

Part 1: **MAJOR FINDINGS**

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

1: THE NEED TO INCREASE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL HIREABILITY PARTICIPANTS

Individuals with disabilities are much less likely than their peers without disabilities to enter and/or complete post-secondary education programs. Post-secondary education and credentialed training programs are essential for most participants to access high wage employment. Therefore, HireAbility needs to implement strategies to increase participation in these programs across all participants served. Creating an array of options, including “earn while you learn” options such as apprenticeship, pre-apprenticeship programs, and paid work experiences will provide onramps for participants to engage in education and training programs that fit their needs. These types of short-term credentialed programs, such as LNA, are often the starting point of high wage career ladders. Additionally, it may require the ability to be 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 participants with marketable skills. HireAbility might need to provide assistive technology, tutoring, and other strategies to help participants succeed in post-secondary programs. Increasing these post-secondary options will assist participants achieve long-term career success in quality employment.

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

As noted throughout the Needs Assessment, the HireAbility 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. HireAbility currently has about 25% less counselor capacity to serve participants over 25 than we did in 2015. While HireAbility 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 HireAbility services later.
- Developing new services and tools that meet the needs of HireAbility participants over the age of 25 such as “earn and learn” opportunities and access to non-traditional education that will better prepare participants to enter the workforce.

3: IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES TO ENSURE CULTURAL COMPETENCY FOR HIREABILITY STAFF

The demographics of Vermont are changing and the population is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse. These trends emphasize the need for HireAbility staff training around racial justice and cultural competency. HireAbility has contracted with a systems change vendor, Social Contract, and a subject matter expert in social change related to diversity, equity and inclusion, Karen Proctor. The Division will need to continue to implement strategies and invest in training for staff that increases cultural competency.

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

HireAbility 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.

HireAbility has historically taken the lead in promoting employment for people with psychiatric disabilities. HireAbility 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.

HireAbility 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.

5: THE NEED TO PREPARE HIREABILITY PARTICIPANTS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF CAREER LADDERS

Entry level employment is often a very important first step for HireAbility participants. This is especially true for high school students and youth with disabilities. However, entry level employment should not be the end goal for most HireAbility participants. HireAbility is developing strategies to help participants move beyond entry level employment. Supporting participants to engage in career assessments is one tool HireAbility staff are employing to help participants think more broadly about career paths and opportunities. Expanding access to post-secondary training and education options is another strategy that HireAbility will need to continue to focus on to create opportunities for career growth. Consistent follow-up with employed participants, post placement is another important piece to this puzzle. By following up with participants once they are employed, HireAbility can help these participants identify potential career ladders in their current jobs or explore other possibilities.

6: THE NEED TO IMPROVE SERVICES AND OUTCOMES FOR PARTICIPANTS WITH OPIOID USE DISORDER

Vermont has seen a dramatic increase in the number of opioid related deaths since the beginning of 2020. HireAbility needs to continue to develop systems and teams to outreach to participants with opioid use disorder to engage them in employment as part of their recovery effort. Two pilots are currently underway, in the Northeast Kingdom and Chittenden County, to attempt to increase the number of participants with substance use disorder that HireAbility is serving. The pilots have already had great success so it will be important for HireAbility to secure funding streams that allow for the expansion of these services statewide.

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

HireAbility has excellent employer outreach through the Workforce Development Teams. Currently, HireAbility has active relationships with about 2,500 employers statewide. As HireAbility 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. One avenue HireAbility is investing significant resources into are “earn while you learn” options such as apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship programs. It might be that HireAbility, partnering with other workforce agencies, needs to develop specific training programs in response to the workforce needs of a specific sector. Business Account Managers will need to work with employers to identify career ladders within their organizations and the training associated with this career progression. HireAbility can support participants to advance up these career ladders by providing tailored training and supports.