

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 up, 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 at a later date
- 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 with 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 work 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 counts as a credential. Some credentials such as Serve Safe 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 employers see the agency as a source of higher skilled employees. This might mean developing new relationships with employers, including “work while you earn” options such as apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship programs. It might be DVR, partnering with other workforce agencies, 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 advance up these career ladders by providing tailored training and supports.