

Making Careers Possible



**Vermont State Rehabilitation Council
Annual Report 2021**

State Rehabilitation Councils (SRCs)

Joelle Brouner, Washington State Rehabilitation Council Executive Director, (used with permission)

State Rehabilitation Councils were born out of the tradition of effective advocacy by people with disabilities committed to the success of the publicly-funded Vocational Rehabilitation program. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first disability civil rights law to be enacted in the United States. The victory was marred when the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) delayed endorsement of the regulations needed to implement the law.

By April of 1977, frustration mounted and disability-rights advocates took direct action by leading sit-ins in Washington, D.C., New York, and San Francisco to pressure HEW to issue the regulations. While the protests in Washington and New York were short-lived, advocates in San Francisco persisted. They occupied the offices of HEW for four weeks.

As a consequence, Joseph Califano, the secretary of

HEW, endorsed the regulations.

The Rehabilitation Act is the federal law that establishes the publicly-funded Vocational Rehabilitation Program as we know it today.

The advocacy did not end in 1977. Since that time disability-rights advocates have continued work in service of a system that affords opportunities for customers of the Vocational Rehabilitation program to have more choices on their journeys toward employment.

During the reauthorization process of the Rehabilitation Act in 1993, advocates built on their tradition of effectiveness by persuading Congress to create State Rehabilitation Councils (under Title I, section 105) as a mechanism to support people with disabilities receiving vocational rehabilitation services to take an active role in shaping the services they receive.



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The Vermont State Rehabilitation Council

Vermont's State Rehabilitation Council advocates for consumer-directed and effective vocational services and for the creation of resources and services that will result in equal opportunities for Vermonters with disabilities.

Under its mandate in the Rehabilitation Act, it “shall review, analyze and advise the designated state unit regarding the performance of the responsibilities of the unit...particularly responsibilities relating to...eligibility (including order of selection); extent, scope and effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by state agencies that affect or that potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving rehabilitation goals...”

To meet its mission, the Council meets on a bimonthly basis five times a year. (There are no meetings in July or August.) SRC committees meet between full Council meetings to help conduct Council business, For more info visit: www.src.vermont.gov

Letters



From the Chair of the Vermont State Rehabilitation Council

Dear Friends,

It is my great honor to present the FY2021 Vermont State Rehabilitation Council Annual Report. Over the past year, we've worked to strengthen the Council itself.

We formally adopted an internal process for member appointments and reappointments, held our annual retreat, and planned for ways to increase membership engagement during and in between meeting. We've also looked at membership and succession planning at all of our steering committee meetings.

Carrying on the excellent history of advocacy, our council is made up of people with disabilities, family members, employers and those interested in ensuring

that people with disabilities have access to supports and services that help create opportunity for careers.

This combination comes through as we advise, and work towards improving the systems that support individuals with disabilities.

I'm honored to serve as the Chair of the SRC, and am really excited about the work in the year ahead. Many thanks to all the members of the SRC for their dedication and advocacy.

In Solidarity,

*Sarah Launderville, Chair
Vermont State Rehabilitation Council*





From the Director of the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation

Dear Reader,

After working fully remotely since March 2020, we have implemented our hybrid work model beginning the first week in November. We have allowed supervisors flexibility in implementation given the high case counts and increasing positivity rate and the fact staff may have unvaccinated children and may be caring for an immune compromised adult or be so themselves. For those of us who are not public facing (for the most part) we are having discussions about intentional teaming during our in-office time. Concern is high given the uncertainty around the new variant. We continue to be very productive with our remote work.

We remain in very solid fiscal shape. We have been awarded significant reallocation funds, allowing us to roll out several projects to support our focus on credential attainment, higher wage employment, and career pathways.

One example is the development and implementation of a system to pay minimum wage for work experiences and for consumers to attend training leading to credentials. Many of our customers are unable to access education and training opportunities because they must pay the bills. We think this could be a game changer for many Vermonters with disabilities. It is too early to have any real data. I remain hopeful it will lead to credentials and higher wage jobs and careers for VR consumers.

Our 2021 Summer Career Exploration Program was wildly successful for students. The program had 144 participants working for 110 different employers. Staff did a follow-up comprehensive assessment of students, employers, and youth teams with very positive feedback. This was our first year and there were many lessons learned. A “how to” manual has been written and is about to roll out to staff. We are starting early to recruit for next summer’s program.

We were funded by RSA for the Disability Innovation Fund Career Advancement Projects. This award is for a \$6.6 million five year grant program to support credential attainment and higher wage jobs for Vermonters with disabilities. We will be adding six VR counselor navigators,

one for each region. In addition, we will be funding two staff from Community College of Vermont and Vermont Technical College to support our customers to obtain certifications and credentials via these two institutions. This project will be transformational to our agency over the next five years!

We are in the process of a rebrand and will soon become known as HireAbility Vermont. We will be rolling out a comprehensive marketing campaign at the end of January with the support of a local marketing firm. We are in the process of implementing an internal communication plan to staff and an external communication plan to partners to prepare for the roll out. It is an exciting time to be messaging a new, fresh look and feel and shedding our old “rehabilitation” identity.

Over the last year we have begun a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion effort. We recently selected a vendor and are in the process of writing a contract with Social Contract, an organization to work alongside of us on this journey of organizational change. They have a four-phase blueprint for this work.

The Kessler Foundation Project, WorkVT 2.0, is rolling in our Burlington and Rutland offices, and we have expanded to Newport and Barre. The Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation (VABIR) finally has access to contact information for all ticket holders in Vermont so we can direct market to them. We are learning already that we should not attempt to protect people’s benefits. It is their decision! Early outcomes are wonderful.

The National Association of State Workforce Agencies invited DVR to present our WIOA dashboard and systems change work driven by WIOA Common Performance Measures. We have had national interest in our dashboard initiative and are seeing positive impacts on the CPMs.

As always, we look forward to continuing our robust and productive partnership with the VT SRC.

Happy New Year!

Diane P. Dalmasse, Director

The Year in Review — Summary SRC Committee Reports



Advocacy, Outreach, and Education Committee

Asher Edelson, Chair

We in the Advocacy, Outreach, and Education (AOE) Committee had a productive year with presentations, legislative outreach, and member engagement. We established legislative priorities, issued statements of support, and advocated for key areas with state and national elected officials.

Regarding the issue of hearing aid insurance, seeing as Vermont is the last state in New England to not have it mandated, our committee created a [statement of support](#) for state legislation H.266. We hosted a Micro Transit Pilot Project panel and provided feedback and input for next steps. We hosted a presentation by the Vermont Coalition for Disability Rights (VCDR), and named two SRC representatives to the VCDR Board of Governors. We also hosted a presentation on attendant care services to provide members with education on the program in advance of the legislative session. We sent a congressional delegation letter in support of the DVR waiver request.

In addition to welcoming new members to the AOE Committee, we transitioned to a new AOE Chair, Asher Edelson. We thanked former AOE Chair, Sam Liss, for his service.

We had active participation at the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) Annual Retreat. Among other ideas, our members offered a variety of suggestions on how to create more actionable items for future meetings, and how to engage more of our membership in advocacy and outreach.

2021 Legislative Priorities

EQUITY FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES:

It is of critical importance that equity considerations for people with disabilities be monitored throughout this legislative session. This includes impacts of both standalone disability related legislation and budget decisions, as well as considering both the intended and unintended consequences proposed legislation will have on Vermonters with disabilities.

HEARING AID INSURANCE MANDATE:

Untreated hearing loss contributes to an increase in dementia, falls, and associated healthcare costs and decreases rates of employment and independent living. A hearing aid mandate will require private health insurance coverage for hearing aids, repairs, and related services. This coverage should be at least equivalent to the coverage provided in the Vermont Medicaid program. Vermont is currently the only New England state without a such a mandate, and most states require coverage nationally.

UNFREEZE THE ATTENDANT SERVICES

PROGRAM: This program—paid for with general funds—allows more people with disabilities to gain and maintain employment. It ensures that people who are ineligible for Medicaid can receive personal attendant care services and direct their care without the requirement of impoverishing themselves. The Attendant Services Program has been frozen for more than five years; new applications are not being accepted and a waitlist is not being maintained.

FIRST RESPONDERS WELLNESS

COMMISSION: Establish a First Responders Wellness Commission because of the negative mental health impacts associated with COVID-19. Given the work of Vermont's Employee Assistance Program in supporting first responders, VocRehab Vermont and the Department for Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living should have adequate representation in the composition of the commission.

PAID FAMILY LEAVE: Create an insurance program that will provide employees with paid parental and family leave. This would enable Vermonters the ability to care for themselves or a loved one during serious illness.



Performance Review Committee

Dominick Caputo, Chair and SRC Vice

The Vermont State Rehabilitation Council's Performance Review Committee (PRC) is responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and advising the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) on its performance in fulfilling its mission and responsibilities.

This year the PRC reviewed, made recommendations and provided input on a range of topics affecting DVR's effectiveness, including the following:

DVR Marketing Plan

The PRC reviewed the work of outside consultants with regards to developing a new marketing plan for DVR.

The marketing plan looks to communicate DVR services to adults, youth, and employers. The goal is to effectively communicate who DVR is and how they can assist stakeholders.

Linking Learning to Careers

An overview of the Linking Learning to Careers initiative was provided to the PRC for review and feedback.

The purpose of the initiative is to develop and implement a model that provides work-based learning experiences and postsecondary access for secondary students, and otherwise enhances their progress on a successful career path.

COVID-19 Impacts

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to play a major role in how DVR provides services to consumers. The PRC requested and reviewed information on how the pandemic affected consumers during 2020.

As expected the pandemic saw a drop in the DVR employment rate along with an associated drop in earnings.

Students with disabilities also saw a drop in enrollment, competitive integrated employment, and work-based learning experiences.

The PRC will continue to monitor how the pandemic affects DVR and their consumers in 2021 and beyond.

Consumer Satisfaction Survey

The biennial Consumer Satisfaction Survey looks at the DVR consumer experience and overall satisfaction with DVR services.

The PRC reviewed a comprehensive presentation on the results of the 2019 survey in preparation for the upcoming 2022 survey, which will encompass 2020/2021.

The PRC provides input and suggests questions that may be included in the upcoming survey.

Intake Assessment Overview

The PRC received an overview of DVR's intake and assessment process. This process helps to determine the next steps, goals, and best potential services for the consumer. Feedback was provided with a goal of reducing the burden on families to manage multiple case managers (DVR, mental health, housing and education).

The Work Ahead

As we move toward 2022, the PRC has developed a significant list of goals and priorities which will explore additional avenues to serve consumers of DVR. We look forward to the upcoming year and to serving the people of the State of Vermont.



Policy and Procedures Committee

Sherrie Brunelle, Chair

Despite another challenging year of adjusting our daily work and personal lives due to COVID-19, the Policies and Procedures (P&P) Committee accomplished a great deal on the past year. As Chair, I am immensely proud of the work that we have done. I am even more proud of and grateful for the contributions of the committee members.

Throughout 2020-2021 the P&P Committee worked on a number of policies, including policies related to:

- Referral and Application
- Eligibility Determination
- Self-Employment
- Post-Secondary Training and Education

The most impactful of these reviews and revisions are changes to the Post-Secondary Training and Education policy. The changes to this policy led to:

- Highlighting and emphasizing that there are multiple pathways to higher wage employment and career advancement for consumers;
- Ensuring that progressive training and education opportunities leading to higher wage employment, including opportunities for advancement, are available at a time and pace determined by the consumer;
- Authorizing use of DVR funds to pay for unpaid student debt that presents a barrier to consumer eligibility for grant funds;

- Emphasizing that DVR is not a general source of financial support for post-secondary education;
- Emphasizing that DVR funding is intended to support consumer advancement toward an employment goal and any services provided must be tied to the consumer's employment goal;
- Instituting minimum wage payment for all DVR consumers participating in job shadows, work experiences, or attending training;
- Increasing the spending guidelines for training and post-secondary education; and
- Providing statewide, office-based, and staff-wide training on the changes under this chapter, the new spending guidelines, and the exceptions process with additional training opportunities provided for staff who missed initial training or are new to DVR.

The committee also worked to ensure that all DVR policies used:

- Gender neutral references
- Consistent and compliant language regarding funding of goods and services and the spending guidelines exceptions process.

The P&P Committee has set an ambitious agenda for the coming year. I look forward to reporting on our accomplishments in the year ahead.

Vermont State Rehabilitation Council Members - 2021

Steering Committee

Sarah Launderville, *SRC Chair*
Nick Caputo, *SRC Vice Chair*
Asher Edelson, *Advocacy, Outreach and Education Chair*
Nick Caputo, *Performance Review Committee Chair*
Sherrie Brunelle, *Policy and Procedures Committee Chair*
Diane Dalmasse, *Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Director*
James Smith, *SRC Liaison, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Budget and Policy Manager*

Advocacy, Outreach & Education Committee

Asher Edelson, *Chair*
Sam Liss, *Past Chair*
Courtney Blasius
Sherrie Brunelle
Diane Dalmasse
Martha Frank
Helena Kehne
Cari Kelley
Ana Kolbach
Sarah Launderville
Bill Meirs
Laura Siegel
Olivia Smith-Hammond
Emily Ahtúnan

Policy & Procedures Committee

Sherrie Brunelle, *Chair*
Kristen Carpentier
Rocko Gieselman
Helena Kehne
Olivia Smith-Hammond
Andrea Bacchi
Emily Ahtúnan
Patricia Wehman
Sarah Sterling
James Smith, *SRC Liaison*

Performance Review Committee

Nick Caputo, *Chair*
Sherrie Brunelle
Gina D'Ambrosio
Danielle Dubois
Laura Flint
Marlena Hughes
Robin Ingenthron
Rose Lucenti
Bill Meirs
Sophie Zeman-Hale
Kevin Stapleton
James Smith, *SRC Liaison*

2021 SRC Members (Including Recently Termed Off Members)

Ana Kolbach
Andrea Bacchi
Asher Edelson
Bill Meirs
Brian Smith
Cara Sachs
Cari Kelley
Courtney Blasius
Danielle Dubois
Diane Dalmasse
Emily Ahtúnan
Gina D'Ambrosio
Helena Kehne
James Smith, *SRC Liaison*
Kristen Carpentier
Laura Flint
Laura Siegel
Lexia Stanley
Marlena Hughes
Martha Frank
Nick Caputo
Olivia Smith-Hammond
Patricia Wehman
Robin Ingenthron
Rocko Gieselman
Rose Lucenti
Sam Liss
Sarah Launderville
Sherrie Brunelle

VR's Contribution to Vermonters and Their Communities

Creating Opportunity, Creating Jobs

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's mission is to help Vermonters with disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain meaningful employment and to help employers recruit, train, and retain employees with disabilities. Consumer choice and self-direction are core values that drive DVR's approach to providing services and developing new programs. DVR's ability to help jobseekers succeed also depends on clearly understanding the needs of our other customers: employers. To that end, DVR plays an important facilitating role in Creative Workforce Solutions, an Agency of Human Services initiative that builds on DVR's initial employer outreach work.

Creating Career Pathways for DVR Consumers

In 2014 the US Congress reauthorized the Rehabilitation Act via the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA is the first legislative reform of the public workforce system in more than 15 years. WIOA introduced new Common Performance Measures (CPM) that core partners including DVR will be measured on. The measures are:

- Job retention six months post program exit
- Job retention 12 months post program exit
- Median earnings six months post program exit
- Credential attainment
- Measurable skills gains
- Employer satisfaction

Prior to WIOA, DVR had been measured primarily on how many people the program assisted in getting a job. This shift from quantitative to qualitative measures required a major paradigm shift in our service delivery system. To respond to the paradigm shift, DVR implemented the Careers Initiative, a series of strategies to align program services with the new measures.

The new strategies include:

- **PROMOTING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING:** DVR has realigned case service resources to support more consumers in post-secondary education and training, with a focus on credentials in high-demand, high-wage fields.

- **CAREER ASSESSMENT:** DVR is promoting the use of modern career assessment tools that help consumers see beyond entry-level employment and identify potential career paths.
- **SUPPORTING PRACTICE CHANGE:** DVR has updated policy and practice to promote consumers achieving longer-term career goals.
- **TEAMING TO SUPPORT THE CONSUMER:** DVR encourages counselors to pull in other team members to support consumers in achieving their employment goals. This might include the employment consultant, the benefits counselor, or the assistive technology specialist.
- **FOLLOW-UP AFTER PLACEMENT:** DVR requires regular follow-up with consumers post-exit to promote job retention and career advancement. This can be critical for consumers who are struggling to retain their jobs.

DVR tracks implementation of these strategies through a new performance dashboard. The dashboard provides real-time information for staff and managers at the counselor, district, and statewide level. The dashboard provides them with a useful frame of reference to judge how they are doing, so they can focus on what they need to do to achieve desired outcomes.

Dashboard data indicates that the Careers Initiative has had a positive impact on practices, services, and outcomes. In the last year DVR has seen the following:

- A 5% increase in DVR consumers participating in post-secondary education and training.
- A 28% increase in follow-up services for employed participants.
- A 23% increase in DVR consumers earning over 125% of minimum wage at program exit.
- An 8% increase in DVR consumers earning over 125% of minimum wage at program exit.

Summer Career Exploration Program

In 2021 DVR launched the Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP), which provides high school students with disabilities paid summer work experiences combined with career exploration curriculum. Despite challenges posed by COVID, district DVR teams -in partnership with employers- created amazing opportunities for youth, regardless of the level of support required for them to be successful. As a result:

- 144 students had a paid work experience through 110 employers
- 34 students were offered competitive employment after completing the SCEP program

WorkVT 2.0

DVR received a competitive grant through the Kessler Foundation to improve employment prospects for consumers receiving SSI and SSDI benefits. Through an innovative combination of services and financial incentives, WorkVT2.0 assists individuals in reaching financial independence by replacing their benefits with a higher paycheck. In less than a year, the project already has five sites around the state with 50 participants (four of whom are already working full time and no longer receiving benefits, and an additional 16 are already working part time).

Number of People Served

- A total of 5,606 individuals were served in SFY 2021. (6,610 in SFY 2020)
- 4,957 people were served in the core DVR program in SFY 2021. (5,709 in SFY 2020)
- 1,189 high school students were served through the Pre-Employment Transition Services program in SFY 2021. (1,583 SFY 2020)
- SFY 2015-2019 (post-WIOA) 26% of all VR youth served received a work-based learning experience.

How Well We Served Them

The DVR Consumer Experience Survey is conducted every three years to determine consumers' overall satisfaction with the program. The survey was last conducted in 2019 by third-party research firm, Market Decisions Research (MDR). Of more than 700 people surveyed in 2019:

- 81% reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with DVR.
- 96% said that they would recommend that their friends or family members seek help from DVR.
- 92% of consumers responded that they are satisfied with their experience working with DVR staff and counselors (a 2% increase from our 2016 survey).
- 98% of consumers reported feeling that they were treated by DVR staff with dignity and respect.

The largest improvement in customer experience was seen in the ability of consumers to communicate with their DVR counselors. In 2016, 88% of consumers were satisfied with their ability to contact their counselors; in 2019 this percentage rose to 91%, an all-time high.

DVR has a contract in place to conduct a survey in early 2022, which will be valuable in assessing consumers' reactions to remote and hybrid services offered during the pandemic.

Employer Satisfaction

In 2019 DVR contracted with MDR to develop a survey that would determine employer satisfaction with DVR services. In 2019 MDR surveyed 200 employers that had contact with a Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS) team member(s) within the last 18 months. The survey found that:

- 77% of employers were satisfied with CWS services
- 94% would be open to working with the CWS team in the future.

One area of improvement that was identified in the survey results, is that employers would like to be contacted more frequently. The information the survey provided is invaluable as we continue to improve our services to employers and develop more connections to best serve DVR customers.

DVR has contracted with MDR to repeat the survey in 2022. We anticipate that COVID and the recent labor shortages will affect the results.

Youth and School Staff Satisfaction

In 2020 DVR contracted with MDR to develop two surveys to determine the satisfaction of youth with DVR transition services and evaluate school and partner satisfaction. Consumers included in the sample were youth who were currently receiving or had received transition services within the last year.

Of the 104 youth respondents:

- 75% were satisfied with services
- 78% found working with their transition counselor helpful.

Of the 189 school and partner staff respondents:

- 96% were familiar with DVR transition services
- 93% felt confident they know how and when to refer a student for services.

Overwhelmingly both surveys found that satisfaction with transition services is high.

However, one area for improvement that was identified is to increase the number of counseling staff that serve transition age youth. This would allow youth to have more regular contact with their counselors and for school staff and partners to collaborate more frequently to provide the most comprehensive services.

How People are Better Off

The most immediate measure of how people are better off is their employment status when they leave the program.

In SFY 2021, 444 individuals closed their DVR cases with successful employment.

This means they:

- Met their individual employment goal.
- Were stably employed for at least 90 days.

Additionally, 54% of consumers (241) had a wage above 125% of the minimum wage.

Vermont's VR programs also received data for the first time, on the WIOA Common Performance Measures and how we compared to national averages. These data show that:

- Vermont VR consumers are achieving measurable skills at a much higher rate than the national average.
- The employment rate two quarters post exit improved from 49% in SFY 2019 to 53.5% in SFY 2021.
- The median earnings two quarters post exit increased from \$3,516 in SFY 2019 to \$4,630 in SFY 2021.



The Vermont State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is appointed by the Governor. We seek new members who have a wide range of interests and talents to help improve the services offered by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation to Vermonters with disabilities. If you are interested in applying to become a member of the SRC, please contact Kate Larose, Coordinator.

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