

**Vermont
State Rehabilitation Council**

**Annual Report
2023—2024**



HireAbility
VERMONT



Table of Contents

◆ State Rehabilitation Councils	3
◆ The Vermont State Rehabilitation Council	4
◆ Letters	
◆ From the Chair of the Vermont State Rehabilitation Council	5
◆ From the Director of the HireAbility Vermont	6-8
◆ The Year in Review—Summary SRC Committee Reports	
◆ Advocacy, Outreach, and Education Committee	9-10
◆ Performance Review Committee	11-13
◆ Policy and Procedures Committee	14-17
◆ Members	18
◆ HireAbility’s Core Services	19
◆ HireAbility Developments and Accomplishments	20-24
◆ HireAbility’s Contribution to Vermonters and Their Communities	25-26
◆ History of State Vocational Rehabilitation Councils	27



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.



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



From the Chair of the Vermont State Rehabilitation Council

Hello,

It is a true honor to present the 2024 Annual Report for the Vermont State Rehabilitation Council (SRC).

The volunteer board members continue to amaze me. The dedication to the mission of HireAbility and interest in learning is humbling and admirable. We also have the opportunity at every meeting to hear from those doing the work, receive updates, and hear the stories of those we serve. The desire to work with every client and ensure that they have the support needed to achieve their goals of employment is the number one goal for every employee at HireAbility. Thank you to the entire staff and members of the SRC.

As you will see from this report, a lot of work has been done throughout the year. Our committees work hard on their perspective areas of focus and are dedicated to those with disabilities in our beautiful state. The Policy and Procedures Committee ensures that we not only live by our mandate in the Rehabilitation Act but also ensure that all Policies and Procedures give clear direction to the employees and offer the most opportunity for our clients. The Performance Review Committee is focused on monitoring and analyzing how well HireAbility Vermont is serving its customers and reporting back to the Council. Another critical piece is making sure that HireAbility is doing the best

job possible with continued support. Lastly, the Advocacy, Outreach and Education Committee is constantly talking about the best ways to advocate on behalf of HireAbility and educate the public on the services provided. This is where the learning and collaborating starts with deciding the issues that need to be discussed and bringing experts to the SRC to learn more.

To say this work is gratifying would be an understatement. I came to this role as a parent of two children who have used the services of HireAbility and one of them joined me on the SRC this year. We need to continue the work of highlighting the talent of those with disabilities and collaborating with our business community to give them an opportunity to see our clients shine and reap the benefits of their commitment to their work. I am excited to see the SRC continue to move this work forward and for Vermont to continue to be a leader in Workforce Development.

With Gratitude,

*Cari Kelley
Chair, Vermont State Rehabilitation Council*



From the Director of Vermont HireAbility

Dear Reader,

HireAbility's highlighted programs below continue to grow Vermont's economy and support our department's mission to make Vermont the best state to live with a disability with dignity, respect and independence. Employment and economic opportunity are the key drivers of a community's health and wellness and have proven to be a social determinant of health for our customers. HireAbility is committed to achieving a chosen career pathway for every Vermonter with a disability we serve.

2024 Summer Career Exploration Program

HireAbility is pleased and proud to have successfully completed our 4th year of the [Summer Career Exploration Program \(SCEP\)](#) (click this link for video). Over 120 youth participate from nine HA districts around the state. Youth in SCEP were employed by nearly 100 Vermont employers. This is the biggest enrollment that we have seen since our inception. SCEP is a program for youth with disabilities in high school that offers 5 weeks of career exploration curriculum in a classroom with peers, plus paid employment in the participant's area of interest. SCEP is intended to be a fun and inspiring vocational launchpad for the youth participating. For many, this is their first job with a paycheck. Past SCEP participants have followed up their SCEP experience by enrolling in dual enrollment courses,

Project SEARCH, College Compass, credentialed training and apprenticeships, and much more. HireAbility believes that everyone can work if they are given the right support. This program offers young people with disabilities a positive first experience with the world of work. The result is youth with stronger self-confidence and belief they can succeed at a job and have a career.



Cont'd Next Page



From the Director of Vermont HireAbility, *Continued*

JOBS Program Celebrates 30 Years of Success

Since 1994, the Jump on Board for Success (JOBS) Program has supported youth disconnected from their communities and facing barriers to successful transitions to adulthood. On June 4th, over 75 people joined HireAbility to share the program's impact over the last three decades, recognize program staff, [hear from youth supported by the JOBS program \(click this link for video\)](#), and honor long-standing program leadership and staff. The JOBS Program is supported through a unique partnership of HireAbility Vermont, the Department of Mental Health, the Department for Aging and Independent Living, the Department of Corrections, and the Department for Children and Families as well as local Designated Agency and Restorative Justice partners around the state. The celebration event was incredibly well received and renewed all our commitment to the value of the JOBS Program for Vermont's at-risk youth.

Working for Recovery from Opioid Use

Opioid use can have a devastating impact on the relationships and structures that support a stable and productive life. Employment is often a victim of opioid use. Yet having a stable job is critical to sustaining recovery. HireAbility is partnering with Invest EAP, VABIR, and the recovery centers in Chittenden and the Northeast Kingdom to help Vermonters in recovery. This [Working for Recovery program \(click this link for video\)](#), funded by the legislature, involves a HireAbility counselor, VABIR employment consultant, and Invest EAP mental health counselor. These three staff form a wrap-around team for the participants as they work to regain jobs and build careers, and encounter the inevitable bumps of stigma, discrimination, and reoccurrence during their lifelong journey of recovery. The team is in the recovery community. Thus, resources are brought within easy reach that aren't usually present there – HireAbility's career counseling and flexible financial resources, VABIR's wide network of employer contacts and job placement skills and Invest EAP's expertise in solution-focused mental health interventions related to employment. The combination of dedicated outreach and an employment focus makes this a very promising initiative.



Cont'd Next Page

From the Director of Vermont HireAbility, *Continued*

Building Careers Through the VT Career Advancement Project (VCAP)

When Cameron started her work with HireAbility in 2019, she was in recovery and relying on Reach Up benefits and wanted our help to get a part-time job. We helped her get a job in a grocery store at just above minimum wage but knew that she had higher ambitions. Her interest then was working in the trades. As we supported her in a DOL manufacturing apprenticeship, we also nurtured her aspirations. When she decided she wanted to become an engineer, we provided the encouragement, counseling, and financial resources to make that a reality which included completing her AA degree. Today, her wage is more than 3 times what it was in 2019, thanks to her drive, and our ongoing support. As a VCAP participant, Cameron personifies what it's about: The VCAP initiative is a systems-change commitment for HireAbility: that every Vermonter who seeks

our services is worthy of and has access to a career that offers economic security and aligns with individual values. VCAP is committed to the long-haul, to sustained effort that helps people with disabilities find their career path, train for it, and move into high-wage, high-quality employment. As Cameron put it: "...having a sounding board, a witness, advice, someone rooting for me... was almost more supportive than the financial help along the way. I really needed that. Thank you!" [Click this link for another participant video highlighting HireAbility's Career Pathways focus.](#)

As always, I look forward to continuing our robust and productive partnership with the VT State Rehabilitation Council.

*Diane Dalmasse,
Director HireAbility Vermont*

Division Philosophy

The Division of HireAbility Vermont has a mission to help Vermonters with disabilities prepare for, obtain, and maintain meaningful careers, and to help employers recruit, train, and retain employees with disabilities. Consumer choice and self-direction are core values that drive HA's approach to providing services and developing new programs. HA's ability to help jobseekers succeed also depends on clearly understanding the needs of our other customers: employers. To

better reach both our consumers and employers, HA rebranded as HireAbility in SFY 2022 and launched a marketing campaign to promote our services for both audiences. The HireAbility rebranding also reinforces our commitment to helping consumers access high wage and high-quality careers through training and education. It also communicates our goal of being a source of motivated and trained employees for Vermont employers.

The Year in Review- Summary SRC Committee Reports

Advocacy, Outreach, and Education Committee

Courtney Blasius, Chair

Dear Vermonters,

It has been a busy, and productive year. We, the Advocacy, Outreach, and Education Committee, began our term by reviewing our priorities, outlined from the previous year. This entailed a discussion about reviewing SRC by-laws in the following year. We held an outreach event at the card room in the Legislature.

Furthermore, we learned about how we can better support/work with individuals with chronic disorders, and/or multiple disabling conditions. We look forward to developing a plan to continue to support these communities.

We are learning about how we can support the Vermont Pathways to Partnerships (VT-P2P) grant received by the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI). Their goal is to build a culture of high expectations for youth with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to adult life. This part-

nership will work with bringing statewide and local leaders together to improve outcomes for youth.

We heard from the Pandemic Equity Coordinator from the Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL) on the work that they are doing on the Effects of Long COVID. We are still in a research phase, of understanding how we can support their work.

We were presented with information on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Bills currently in the state legislature. This bill seeks to include accessibility models in all Vermont schools. This act relates to the Education Bill of Rights for students who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf/blind. This act has made a crossover to the senate and is still under review.



Cont'd Next Page



Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Advocacy, Outreach, and Education Committee, *Continued*

We had a presentation on the Spirit of ADA Awards, which are given to nominated employers for their exemplary commitment to creating an inclusive workplace. Their mission is to create equal employment for all Vermonters. 2023 winners are listed here: [Spirit of the ADA Award Winners | Employment of People with Disabilities](#)



Lastly, we reviewed the process and Outcomes for SCEP (Summer Career Exploration Program). This program has had a successful start in the past few years, however, increased difficulties with transportation are imminent due to proposed budget cuts in public transit expected across the state in the next fiscal year.

It has been my distinct pleasure to serve this committee as a member, and as committee facilitator, this past year. I look forward to seeing their continued efforts to assist Vermonters of all abilities, and their unique needs.

Gratefully,

*Courtney Blasius
Chair, Advocacy, Outreach, and Education
Committee*

HireAbility Overview

HireAbility serves people with disabilities in Vermont who face barriers to employment. We help HireAbility consumers figure out what types of career pathways will work for them, through assessment, counseling, and guidance. We use our extensive networks in the employer community to create job opportunities, match employer needs with jobseeker skills, and help employers retain staff with disabilities. We also invest heavily in post-secondary training and education to help our consumers gain credentials that will lead to high wage and high-quality employment.

Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Performance Review Committee

Dominick Caputo, Chair

The Vermont State Rehabilitation Council's Performance Review Committee (PRC) is responsible for reviewing, analyzing, and advising the Vermont Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (HireAbility) 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 HireAbility's effectiveness, including the following:

Work Vermont 2.0

The PRC recently assessed the WorkVT 2.0 initiative, a program developed to support individuals receiving Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in achieving financial independence. WorkVT 2.0 is designed to assist beneficiaries by helping them replace their SSI or SSDI benefits with higher wages, guided by each participant's specific career goals. This program introduces a novel approach to case management for HireAbility by emphasizing team-based case handling, expanded support from Certified Work Incentives Counselors (CWICs), targeted financial assistance at critical times, and longer case management periods.

Beneficiaries in WorkVT 2.0 begin with a nine-month Trial Work Period (TWP), allowing them to earn without impacting their benefits. After completing TWP, they enter a 36-

month Extended Period of Eligibility, where benefits are suspended if earnings exceed the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) level.

While the data isn't available for 2024, in 2023, the program enrolled 144 participants, with 116 currently active after initial withdrawals. Of these, 88 are employed 32 in full-time roles. Remarkably, 26 participants successfully eliminated their benefits by achieving full self-sufficiency. Additionally, 37 participants pursued higher education or specialized training, underscoring the program's commitment to fostering long-term career growth and financial independence.

Common Performance Measures

The PRC assessed Vermont's performance on the Common Performance Measures, comparing the state's results to the national average across eight key metrics. These measures assess progress in education, training, and employment outcomes, specifically focusing on participants' measurable skill gains, employment rates two and four quarters after program exit, and median earnings two quarters post-exit.



Cont'd Next Page

Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Performance Review Committee, *Continued*

Vermont performed strongly in six out of the eight metrics, surpassing the national average in key areas. Notably, the state achieved a credential attainment rate of 53.2%, significantly higher than the national average of 37.6%, reflecting Vermont's success in supporting participants toward recognized post-secondary credentials or direct employment pathways. These results highlight Vermont's effectiveness in fostering academic, technical, and occupational advancements among participants, ultimately enhancing employability and supporting long-term economic stability. The PRC's findings reinforce the value of continued investment in state programs that prioritize measurable skill development and employment outcomes.

Summer Career Exploration Program

The PRC recently reviewed the Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP) administered by HireAbility, which provides pre-employment transition services to students. This program offers high school students aged 14-21 a three- to five-week paid work experience during the summer, where they gain hands-on exposure aligned with their career interests. Each week, students work between 10 to 32 hours and participate in at least two hours of job skills training. Since its inception in 2021, SCEP has supported 481 youth, with many participants continuing to further work-based learning opportunities. Impressively, 85% of participants remain engaged with HireAbility after completing SCEP, reflecting the program's impact. Additionally, SCEP has

established partnerships with 371 employment sites across Vermont, with about 25% of students receiving job offers post-program. Approximately 30% of participants either hold or have held employment upon case closure, highlighting SCEP's success in fostering job readiness and future employment opportunities.

Unmet Mental Health Needs

The latest review of data related to the mental health needs of Vermonters reveals key insights into the population served by HireAbility. Of the individuals assisted, 1,923 (approximately 35% of the total served population) were identified as having a disability related to mental health. The remaining 3,500 individuals served fell into other categories of disabilities. Since 2022, there are still 1,034 open cases, with an average case duration of nearly one year, which aligns with the timeline for other disability cases.

Cont'd Next Page



Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Performance Review Committee, *Continued*

Key findings from the Mental Health data include:

Case Closure and Employment:

The rate of cases closed successfully—defined as employment sustained for 90 days or more—is 6% for those with mental health-related disabilities, compared to 11% for individuals with other disabilities.

Employment during case engagement was achieved by 30% of the mental health group, slightly higher than the 26% seen in other disability groups.

Education and Training Outcomes:

Among those with mental health disabilities, 9% completed additional education or training beyond high school. This is marginally lower than the 12% completion rate observed in other disability types.

Service Provision:

Sixty-five percent (65%) of individuals with mental health disabilities have an external partner, such as Community Rehabilitation and Treatment Services (CRT) or Vermont Association of Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation (VABIR), working alongside HireAbility staff, aligning with the partnership rate for other disability groups.

Paid services that directly connect to employment goals are utilized by 44% of the mental health group, which is higher than the 34% for other disability groups. Additionally, 17% of this group received paid services in support of

training or education programs, compared to 12% in other disability categories.

The needs assessment highlights a substantial unmet demand for services among individuals with mental health needs. This suggests that several eligible individuals with mental health disabilities may not be receiving the necessary support and services.

While there are some variations in outcomes and service use between individuals with mental health-related disabilities and other groups, the metrics indicate that discrepancies are not substantial. This alignment is encouraging and demonstrates that efforts to support individuals with mental health disabilities are effectively integrated into the broader support framework.

The Work Ahead

As we move toward 2025, the PRC will continue our review of the Common Performance Measures and will start our review of the consumer and business satisfaction surveys. We have also developed a significant list of goals and priorities which will explore additional avenues to serve consumers of HireAbility. We look forward to the upcoming year and to serving the people of the State of Vermont.

Dominick Caputo, Chair Performance Review Committee

Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Policy and Procedures Committee

Sherrie Brunelle, Chair

It is the charge of the Policies and Procedures Committee (Committee) to periodically review and when appropriate to revise all HireAbility VT policies within its *Manual of Policies and Procedures* to:

- Maintain compliance with the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act of 2014*.
- Provide clear guidance to counselors,
- Ensure that applicant and participants rights are protected, and
- Promote effective services and quality employment outcomes for participants.

Throughout FY 2024, the Committee worked diligently toward meeting its charge by reviewing and updating multiple policies with significant impact on HireAbility VT participants. The following policies were revised and adopted after public comment.

Chapter 308, Self-Employment

It is with pride that the Committee can announce the completion of its review and revision of this critical policy which could be a great employment opportunity for individuals with disabilities. Self-employment can allow a participant to structure their business in a way that takes into consideration the participant's abilities, capabilities, and interests. Unlike most policies, this policy was worked on over a period of years. It was a significant undertaking that totally changed how

HireAbility VT supports participants interested in self-employment as a means of entering or reentering the competitive workforce. We

were fortunate to have the opportunity to work with Griffin Hammis Associates (GHA), internationally recognized experts in the fields of self-employment and customized employment for individuals with disabilities. This support was at no cost to HireAbility VT. It was funded through a grant from the federal Rehabilitation Services Administration to GHA. We are excited that support and technical assistance from GHA will continue as the new policy and procedures are implemented.



Cont'd Next Page



Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Policy & Procedures Committee, *Continued*

As a result of the collaboration with GHA, HireAbility VT has established:

- A comprehensive and concise policy that aligns with the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA)* of 2014;
- A comprehensive training curriculum for all counselors that is multi-tiered allowing select staff to become regional experts in self-employment;
- A comprehensive guidance manual for counselors for ongoing reference post training;
- A comparable guidance manual for participants;
- Establishing panels of professionals and HireAbility staff that can review a participant's proposed business plan, make recommendations for improving a proposed plan, and approving funding for a proposed plan;
- Creation of a program manager position who will monitor the implementation of the policy, procedures, and collect data as the new policy is implemented; and
- Increased funding guidelines designed to offer participants greater employment and career pathways opportunities.

Chapter 306, Rehabilitation Technology

Revisions to this chapter were a carryover from FY23 where the Committee decided to separate rehabilitation (assistive) technology from home modification. Be-

cause of fluctuating costs of technology, no spending guidelines are included in the revised policy. Referral to the Assistive Technology program housed within HireAbility has been added to ensure that the participant gets the technology best suited to their needs and abilities.

Chapter 315, Home Modifications

The committee added to the new policy requirements that:

- Only modifications essential to the participant's vocational rehabilitation and attainment of the employment outcome referenced in the Individual Plan Employment (IPE);
- Only space to be used by the participant and needed to safely meet their vocational rehabilitation needs will be modified;
- Counselors consult with their regional manager and central office when they believe home modifications may be necessary;

Cont'd Next Page



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC

Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Policy & Procedures Committee, *Continued*

- The contractor provide proof of insurance coverage, a complete description of the work to be completed and once completed with a breakdown of costs, and proof the work was completed consistent with local building codes and ADA accessibility guidelines, unless a waiver of ADA guidelines cannot be followed, and the participant signs a waiver agreement; and
- Other funding sources are explored and used before seeking funding from HA.

Health Services, Chapter 302

Consistent with the requirements of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) this policy was revised to include a requirement that when determining the rate of payment for any specific health service, the counselor will use the Vermont Blue Cross Blue Shield standard rates. If the total cost of the health service exceeds \$3,000, the counselor must seek regional manager approval.



Audiology Services and Hearing Aids. Chapter 313

The committee members had multiple questions about this policy which could not be addressed by the close of the fiscal year. However, it was important that counselors have guidance on the availability of insurance to cover the costs of audiology services and devices resulting from recent changes in the law. So, the committee approved these limited revisions with the expectation that further discussion of this policy will follow in the coming year.

In addition, the Committee worked on the following policies:

Confidentiality, Chapter 101

The committee continued its discussion of this important policy but was not able to finish its review prior to the close of the fiscal year. Topics of discussion included the need to include:

- A clearly delineated complaint process when an applicant or participant believes that their confidentiality was breached;
- Use of encryption when sharing information with applicants, participants, and others; and
- Clear direction to counselors when asked to testify in an administrative hearing or court proceeding.

Cont'd Next Page

Summary SRC Committee Reports, Continued

Policy & Procedures Committee, *Continued*

Transportation, Chapter 312

In Vermont, transportation is one of the greatest barriers to employment. But it is an issue that far exceeds the authority of HireAbility VT. That said, the committee looked at what it might do to address the problem within the scope of this policy. Concerns were raised about the spending guidelines for vehicle repairs and purchases including setting a lifetime of the case amount which is inconsistent with federal regulations. Input was sought from counselors from each region. The group had several recommendations for revisions to this policy which the committee will consider in the coming fiscal year.

Going forward

The committee will continue the work done this year and add to its review policies not

revised since 2009 and those related to Supported Employment and Customized Employment.

In closing, I want to thank all the members of the Policies and Procedures Committee for their enthusiasm, dedication, and hard work over the past year. This may not be the most exciting and stimulating committee on which to serve, but it is a critically important committee that has an impact on those seeking or receiving HireAbility services and those that use them as guidance when serving both groups. I so appreciate each and all of you.

Respectfully,

Sherrie Brunelle, Chair Policy & Procedures Committee



Vermont State Rehabilitation Council Members 2023-2024

Steering Committee

Cari Kelley, *SRC Chair*
Andrea Bacchi, *SRC Vice Chair*
Courtney Blasius, *Advocacy, Outreach and Education Committee Chair*
Sherrie Brunelle, *Policy and Procedures Committee Chair*
Nick Caputo, *Performance Review Committee Chair*
Diane Dalmasse, *HireAbility Vermont Director*

Advocacy, Outreach & Education Committee

Courtney Blasius, *Chair*
Angela Allard
Sherrie Brunelle
Helena Kehne
Cari Kelley
Jacqueline Kelley
Brandy Reynolds
Nancy Richards
Ana Russo
Laura Siegel
Diane Dalmasse, *SRC Liaison*

Performance Review Committee

Nick Caputo, *Chair*
Sherrie Brunelle
Gina D'Ambrosio
Laura Flint
Bill Meirs
Amanda Arnold, *SRC Liaison*

Policy & Procedures Committee

Sherrie Brunelle, *Chair*
Laura Siegel, *Vice Chair*
Andrea Bacchi
Helena Kehne
Cari Kelley
Jacqueline Kelley
Tara Shatney
Emily Wagner
James Smith, *SRC Liaison*

2024 SRC Members

Angela Allard
Andrea Bacchi
Courtney Blasius
Sherrie Brunelle
Nick Caputo
Diane Dalmasse (ex-officio, non-voting)
Gina D'Ambrosio
Laura Flint
Helena Kehne
Cari Kelley
Jacqueline Kelley
Bill Meirs
Brandy Reynolds (non-voting)
Nancy Richards
Ana Russo
Tara Shatney (non-voting)
Laura Siegel
Emily Wagner
Amanda Wheeler

HireAbility's Core Services

HireAbility Core Services: HireAbility (HA) services for jobseekers are tailored to the person and driven by his or her own interests, job goals, and needs. Each person meets regularly with his or her counselor, who helps develop an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) and manages the services and supports needed to realize the person's career goals. The core services of vocational assessment, counseling and guidance, job training, and job placement provided by HA staff and partners, are enhanced with a range of purchased services and supports.

HireAbility Placement Services: HireAbility has an ongoing partnership with the Vermont Association of Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation (VABIR) to provide employment services. HA customers and counselors benefit from dedicated employment consultants who provide job development, job placement, and workplace supports to help people find and keep jobs.

HireAbility Employment Teams: HireAbility oversees 12 Business Account Managers (BAMs) who have active relationships with 2,500 employers statewide. The BAMs convene local teams of Agency of Human Services (AHS) providers who deliver employment services across multiple populations. These employment teams coordinate local employer outreach across programs to better serve employers.

Jump on Board for Success (JOBS): The JOBS program is a HireAbility partnership

with the Department of Mental Health. JOBS provides employment and mental health case management services for youth with severe emotional/behavioral disabilities.

Work Incentives Counseling Program: HireAbility Certified Work Incentives Counselors provide information and expertise to Social Security disability program beneficiaries about the impact employment will have on their benefits.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP): EAP has offered comprehensive Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services since 1986. EAP provides short-term counseling and referral, management consultation, wellness workshops, and resource information.

Rehabilitation Counselor for the Deaf (RCD): RCDs provide a wide range of services for Vermonters who are Deaf, hard of hearing, or late deafened.

Assistive Technology Program: The AT program helps individuals of all ages find accessible solutions to overcome disability and aging related barriers at home, work, and the



HireAbility Developments and Accomplishments

Improving Participant Outcomes Across Measures:

In 2014 the US Congress reauthorized the Rehabilitation Act via the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA introduced new Common Performance Measures (CPM) that core partners, including DVR, are evaluated on. The measures are:

- Job retention six months post program exit.
- Job retention twelve months post program exit.
- Median earnings six months post program exit.
- Credential attainment.
- Measurable skill gains.
- Employer satisfaction.

Prior to WIOA, HireAbility was measured primarily on how many people the program assisted in getting a job. This change from quantitative to qualitative measures required a major paradigm shift in our service delivery system. HireAbility implemented the Careers Initiative, a series of strategies to align program services with the new Common Performance Measures.

HireAbility tracks the Careers Initiative strategies through a Performance Dashboard. The Dashboard provides staff and managers with real-time information at the counselor, district, and statewide level. It also serves as a frame of reference or

how they are doing and what they need to focus on to achieve the desired outcomes.

Several new measures were introduced in SFY 2024 that raise the standard by which we measure our progress, including wages of 150% of minimum wage at closure, credential attainment, and engagement in work-based learning opportunities

SFY 2024 Dashboard data indicates the Careers Initiative has had a positive impact on practices, services, and outcomes:

- A 24 percentage-point increase in the number of HireAbility participants engaging in Career Assessment within 180 days of application, and 1 percentage point increase over SFY 2023. Assessment is also an important tool throughout the life of the case, not just at the start of a new case. In SFY 2023, 33% of the cases served had had an assessment done during the life of their case, and so far, in SFY 2024, that had risen to 42%, a 9 percentage-point increase.
- A 13 percentage-point increase in HireAbility participants with higher wage employment plan goals since inception. The ratio stayed steady over the past SFY while the population served has grown by 6%.

Cont'd Next Page

HireAbility Developments and Accomplishments, *Continued*

- A 29 percentage-point increase in HireAbility participants earning over 125% of minimum wage at program exit since inception and a 1 percentage-point increase during SFY 2024. In SFY 2024, 64% of our successful closures had wages above 125% of minimum wage. We introduced a new measure of 150% of higher minimum wage or higher and 38% of our successful closures exceeded that measure.
- A post-pandemic rebound in services, with a 95% increase in applicants and 98% increase in plans initiated, resulting in an overall 22% increase in the caseload.

We are also seeing a positive impact on the Common Performance Measures themselves with gains across 4 measures in SFY 24 and a minimal drop in the Measurable Skill Gain rate.

The Opioid Employment Project: The opioid epidemic has had a profound impact on the State's workforce because of the very high rate of unemployment (60% plus) among individuals receiving treatment for opioid dependence. Opioid dependence disproportionately affects adults ages 20 to 40 and in Vermont the epidemic has had the effect of taking younger workers out of the workforce, just when they should be building careers and credentials. Also, if a person with an opioid use disorder is employed, they are more likely to have:

- A lower rate of recurrence
- Less criminal activity
- A higher rate of treatment completion

- A lower risk of overdose

In the summer of 2022, the legislature provided the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (recently rebranded as HireAbility (HA) Vermont) with dedicated funds to pilot specialized employment services in Burlington and Newport for individuals with opioid use disorders. The pilots use a team staffing model that has proven successful with other high needs populations needing an intensive and holistic approach. The teams include:

- A HA vocational counselor at each site (Jacob Grayck, Burlington, Misty Poitras Newport)
- A contracted VABIR job placement specialist at each site (Morgan Sanville Burlington, Vanessa Thomas Newport)
- A part time Employee Assistance Program staff person (Patricia Marshall Burlington, Tony Strange, Newport)

The two pilots have been very successful in engaging community providers, generating 307 referrals of whom 165 applied for services. The pilot sites have also showed promising early outcome data. HA will not have the funding to sustain the two sites beyond SFY 2025. We are seeking funding to sustain the pilot sites and expand the intervention to other sites in Vermont.

Cont'd Next Page

HireAbility Developments and Accomplishments, *Continued*

A Fourth Successful Year of the Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP):

In 2024, HireAbility completed the fourth year of the Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP). The SCEP was designed to provide high school students with disabilities paid summer work experiences combined with career exploration curriculum. Local HireAbility district teams partnered with local employers to provide meaningful real life work experiences for students with disabilities. Lessons learned from years one and two were documented in a SCEP Manual to improve implementation across the state. In the last four years, the HireAbility Summer Career Exploration Program (SCEP) has supported 481 Vermont youth to engage in summer classroom instruction and paid work experiences in 371 businesses around the state. In summer 2024 we saw our largest SCEP enrollment yet. We had 115 youth successfully complete the program in nine cohorts around the state. Those youth were placed in 97 different employment sites covering a wide variety of jobs across the Vermont economy.

Because of the loss of federal funds, we will not be running a SCEP program in the summer of 2025. This is a big loss for students with disabilities in Vermont and the employers who provided work sites.

Farm First:

Farm First provides Vermont's farmers and their families with support, resources, and information to reduce stress and improve

emotional well-being. We do this by having a Resource Coordinator respond to outreach and establish a plan for each farmer. The plan may include up to 12 counseling sessions with an Employee Assistance Program counselor or an affiliate, a referral for Hire Ability services and/or other supports such as business advising, agricultural mediation, etc. The program was initially started to serve dairy farmers but at this time we are serving all farmers with approximately 50% of these farmers being primarily focused in dairy.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Access (DEIA):

In 2021 Governor Scott announced the following proclamation: "Vermont seeks to achieve equality and equity and to create a culture in which racial, ethnic and other cultural disparities are openly acknowledged and addressed and where no one person is more likely to experience society's benefits or burdens than any other person." HireAbility has embraced this declaration and is working towards putting these words into practice. Working with a contractor and our partners we developed the following DEIA vision statement for the program: **HireAbility will become an organization where; All staff and participants have a sense of belonging & feel welcomed here at HireAbility. Our diverse staff reflect the communities that we serve. Our strong connections with multicultural communities and community partners ensures engagement, successful outcomes, and career pathway opportunities for participants from diverse backgrounds.**

HireAbility Developments and Accomplishments, *Continued*

To make this vision a reality, HireAbility worked with the consultant to conduct a needs assessment and identify opportunities for growth. Based on the needs assessment, we have identified four areas of focus for our work in SFY 25. We have formed four charter groups made up of a diverse cross section of staff to do this work. The goals for each charter group are as follows:

- Develop a workforce that reflects the diverse populations we serve.
- Effectively reach all populations that are eligible for our services.
- Ensure staff have access to the tools and knowledge and feel competent to serve all participants in a culturally appropriate way.
- Strengthen our existing communication loops to ensure staff are informed and can contribute.

The charter groups will be charged with developing strategies to move the agency forward in these areas. They will also identify metrics for success that are meaningful and measurable.

The Vermont Career Advancement Project (VCAP): HireAbility was awarded a \$6.5 million grant from the US Department of Education to support the Vermont Career Advancement Project (VCAP) in 2021. VCAP has established a robust partnership between HireAbility, the Vermont Department of Labor (VDOL), the Community College of Vermont (CCV), Vermont State University

(VTSU), and secondary Career and Technical Education Centers (CTEs), to build on-ramps enabling individuals with disabilities to pursue high quality, high paying careers. The project has embedded dedicated Career Pathways Student Advisors in these post-secondary programs to provide intensive support for VCAP participants. VCAP has also partnered with other workforce development organizations to expand paid and credentialed occupational training programs in response to employer needs.

With an addition in 2023 of the VCAP Employer Advisory Group, VCAP is using feedback from the employer advisors to strengthen HireAbility's extensive network of employer contacts through its Business Account Managers. CCV and VTSU, which have program development experience and expertise, provide the required Related Instruction for apprenticeships and other credentialed programs, as well as stackable credentials and nested programming. These programs are linked directly to secondary and adult programs offered through Vermont's Career and Technical Education (CTE) centers. The project goals include enrollment of 500 participants, with 375 earning Industry Recognized Credentials and 75 enrolling in Registered Apprenticeships. 75% of participants will exit their training programs employed and earn at least 150% of the state's minimum wage.

Cont'd Next Page

HireAbility Developments and Accomplishments, *Continued*

HireAbility started enrollment in VCAP in August 2022. To date 484 individuals have been enrolled in the program. There have been 230 educational goals completed including 23 college degrees and 58 industry recognized credentials such as vocational and technical licenses or certificates. There have been 25 individuals who have completed their career pathway goal and gained competitive employment with the average wage of \$22/hour. The most common career goals among VCAP participants include nurses, bookkeeping and accounting, social services workers, medical records specialists, and heavy and tractor-trailer truck

The Career Training Offset (CTO): HireAbility has long recognized that many of our participants cannot engage in industry recognized credential training programs because they cannot afford to stop working. As a result, they remain in entry level employment without the training and skills to move up the career ladder. To address this issue, HireAbility implemented the Career Training Offset (CTO). Participants enrolled in training that

leads to an industry recognized credential, are paid minimum wage for classroom and unpaid instruction time. For example, an HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Air Conditioning) program has approximately 144 hours of unpaid training time. HireAbility will pay the participant minimum wage for these hours to ensure they have a steady source of income while they get trained.

Between July 2023 and June 2024, 125 participants started training programs with support from the CTO and 69 successfully completed a CTO supported training program. Forty participants who participated in a CTO during SFY24 are currently employed in their intended field or were at the time their cases closed. CTO participants engage in a wide range of training programs, with medical billing and coding, CDL training, cosmetology, LNA, and massage therapy programs being the most common.

Unfortunately, because of the loss of federal funding we will have to end this program in SFY 25. We are very concerned that some participants may not be able to afford to enroll in credentialed programs without it.



HireAbility
VERMONT

HireAbility's Contribution to Vermonters and Their Communities

Number of People Served:

- A total of individuals 6,734 were served in SFY 2024. 6,324 were served in SFY 2023.
- 6,172 people were served in the core HireAbility program in SFY 2024. 5,762 were served in SFY 2023.
- 1,598 high school students were served through the Pre-Employment Transition Services program in SFY 2024. 1,479 were served in SFY 2023.

How Well We Served Them: The HireAbility Participant Experience Survey is conducted every two years to determine participants' overall satisfaction with the program. The survey is conducted by a third-party research firm, Market Decisions Research (MDR), who has an extensive background working with Vocational Rehabilitation agencies nationwide. 646 participants were contacted for our 2022 survey. This was the first survey conducted post-COVID and has provided HireAbility with valuable information regarding participants' reactions to remote and hybrid services.

The following are highlights from the 2022 results:

- 81% of participants reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with HireAbility.
- 93% said they would recommend that their friends or family members seek help from HireAbility.

- 90% of participants responded they are satisfied with their experience working with HireAbility staff and counselors. This is a two percent increase from our 2019 survey.
- 97% felt they were treated by staff with dignity and respect.
- 77% of participants reported that it was very easy or somewhat easy to connect with their counselor, even during the times when services were being delivered entirely remotely.
- 63% of participants reported that they would like to continue to receive services remotely.

HireAbility will conduct the next survey in spring of 2025

Employer Satisfaction with HireAbility: In 2022 HireAbility contracted with MDR to develop a survey that would determine employer satisfaction with services. Between February and May 2022, MDR surveyed 72 employers that had contact with a HireAbility team member(s) within the last 18 months. The survey found that 93% of employers were satisfied with services, up from 77% in 2019, and 100% of employers would be open to working with HireAbility again in the future, up from 94% in 2019. One area of improvement that was identified is that employers would like to be contacted more frequently.

Cont'd Next Page

HireAbility's Contribution to Vermonters and Their Communities, *Continued*

The survey results provided invaluable information that will help us continue to improve our services to employers, develop more connections, and better serve HireAbility customers.

How People are Better Off: The most apparent measure of successful participant outcomes is their employment status when they leave the program. In SFY 2024, 517 individuals closed their cases with successful employment. This means they met their individual employment goals and were stably employed for at least 90 days. In addition, 314 of these individuals (62%), earned above 125% of minimum wage.

HireAbility also received data for the third time on all five WIOA Common Performance

Measures. The SFY 2024 results show Vermont participants are achieving outcomes at a higher rate than the national average on all five performance measures. Additionally, Vermont's programs improved on four of the five performance measures in SFY 2024 compared to our SFY 2023 outcomes.

The employment rate four quarters post-exit continues to improve, starting at 49.7% in SFY 2020 and increasing to 57.4% in SFY 2024. Vermont's median earnings two quarters post exit jumped from \$3,901 in SFY 2020, which was below the national average, to \$6,950 in SFY 2024, and has been above the national average for past four years.



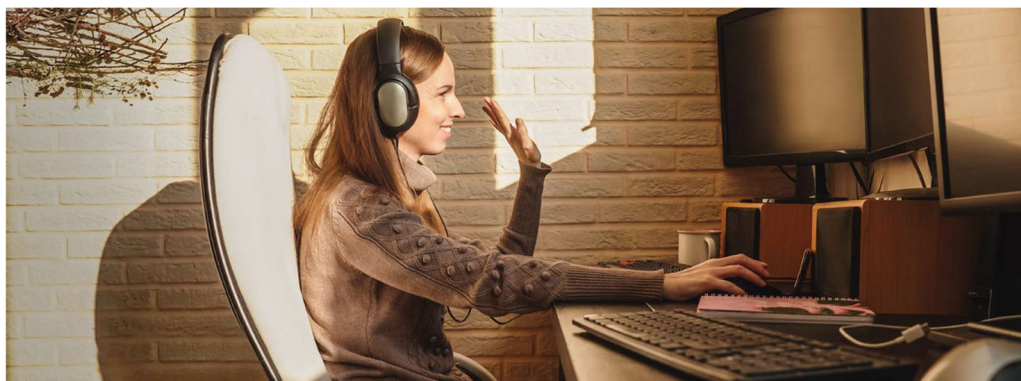
History of State Vocational Rehabilitation Councils

When the Rehabilitation Act Amendments were being considered by the 102nd Congress in 1992, disability rights activism had increased and recommended changes to the Rehabilitation Act included persons with disabilities be at the table. As a result, revisions to the act included individual dignity, self-determination, inclusion and full participation of persons with disabilities. In addition, this included the establishment of a State Rehabilitation Advisory Council (SRC) with a majority of the members (51%) being persons with disabilities.

By the 1998 Amendments, SRC's role and empowerment were recognized and strengthened. The name and role of the body of advocates was changed from the State Rehabilitation Advisory Council to the State Rehabilitation Council. The role changed from being advisory, to being involved in developing policies, planning activities, evaluation of the program's effectiveness and carrying out other functions related to the vocational rehabilitation program. This also included that the SRC, in conjunction with the State VR agency, joint-

ly conduct the comprehensive needs assessment of individuals with disabilities in the state, develop (and agree to) the State's annual goals and priorities, and evaluate the VR performance toward the goals annually. The role of the SRC changed from advisory to working in partnership with the State VR agency.

Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (as amended) requires consumers, advocates and other representatives of individuals with disabilities to participate in the administration and oversight of a state's VR program. The SRC fulfills this mandate in all states and territories. This is required in order for Vocational Rehabilitation programs to be eligible for and maintain federal VR funds. The SRC must consist of at least fifteen (15) members. They cannot have less unless they are a commission. There is not a maximum number of members unless Council Bylaws note otherwise. Members are appointed by the Governor, representing a variety of perspectives from the VR program and disability community as outlined in the legislation.





HireAbility

VERMONT

The Vermont State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is appointed by the Governor. We frequently need new members who have a wide range of interests and talents to help improve the services offered by HireAbility to Vermonters with disabilities. If you are interested in applying to become a member of the SRC, please contact Janice Leonard, Coordinator:
janice.leonard@vermont.gov

Support Staff

James Smith, Deputy Director,
james.smith@vermont.gov,

Amanda Arnold, Quality Assurance Manager,
amanda.arnold@vermont.gov

Janice Leonard, State Rehabilitation Council Coordinator,
janice.leonard@vermont.gov,

