow up with employed consumers, post placement. By following up with consumers once they are employed, DVR can help these consumers identify potential career ladders in their current jobs or explore other possibilities.

7: THE NEED TO ENGAGE EMPLOYERS ABOUT THE POTENTIAL OF DVR CONSUMERS TO FILL HIGHER SKILL, HIGHER WAGE POSITIONS

DVR has excellent employer outreach through the Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS) initiative. Currently, DVR has active relationships with about 2,500 employers statewide. As DVR supports more individuals pursuing higher wage and higher skill employment, it is important that employers see the agency as a source of higher skilled employees. This might mean developing new relationships with employers, including “earn while you learn” options such as apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship programs. It might be that DVR, partnering with other workforce agencies, needs to develop specific training programs in response to the workforce needs of a specific sector. CWS Business Account Managers will need to work with employers to identify career ladders within their organizations. DVR can support consumers to advance up these career ladders by providing tailored training and supports.