



MONTANA VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AND BLIND SERVICES COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

DECEMBER 2023

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the State of Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, Disability Employment and Transitions, Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services Program (VRBS) sought a contractor through a request for proposal to conduct a Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) of individuals with disabilities, including investigation of barriers, service needs, and potential changes to system infrastructure. VRBS contracted with Bloom Consulting (Bloom) to conduct the CSNA and develop detailed analysis, information, and recommendations to support VRBS. This report presents findings on the vocational rehabilitation needs of Montanans with disabilities and related service implications for VRBS.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT GOALS

Needs assessments are intended to gather stakeholders' expressed and observed needs through the collection and analysis of primary and secondary data. Needs assessments are conducted to identify gaps between existing and needed services; they provide information to guide strategies to reach the desired program performance or outcomes. The federal standards for conducting the comprehensive needs assessment define minimally expected content. As stated in federal guidelines, the comprehensive statewide assessment must:

- Describe the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing in the state, including:
 - Individuals with the most significant disabilities and their need for supported employment;
 - Individuals who are from racial or cultural minority groups;
 - Individuals who are unserved or underserved by vocational rehabilitation programs;
 - Individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce development system; and
 - Youth and students with disabilities, including their need for and coordination of pre-employment transition services.
- Provide an assessment of the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the state.

Bloom collaborated with VRBS staff to develop a framework and establish activities related to the CSNA that met the following goals:

- Create a CSNA that clearly establishes goals, defines implementation and dissemination plans, gathers and analyzes the information, and provides findings that inform state priorities, strategies, and programming.

- Designs and disseminates survey instruments that target identified populations and provide reliable and valid measures of population needs.
- Assesses the rehabilitation needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, individuals who are minorities, individuals unserved or underserved by VRBS, and individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide workforce investment system.
- Articulates the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation providers within the state.
- Provides outreach to stakeholders to ensure broad input and establish long-term connections.
- Completes a final, professional report and presentation that provides clear findings and is easily accessible to target audiences, including the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) and VRBS Leadership.

In developing the CNSA framework and activities, the Bloom team was mindful of the recent work done by Montana VRBS in the development of their 2020-2025 strategic plan. This project provided a valuable framework for defining CSNA goals and shaping data collection protocols.

SERVICE CONTEXT

Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS) serves people with disabilities seeking employment and businesses employing or interested in employing people with disabilities. VRBS is part of the Disability Employment and Transitions Division of the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services. VRBS straddles multiple service delivery realms, including workforce development, health and human services, and education. This overlapping service field both complicates collaboration and data sharing and also creates opportunities for innovation.

VRBS service implementation is informed by a shared vision, mission, and core values.

VISION: Montana values people with disabilities in our workforce and our communities.

MISSION: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services promotes opportunities for Montanans with disabilities to have rewarding careers and achieve maximum personal potential.

CORE VALUES:

1. We value informed choice; our staff guide, and the people we serve decide.
2. We presume all people with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities, can work in competitive integrated settings with advancement opportunities.

3. We believe work provides a sense of purpose.
4. Our services promote the civil rights of each participant.
5. We respect and value diversity.
6. We value our ethical foundations of autonomy, beneficence, fidelity, justice, nonmaleficence, and veracity.
7. We promote healthy interdependence, independent living, and community integration.
8. Collaborating with partners makes us stronger and more effective.
9. We continually innovate and provide state-of-the-art services.

Montanans are eligible for VRBS services if they meet all three of the following criteria: have a physical or mental disability; the disability prevents them from getting or keeping a job; and they want to work and need VRBS services to help them get and keep a job. VRBS services are tailored to the needs of each individual. Common services may include:

- Evaluations to determine rehabilitation needs and interests.
- Career counseling and guidance to develop an individualized plan for employment (IPE).
- Needed medical or psychological services.
- Training to qualify for employment.
- Job development and placement services.
- Rehabilitation technology or modifications.
- Referrals to partner agencies to help access programs and services that will increase employment opportunities.
- Supportive or ancillary services to address employment needs and barriers such as transportation, tools, and work clothes.

VRBS services are part of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). VRBS interacts within the workforce development system to best serve people with disabilities, including an emphasis on services for youth with disabilities, a focus on competitive integrated employment, and alignment between VRBS and workforce development programs. VRBS is unique among WIOA programs because of its focus on maximizing opportunity for individuals to pursue careers, as opposed to job placement that may or may not be aligned with career goals.

REPORT OVERVIEW

In addition to this introduction, the report includes the six sections listed below that present the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment's activities, analysis, and results.

- Executive Summary
- Methodology

- Disability Context
- Barriers and Service Needs for People with Disabilities
- VRBS Investments and Outcomes
- Conclusion and Recommendations

Several appendices, attached under separate cover, provide supplemental or more detailed information to support the VRBS Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, including:

- Appendix A: Response to Required Federal Needs Assessment Standards
- Appendix B: Survey Respondents
- Appendix C: Focus Group and Interview Protocols
- Appendix D: Survey Protocols

Throughout the report, the identification of program strengths and opportunities and recommendations for improvement reflect stakeholder input collected during the needs assessment process. In several cases, to promote readability and interpretation, survey responses provided in figures have collapsed two responses categories (“most” and “all” for some questions, and “usually” and “always” adequate for other questions). Additionally, illustrative quotes collected from interviews, focus groups, or surveys are presented in blue italics to distinguish them as direct stakeholder feedback.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

DISABILITY PREVALENCE

One in 9 Montanans (11 percent of the working age population) has a disability. Cognitive disabilities are the most common disability type, followed by an ambulatory disability. The Native American population has the highest rate of disability in the state, at 14.5 percent, and Deer Lodge County has the highest rate of disability at 24 percent. Twenty percent or more of the working age population in Lincoln, Sanders, Powell, Custer, and Blaine County experience disabilities.

The number of Montanans receiving VRBS services is roughly aligned with the focus population (the count of people with disabilities who are choosing to be in the labor force but are not employed). Although a greater proportion of people with disabilities in Montana are unemployed compared to people without disabilities, the employment gap is relatively small: 91 percent of people with disabilities in the labor force are employed, compared to 96 percent of people without disabilities, resulting in an employment gap of 5 percent. People with independent living difficulties have the highest unemployment rate among people with disabilities (18%).

The Montana VRBS client demographic composition is generally representative of the broader population of people with disabilities in the state, including by race/ethnicity and age. Missoula County has the highest proportion of people with disabilities participating in Montana VRBS services.

UNMET NEEDS

BARRIERS

Transportation is a significant barrier to employment and participation in vocational services for adults and youth. According to staff, contractors, and partners, individuals who are blind or visually impaired face additional transportation barriers. Most people with disabilities struggle to meet at least some of their basic needs, negatively impacting their ability to find and keep a job. In addition to transportation, VRBS clients and non-participants identified housing, behavioral health, physical health, food, clothing, and benefits security as other basic needs challenges.

People with disabilities cited a wide array of job-related challenges including limited work experience, limited opportunities to explore careers, and limited relevant skills. Clients generally face fewer barriers than non-participants in meeting their employment needs.

Pre-ETS participants face challenges with access to information, particularly as they transition from high school to post-secondary education or employment options. Many students do not know where to go to ask questions and have varying levels of parental support or engagement.

SERVICES

Service provision to both adults and students increased from program year 2021 to program year 2022. The greatest share of respondents received career services, followed by training services and supportive services. The service gap (the percentage of respondents who indicated that they needed but did not receive a service) was lowest for supportive services. Across all services, the reported service gap generally ranged from 3 percent to 18 percent, except for work-based learning, where 23 percent of respondents said they needed but did not receive the service, and soft skills training, which had the largest reported service gap (31%).

Vocational counseling, job search assistance, and career exploration were the career services in most demand. VRBS clients, non-participants, staff, CRPs, and partners aligned in the identification of these three career services: they were the most received by clients, the most in-demand by non-participants, and identified needed by “most” or “all” of adults with disabilities by the greatest shares of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents. Among VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents, vocational counseling, job search assistance, and career exploration were also viewed as most adequate in the community. Staff felt challenged to support growing client demand for self-employment with time-consuming business plan development and implementation support requirements.

Academic education, work-based learning, and soft skills training were the training services in most demand. VRBS clients, non-participants, staff, CRPs, and partners aligned in the identification of these three training services: they were the most received by clients, the most in-demand by non-participants, and identified needed by “most” or “all” of adults with disabilities by the greatest shares of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents.

The soft skills training gap is significant. Nearly one-third of VRBS participants indicated that they needed but did not receive soft skills training; this was the highest service gap identified. Moreover, small proportions of respondents rated soft skills training as “usually” or “always” adequate in the community. Soft skills training was identified as a gap for the general workforce, not unique to people with disabilities.

Compared to career and training services, VRBS clients were less likely to identify receipt of or need for supportive services. With the exception of transportation services, fewer staff, CRPs, and partner respondents indicated that “most” or “all” clients need supportive services, aligning with client and non-participant responses that indicate less receipt and less demand for supportive services. However, for clients who would benefit from them, assistive technology service receipt was perceived as a gap across all stakeholders.

Although transportation services were identified as most needed by VRBS staff and partners, these respondent groups also considered transportation services to be the least adequate in the community. This aligns with findings from people with disabilities: approximately one-third of clients and non-participants cited transportation as a basic needs barrier. Approximately 3% of clients received transportation services in program year 2022.

Most Pre-ETS participants noted that they received opportunities for career exploration, work-based learning, work readiness, and learning about accommodations they need. Among all Pre-ETS services, work-based learning had the largest service gap; that is, Pre-ETS respondents were less likely to identify receipt and more likely to identify a service gap (that they needed but did not receive a service) for work-based learning services versus other Pre-ETS services. Despite VRBS staff and partner respondent perceptions of widespread need for Pre-ETS services, they indicated limited service adequacy to address the needs of students with disabilities.

PEOPLE WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

Customized employment is a gap for people with significant disabilities. Montana is reshaping its approach to customized employment to support increased access and use of this service. Supported employment and extended employment are considered effective; however, access is mixed. VRBS and DDP stakeholders work to coordinate supported and extended employment services for clients. Access is hindered by limited staff and job coach capacity, especially in rural areas.

ASSESSMENT OF UNSERVED AND UNDERSERVED

VRBS clients are reflective of the state, but opportunities for reaching underserved populations remain. More VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents considered people with behavioral health disabilities and brain injuries to be unserved or underserved compared to people with other types of disabilities. However, respondents felt every type of disability was underserved or unserved to some degree.

Additionally, more staff, CRPs, and partners considered people living in rural areas of the state and those experiencing homelessness to be unserved or underserved compared to other groups. As with disability type, respondents said every subgroup was underserved or unserved to some degree.

Preliminary VRBS cost data, as well as post-exit client wage data, suggests there may be program inequities impacting Native American and Hispanic/Latino clients. These preliminary data suggest that, on average, less is spent on these client subgroups and that, on average, they have lower wages after program exit.

Improving transportation options was the top action recommended by staff and CRP respondents to improve service provision for unserved and underserved people. Stakeholders also reflected on opportunities to establish and strengthen services for under/unserved populations, often with a focus on collaboration with partner agencies.

VRBS INVESTMENTS AND OUTCOMES

VRBS STAFF AND AGENCY

VRBS staff are perhaps the greatest agency investment in client services and outcomes. VRBS staff cite high caseloads, too much paperwork/data entry, and high employee turnover as key challenges to providing services. Three-quarters of staff respondents also identified pay incommensurate with educational requirements as an organizational challenge when providing services. Nearly half cited new or changing regulations as a barrier.

Across the agency, there were 11 vacancies, including 8 for VRBS counselors or counselor supervisors. The Billings office has the highest number of vacancies (3), but the Bozeman office has the highest proportion of vacancies (33% of positions are vacant). Over the past nine years, VRBS had the highest caseload in September 2016, falling to the lowest in March 2020. The current caseload (as of October 2023) has rebounded since the March 2020 low, but it has yet to reach the high of September 2016.

CRPS

Staff and CRP respondents consider CRPs successful in helping individuals get and keep jobs. The vast majority of VRBS staff and CRP respondents agreed or strongly agreed that CRPs help people get and keep jobs, and that CRPs are knowledgeable about providing appropriate services for VRBS clients. Most respondents in both groups also disagreed that there are an adequate number of CRPs to meet the needs of people with disabilities seeking employment, and that CRP agencies have consistent staff and do not struggle with staff turnover.

All counties have at least one CRP serving clients in that county. Missoula County has nine CRP contracts serving the county, the highest number among counties. Most counties (36%) have two contracts, followed by three contracts (21%), and one contract (18%). Like VRBS staff respondents, the majority of CRP respondents identified high caseloads as a challenge to providing vocational rehabilitation services.

VRBS clients report positive experiences with job coaches. Clients considered job coaches to be knowledgeable, able to see them quickly, and respectful of their culture and background.

PRE-ETS SERVICES

In the context of locally controlled school districts, Pre-ETS engagement with high schools is based on relationships with school administration and special education teachers and school counselors.

Nearly half (49%) of Montana's accredited high schools have a Pre-ETS contract. VRBS has a total of 76 Pre-ETS school contracts in 73 percent of counties and 17 Pre-ETS provider contracts. Students with disabilities have inconsistent access to vocational services because of this limited, but growing number of school contracts, and inconsistencies across school capacity to implement Pre-ETS services. Pre-ETS services are primarily provided by schools, with limited contractor engagement to supplement special education capacity. Students with disabilities often don't receive vocational services in the summer or after school unless they are enrolled in VRBS.

COLLABORATION WITH PROGRAM PARTNERS

VRBS is part of a rich tapestry of vocational, education, health, and human services programs serving diverse clients with varied and wide-ranging needs. Clients are satisfied with how well their VRBS counselors connected them with other or community organizations to help them get the services they need. VRBS staff identified strong relationships with Jobs Services, post-secondary schools, Centers for Independent Living, Montana Developmental Disabilities Program, and Adult Education, with opportunities for growth in relationships with youth foster care programs, housing service providers, and Best Beginnings Scholarships.

VRBS staff and partners want more communication and collaboration to better serve shared clients and better use collective program resources. Collaboration challenges include understanding partner programs and how they overlap/intersect, communication and data sharing, and limited staff capacity. These problems are exacerbated in rural areas and on reservations, where VRBS staff and partner capacity is generally lower. The lack of data system interconnectedness means staff manually refer clients to partner agencies and communicate about shared clients outside of shared case notes or service authorizations. Staff are developing workarounds in some regions.

WORKING WITH BUSINESSES

Nearly half of business respondents expressed interest in working with people with disabilities and noted that they are comfortable training and supporting people with disabilities. Yet the current economic climate presents a double-edge sword in hiring people with disabilities. Businesses may be more open to hiring people with disabilities given broad hiring challenges; however, staffing shortages within business and disability organizations reduce their capacity to support individuals with disabilities as they transition to the workplace.

Businesses are interested in prescreening services. Although prescreening of candidates was identified as a service of interest by three-quarters of business respondents, just 11 percent of those that had worked with a disability organization had received such service, suggesting an opportunity for greater outreach and implementation of this VRBS offering.

OUTCOMES

The needs assessment looks at various service outcomes including wages and stakeholder or satisfaction with services and service delivery, including access and informed decision-making.

Hourly wages among exited participants shifted slightly higher between program year 2021 and 2022, however, post-exit client wage data analysis by race and ethnicity suggests disparities. Average quarterly wages in the four quarters following exit was highest for White participants (earning \$3,042 per quarter, on average), followed by participants of unknown race (\$2,507), and Native American participants (\$2,489). On average, VRBS participants who exited between March 2021 and March 2023 received 2.5 years of VRBS services.

In general, VRBS clients were satisfied with services and provided positive feedback overall on counselor quality, the amount of face-to-face time they have with their counselor, and access to VRBS services, and the degree of counselor turnover. The long wait time for services was among the most frequently cited challenges for non-participants, with 44 percent indicating they had not started services yet and 39 percent indicating the process took too long. About half of staff and CRPs reported that participants are served in a timely manner.

Most clients felt that VRBS supported informed decision-making principles, however many staff discussed feeling unable to fully embody these principles while juggling growing caseloads and associated administrative/data entry requirements. Stakeholders expressed a lack of philosophical alignment across the state's developmental disabilities ecosystem negatively impacting choice. Stakeholders grappled with whether and how to align with Employment First principles while retaining a range of competitively paid options for people with diverse needs and wants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report's recommendations fall into several themes focused on increasing program capacity to effectively serve people with disabilities.

AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING. VRBS works across multiple service ecosystems comprised of many programs and community partners, making it challenging to develop and maintain relationships that promote awareness of VRBS and understanding how its services support people with disabilities. Workforce/staffing challenges across these service systems – workforce development, health and human services, and education – exacerbate relationship-

building challenges. Siloed eligibility processes and data management systems mean cross-program collaboration is often reliant on individuals working in disparate programs manually referring individuals to VRBS and having a deep enough understanding of VRBS to know how to layer services and funding. The CSNA includes recommendations focused on continuing to invest in relationship-building, while also seeking ways to improve systemic coordination across programs with shared clients.

IMPROVED ADULT SERVICES. As the VRBS client population grows overall and in diversity of need through the opening of priority status, VRBS is increasing its ability to provide vocational services aligned with person-centered employment plans. The CSNA includes recommendations to establish and improve service delivery and accessibility through individual placement and support (IPS) services and community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) as well as through improvements to transportation, self-employment, customized employment, work-based learning, soft skills, and benefits counseling services.

IMPROVED YOUTH SERVICES. VRBS has grown its Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to serve more students in an increasing number of schools throughout the state. The report includes recommendations to continue to enhance Pre-ETS including approaches to foster relationships with high schools and improve services to youth within schools and through contractors, with a focus on driver's education, life skills, career exploration, and transitions.

UNDERSERVED AND UNSERVED. VRBS serves people with all types of disabilities and across many subgroups, including people in rural areas and reservations and individuals who are Latino/a. The CSNA contains recommendations to support improved engagement with and service for under/unserved populations including performance measures focused on racial and cultural equity, investment in cultural competency training, and significant partner collaboration focused on shared service delivery.

COORDINATION WITH PARTNERS. Because VRBS clients commonly receive services from other workforce, health and human services, and education agencies in addition to other partners focused on subgroups including Tribal programs, there are opportunities for enhanced collaboration to better support shared clients and under/unserved populations. Recommendations focused on partnership development include investing in building relationships at local and state levels, increasing information sharing including through data system modifications, analyzing opportunities for more holistic, cross-program case management, cross-training, shared positions, and collaborative business engagement. A section of the report analyzes opportunities for defining a statewide Employment First policy.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY. The report includes many recommendations to improve staff and organizational capacity during this period of program growth, including increased compensation, more flexible and tiered counselor education and training requirements,

enhanced staff support and mentorship, reduced regulatory, policy, and process burdens, and enriched organizational culture.

METHODOLOGY

The VRBS CNSA was guided by core research questions that informed data collection and analysis methods. The research questions and the methodology employed for the needs assessment are based on an assessment of best practices in the field, a review of methods used in past CSNAs, and collaboration with VRBS staff.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided needs assessment activities and analysis:

1. What is the prevalence of disability in Montana, and how does this context inform VRBS policy and program planning?
2. What are the rehabilitation needs of people with disabilities in Montana, and how do these vary by geography, population, or other characteristics?
3. What resources does VRBS invest in supporting the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities?
4. What are the gaps between the needs and resources invested or client outcomes?

DATA COLLECTION

Bloom Consulting used multiple data sources to develop this needs assessment. Four methods were selected to answer the research questions, including: 1) review and summary of existing data; 2) key informant/stakeholder interviews; 3) stakeholder focus groups; and 4) stakeholder surveys of VRBS clients, Pre-ETS participants, individuals with disabilities who are not VRBS clients, VRBS staff, contractors, partners, and businesses.

To assess the prevalence of disability, the employment status of people with disabilities, and the characteristics of Montanans and VRBS clients with disabilities, the research team reviewed national surveys, state-level data, program-level administrative data, and relevant national reports and policy articles. Data to inform the prevalence analysis included:

- Secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, Montana Office of Public Instruction, and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).
- VRBS program data from the Madison system and U.S. Department of Education Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) quarterly summary data.

Key informant interviews offered the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the strengths and needs associated with vocational rehabilitation service delivery and outcomes according to VRBS staff and people working in the field. A total of 21 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders.

Focus groups provided the opportunity to have meaningful conversations about VRBS' strengths and needs with different respondent groups, including people with disabilities, VRBS staff, partner agency staff, workforce development staff, community providers, advocacy groups, and other interested parties. A total of 23 focus groups were held: 10 were held virtually and 13 were conducted in person in 6 different communities of the state. Sixty-five people participated in person and 145 virtually for a total of 210 focus group participants.

The surveys of VRBS clients, Pre-ETS participants, VRBS non-participants, VRBS staff, contractors, partners, and businesses provided descriptive quantitative data to complement the interviews and focus groups. The surveys also expanded the reach of the needs assessment by providing an opportunity for more stakeholders from across the state to provide input. Survey respondents totaled 1,295. Survey responses by group were as follows:

- 507 VRBS clients
- 313 Pre-ETS participants
- 171 people with disabilities not participating in VRBS
- 85 VRBS staff
- 39 CRP respondents
- 158 partner agencies
- 22 businesses

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis synthesized findings across the four core data sources to identify key needs, issues, trends, opportunities, and recommendations. The report compares findings across analyses to identify common themes and variations across data sources. Participant survey response rates and analysis of demographic characteristics of survey respondents compared to overall vocational rehabilitation participants ensure the generalizability of findings from the participant survey to the vocational rehabilitation participant population.

More detailed information on needs assessment methodology can be found in Appendix A: Methodology.

LIMITATIONS

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings:

- **Challenges with Native American/American Indian participation.** Despite multiple outreach attempts, the research team struggled to get participation from all of Montana's tribes.
- **Non-representative survey sample.** The survey response was, in general, robust; however, it cannot be considered a representative sample of the groups surveyed. As with any survey, a different respondent pool may result in different results.

- **Respondent variability in understanding and interpretation of questions.** Individual respondents will vary in their understanding of what terms mean and how they interpret the questions of the survey, focus group, and interview questions. This limitation is partly evidenced by certain questions eliciting a high level of “don’t know” responses. In some cases, the research team considered this a finding in and of itself, pointing perhaps to a need for increased outreach and education.
- **Needs assessment vs. program evaluation.** This research effort is a needs assessment, which seeks to understand the met and unmet employment-related needs of people with disabilities in the state of Montana. It is not an evaluation of VRBS programming, staffing, and overall service administration, and does not provide an evaluative assessment of how well program operations or services function. VRBS may have developed or be in the process of developing service and system responses to some of the needs identified through this process, and VRBS may choose to use some of the findings to inform modifications to the way they conduct business.
- **Administrative data universe variation.** Administrative data provided in this report varies by source, population included, and timeframe covered. In addition, administrative data may vary in quality given data entry inconsistencies or structural elements of the data system that limit what data can be extracted for a given purpose. Consequently, caution should be taken in comparing different administrative datasets or interpreting administrative data findings.
- **Long time span for data collection.** The CSNA research timeframe spanned 18 months, with data gathered over much of this timeframe. Over this period, VRBS, which is very attuned to program needs and gaps, has implemented numerous changes to improve service delivery and organizational effectiveness. As a result, some findings/issues identified in the process of the needs assessment – and their attendant recommendations – already may be addressed or in the process of being addressed.

Despite these limitations, the needs assessment can provide important quantitative and qualitative information to understand potential service gaps with an eye toward service delivery improvements for people with disabilities.

HOW TO NAVIGATE THIS REPORT

To aid in report navigation and accessibility, we provide an overview of frequently used terms and a description of how to interpret report charts.

FREQUENTLY USED TERMS


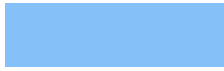





Terms used frequently throughout the assessment that are important for understanding findings and recommendations include:

- **Participants** or **clients** are individuals participating in VRBS services who have an individualized plan for employment (IPE).
- **Non-participants** are people with disabilities who are not receiving VRBS services. These individuals may be applying for VRBS and do not yet have an IPE, they may be former clients, or they may be individuals with no interaction with VRBS at any point.
- **Pre-ETS** or Pre-Employment and Transition Services assist students ages 14-21 as they transition from high school to postsecondary education or employment. Pre-ETS in the survey results means the responses from students participating in Pre-ETS services.
- **CRPs** or **Community Rehabilitation Providers** are individuals or agencies approved by VRBS to provide employment services to clients aligned with their vocational goals.
- **Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)** oversees vocational rehabilitation programs nationwide. In addition to providing guidelines for conducting a vocational rehabilitation needs assessment, RSA summarizes state program data in quarterly dashboards, which are used in this needs assessment to understand the Montana VRBS participant population and service delivery.

FIGURE FORMATTING

This report was designed to use simple tables and formatting to facilitate screen reading software use and avoid color combinations that are difficult for people with color blindness to read.¹ In addition, to ease interpretation, the same colors were used for the same respondent groups to display the survey results, and the same color schemes were used for all Likert scales. In all charts, “don’t know” responses are shaded gray.

Survey respondent groups and their corresponding colors are as follows:

Staff	
CRP	
Partner	
Pre-ETS	
Participant	
Non-Participant	
Business	

¹ The consultant team would like to acknowledge the San Bernardino County Information and Technology Department for sharing resources on creating accessible charts and graphs.

DISABILITY CONTEXT

HOW DISABILITY IS DEFINED IN PREVALENCE DATA

Disability prevalence data displayed in this section is sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), which includes six types or categories of disability: hearing difficulty, vision difficulty, cognitive disability, ambulatory difficulty, self-care difficulty, and independent living difficulty.

Disability status is determined by the answers to these six types of difficulty. For children under five years old, only hearing and vision difficulties are used to determine disability status. For children between the ages of five and 14, disability status is determined by hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, and self-care difficulties. People aged 15 years and older are considered to have a disability if they have difficulty with any of the six difficulty types.

The ACS questions posed to respondents provide definitions for each type of disability:

- **Hearing difficulty:** Respondents are asked if they are “deaf or had serious difficulty hearing.” (Asked of people of all ages.)
- **Vision difficulty:** Respondents are asked if they are “blind or had serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses.” (Asked of people of all ages.)
- **Cognitive difficulty:** Respondents are asked if “due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition” do they have “serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions.” (Only asked of people ages 5 and over.)
- **Ambulatory difficulty:** Respondents are asked if they have “serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.” (Only asked of people ages 5 and over.)
- **Self-care difficulty:** Respondents are asked if they have “difficulty dressing or bathing.” (Only asked of people ages 5 and over.)
- **Independent living difficulty:** Respondents are asked if “due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition” do they have difficulty “doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping.”²

DATA UNIVERSE: PEOPLE LIVING IN GROUP QUARTERS

Note that the ACS prevalence data presented in this report are limited to the civilian noninstitutionalized population and do not include people living in group quarters. Group quarters include such places as college residence halls, residential treatment centers, skilled

² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey and Puerto Rico Community Survey 2021 Subject Definitions (www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/subject_definitions/2021_ACSSubjectDefinitions.pdf)

nursing facilities, group homes, military barracks, correctional facilities, workers' dormitories, and facilities for people experiencing homelessness. There are two general categories of group quarters:

- **Institutional group quarters** are facilities that house people who are primarily ineligible, unable, or unlikely to participate in the labor force while resident. The institutionalized population is the population residing in institutional group quarters, such as adult correctional facilities, juvenile facilities, skilled-nursing facilities, and other institutional facilities such as mental (psychiatric) hospitals and inpatient hospice facilities.
- **Noninstitutional group quarters** are facilities that house people who are primarily eligible, able, or likely to participate in the labor force while resident. The noninstitutionalized population lives in noninstitutional group quarters such as college/university student housing, military quarters, and other noninstitutional group quarters such as emergency and transitional shelters for people experiencing homelessness and group homes.³

In this report, the disability status for people living in noninstitutional group quarters is provided as a footnote to the display of overall disability prevalence, the only statistic for which group quarters data is provided.

ESTIMATING PREVALENCE OF MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS

Montana VRBS supports an increasing percentage of clients with mental health disability; therefore, understanding the size of the population with mental health disability is important for estimating the possible client population or those who may be eligible for services but not receiving them. ACS questions attempt to capture disability due to mental conditions in the framing of questions to include the qualifier, “due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition” does the respondent have a particular disability. However, data specifically targeted at assessing the prevalence of mental health illnesses may be more inclusive of people whose disability is a mental health condition. According to data collected in 2021, 26.7% of Montanans aged 18 and over, or approximately 229,000 adults, experience any mental illness, which is defined as having a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder (other than a developmental or substance use disorder), as assessed by the Mental Health Surveillance Study Structured Clinical Interview.⁴

³ U.S. Census Bureau, “Understanding and Using American Community Survey Data: What All Data Users Need to Know,” September 2020

(www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/acs/acs_general_handbook_2020.pdf)

⁴ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, “2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Model-Based Estimated totals for States” (<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2021-nsduh-estimated-totals->

DISABILITY PREVALENCE

Given the role of Montana VRBS to provide services that increase the ability of people with disabilities to work, the focus of the disability prevalence below is on the working age population – people ages 18 through 64. Following disability prevalence and other characteristics of the working age population, disability prevalence and characteristics of youth are presented.

DISABILITY PREVALENCE: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **1 in 9 Montanans of working age are disabled.** This is equivalent to 11.1% of the total working age population (ages 18-64) or a total of 70,623 working age individuals statewide.
- **The Native American population has the highest rate of disability in Montana.** 1 in 7 Montana Native Americans of working age are disabled (14.5%).
- **1 in 20 Montanans of working age (5.1%)** have a cognitive disability, the most common disability type, followed by 4.5% with an ambulatory disability.
- **Deer Lodge County has the highest rate of disability** in the state, with 24.1% of working age residents experiencing disability. In the following counties, 20% or more of the working age population experiences disability: Lincoln (23.9%), Sanders (22.2%), Powell (22.0%), Custer (20.6%), and Blaine (20.1%).

According to the American Community Survey, 13.8% of Montanans of all ages experience disability, which is equivalent to 146,768 residents. This rate is slightly higher than the national average of 12.6% of people of all ages experiencing disability.⁵

PREVALENCE BY AGE

Disability prevalence increases with age. While 11.1% of the working age population experiences disability in Montana, one-quarter (25.5%) of residents ages 65-74 experience disability and nearly half (46.4%) of residents ages 75 and over experience disability.

[state](https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2021-nsduh-guide-state-tables-and-summary-sae-methodology)) and “2021 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Guide to State Tables and Summary of Small Area Estimation Methodology” (<https://www.samhsa.gov/data/report/2021-nsduh-guide-state-tables-and-summary-sae-methodology>)

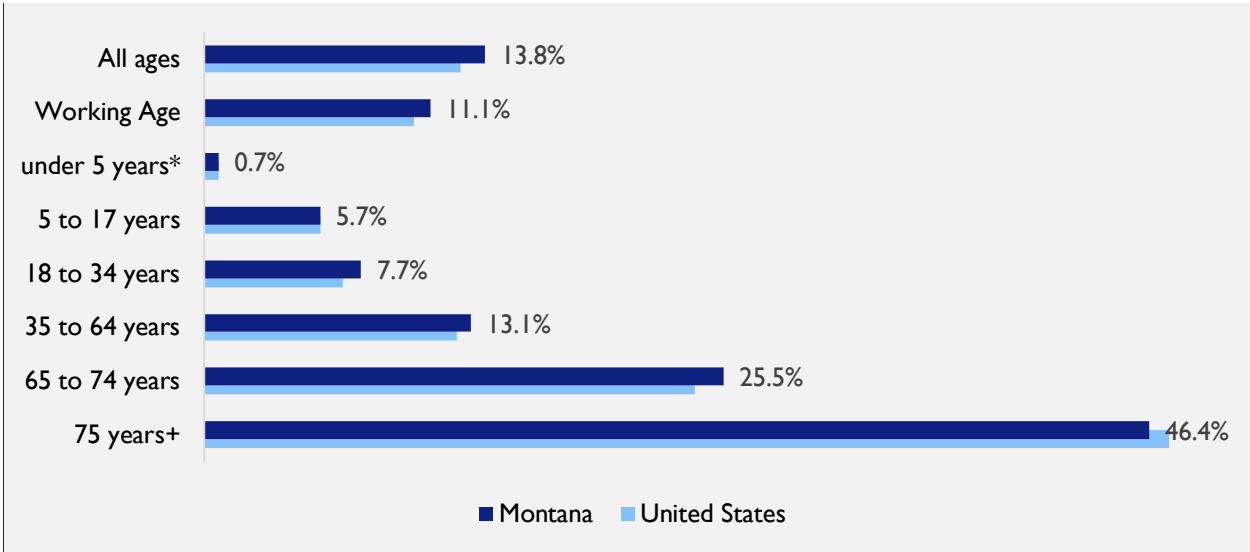
⁵ These figures reflect the civilian noninstitutionalized population. In addition, 3,532 people living in noninstitutionalized group quarters in Montana experience disability (21.7% of people living in noninstitutionalized group quarters). Among the noninstitutionalized group quarters population, just over half (51.1%) are living in college/university student housing. Among this population, 5.2% (429 people) experience disability. Among the remaining population living in noninstitutionalized group quarters, such as military quarters, emergency and transitional shelters for people experiencing homelessness, or group homes, 39.0% (3,103 people) experience disability. (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table B26108)

Focusing on the working age population, 7.7% of Montanans ages 18 to 34 experience disability (17,898) and 13.1% of Montanans ages 35 to 64 experience disability (52,725). Overall, 11.1% of Montanans of working age (70,623 residents) experience disability, which is slightly higher than the national average of 10.3%.

Please see the subsection “Youth Disability Prevalence and Characteristics“ for youth-specific disability prevalence data and analysis.

11% OF WORKING AGE POPULATION HAS A DISABILITY IN MONTANA

Figure 1. Disability prevalence among Montanans by age compared to United States, 2021



	Percent of People with Disabilities in the U.S.	Count of People with Disabilities in Montana	Percent of People with Disabilities in Montana
All ages	12.6%	146,768	13.8%
Under 5 years*	0.7%	436	0.7%
5 to 17 years	5.7%	9,779	5.7%
18 to 34 years	6.8%	17,898	7.7%
35 to 64 years	12.4%	52,725	13.1%
65 to 74 years	24.1%	31,682	25.5%
75 years	47.4%	34,248	46.4%
Working age (18-64)	10.3%	70,623	11.1%

*For children under 5 years of age, only hearing and vision disabilities are captured by the American Community Survey. Independent living difficulty is not included as a disability for children and youth ages 0-14.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

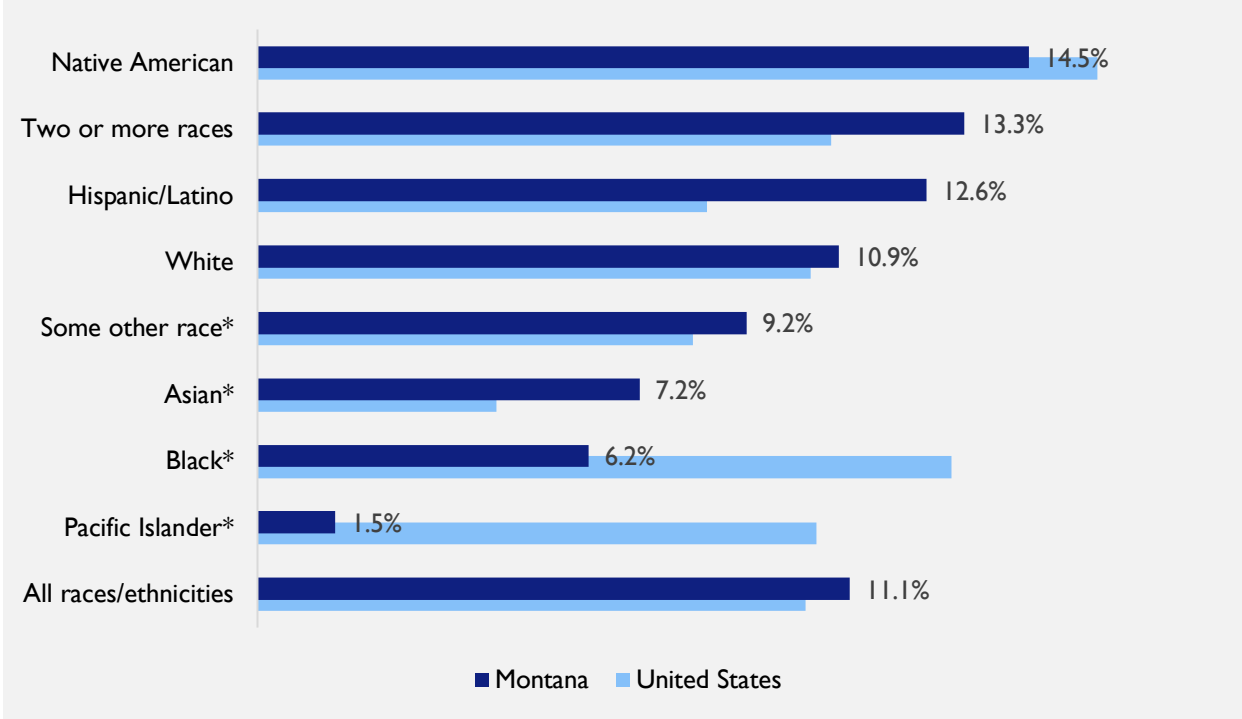
PREVALENCE BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Working age Native Americans and people who identify as two or more races experience the highest rates of disability among racial/ethnic groups in Montana. Approximately 1 in 7 working

age Native Americans have a disability (14.5% of all Native Americans). This is followed by people who identify as two or more races, of which 13.3% have a disability. Latinos have the third highest rate of disability; 1 in 8 Latinos (12.6% of all Latinos) experience disability, which is higher than the national rate of 8.5%. The rate of disability among the working age white population of Montanans (10.9%) is roughly on par with the national rate 10.4% for the white working age population. At the other end of the continuum, racial groups that had lower rates of disability compared to other racial or ethnic groups in Montana include people who identify as Pacific Islander, Black, Asian and some other race. However, it should be noted that the estimates for these comparatively small populations in Montana have a high margin of error; therefore, disability prevalence rate estimates for these groups are unstable.

NATIVE AMERICANS HAVE THE HIGHEST RATE OF DISABILITY AMONG ALL RACE/ETHNIC GROUPS

Figure 2. Disability prevalence among working age Montanans by race/ethnicity compared to United States, 2021



	Percent of People with Disabilities Ages 18-64 in the U.S.	Count of People with Disabilities Ages 18-64 in Montana	Percent of People with Disabilities Ages 18-64 in Montana
White	10.4%	60,733	10.9%
American Indian	15.8%	5,174	14.5%
Two or more races	10.8%	3,387	13.3%
Some other race	8.2%	615	9.2%
Asian	4.5%	473	7.2%
Black	13.1%	236	6.2%
Pacific Islander	10.5%	5	1.5%
Hispanic/Latino	8.5%	3,184	12.6%
Total People with Disabilities	10.3%	70,623	11.1%

Note: The Census defines Hispanic/Latino as an ethnicity and the remaining categories as races. People are asked to identify as a race and then either Hispanic or Non-Hispanic. In this table, Hispanic/Latino includes people of any race; all racial identities shown reflect that race alone and include people who identify as either Hispanic or Non-Hispanic.

*High margin of error; interpret with caution.

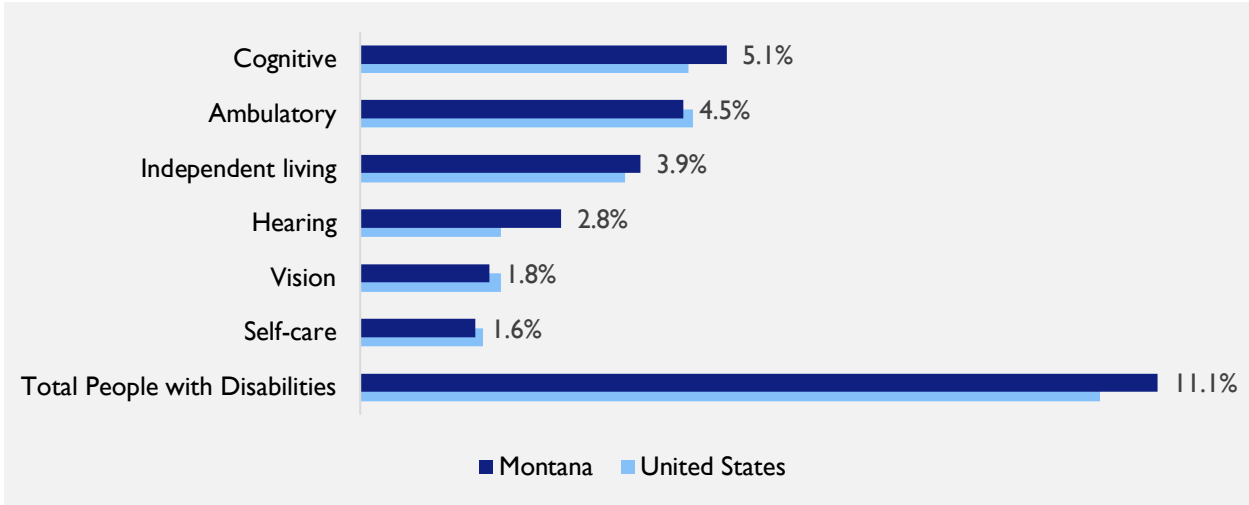
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Tables S1810 and B18101A-1

PREVALENCE BY DISABILITY TYPE

One out of every 20 Montanans of working age has a cognitive disability (5.1% or 32,281). This rate is slightly higher than the national rate of 4.6%. Ambulatory disabilities are the next highest rate of disability in the state, experienced by 4.5% of working age Montanans (or 28,737) and similar to the national rate of 4.6%. One in 26 working age Montanans (3.9%) have an independent living difficulty (or 24,464), compared to 3.7% of the national level. Hearing difficulties affect 2.8% of the working age population (or 17,560), which is a slightly higher rate than the national average of 2.0%. Vision difficulties affect 1.8% of the state’s working age population (or 11,473), which is on par with the national rate of 2.0%. Self-care difficulties are the least frequently experienced disability, affecting 1.6% of the working age population (or 10,233), which is also on par with the national rate of 1.7%.

5% OF WORKING AGE MONTANANS HAVE COGNITIVE DIFFICULTIES

Figure 3. Disability prevalence among working age Montanans by type of disability compared to the United States, 2021



Type of Disability	Percent of Working Age People with Disabilities in the U.S.	Count of Working Age People with Disabilities in Montana	Percent of Working Age People with Disabilities in Montana
Cognitive	4.6%	32,281	5.1%
Ambulatory	4.6%	28,737	4.5%
Independent living	3.7%	24,464	3.9%
Hearing	2.0%	17,560	2.8%
Vision	2.0%	11,473	1.8%
Self-care	1.7%	10,233	1.6%
Total People with Disabilities	10.3%	70,623	11.1%

Note: Counts of people with disabilities exceed the overall count of people with disabilities because people can identify as having more than one disability.

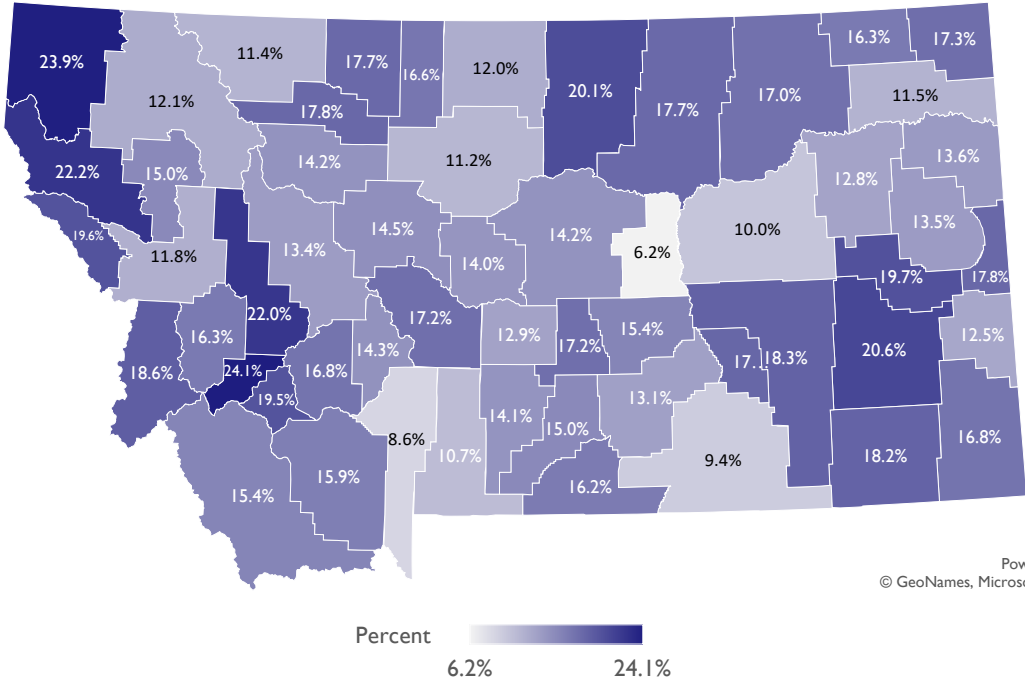
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

PREVALENCE BY GEOGRAPHY

The proportion of the population with disabilities varies from a low of 6.2% in Petroleum County to a high of 24.1% in Deer Lodge County. Rates for all counties in Montana are provided in the map and table in Figure 4. Counties with the highest numbers of people with disabilities include Yellowstone (21,155 people), Missoula (13,811), Flathead (12,441), and Cascade (11,680).

DISABILITY RATE BY COUNTY RANGES FROM 6% TO 24%

Figure 4. Disability prevalence by Montana county, All ages, 2021



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County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent
Beaverhead	15.4%	Flathead	12.1%	Madison	15.9%	Roosevelt	11.5%
Big Horn	9.4%	Gallatin	8.6%	Meagher	17.2%	Rosebud	18.3%
Blaine	20.1%	Garfield	10.0%	Mineral	19.6%	Sanders	22.2%
Broadwater	14.3%	Glacier	11.4%	Missoula	11.8%	Sheridan	17.3%
Carbon	16.2%	Golden Valley	17.2%	Musselshell	15.4%	Silver Bow	19.5%
Carter	16.8%	Granite	16.3%	Park	10.7%	Stillwater	15.0%
Cascade	14.5%	Hill	12.0%	Petroleum	6.2%	Sweet Grass	14.1%
Chouteau	11.2%	Jefferson	16.8%	Phillips	17.7%	Teton	14.2%
Custer	20.6%	Judith Basin	14.0%	Pondera	17.8%	Toole	17.7%
Daniels	16.3%	Lake	15.0%	Powder River	18.2%	Treasure	17.9%
Dawson	13.5%	Lewis and Clark	13.4%	Powell	22.0%	Valley	17.0%
Deer Lodge	24.1%	Liberty	16.6%	Prairie	19.7%	Wheatland	12.9%
Fallon	12.5%	Lincoln	23.9%	Ravalli	18.6%	Wibaux	17.8%
Fergus	14.2%	McCone	12.8%	Richland	13.6%	Yellowstone	13.1%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

YELLOWSTONE COUNTY HAS HIGHEST COUNT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES (21,155)

Figure 5. Count of People with Disabilities by Montana County, All Ages, 2021

County	Count	County	Count	County	Count	County	Count
Beaverhead	1,419	Flathead	12,441	Madison	1,348	Roosevelt	1,229
Big Horn	1,226	Gallatin	9,968	Meagher	328	Rosebud	1,538
Blaine	1,403	Garfield	97	Mineral	868	Sanders	2,706
Broadwater	940	Glacier	1,568	Missoula	13,811	Sheridan	600
Carbon	1,683	Golden Valley	141	Musselshell	739	Silver Bow	6,689
Carter	223	Granite	539	Park	1,811	Stillwater	1,330
Cascade	11,680	Hill	1,941	Petroleum	27	Sweet Grass	516
Chouteau	658	Jefferson	1,998	Phillips	743	Teton	864
Custer	2,432	Judith Basin	280	Pondera	1,051	Toole	789
Daniels	280	Lake	4,625	Powder River	315	Treasure	124
Dawson	1,178	Lewis and Clark	9,334	Powell	1,177	Valley	1,267
Deer Lodge	2,143	Liberty	334	Prairie	238	Wheatland	265
Fallon	373	Lincoln	4,658	Ravalli	8,122	Wibaux	178
Fergus	1,599	McCone	228	Richland	1,551	Yellowstone	21,155

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

YOUTH DISABILITY PREVALENCE AND CHARACTERISTICS

This section provides disability prevalence and characteristics for the youth population to provide context for findings related to Pre-ETS clients. Sources include the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for population-level estimates of youth with disabilities and the Montana Office of Public Instruction for counts of youth enrolled in special education services.

OVERALL PREVALENCE AND PREVALENCE BY AGE

AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY ESTIMATES

The ACS estimates that 436 children under age 5 in Montana have a vision and/or hearing disability, the only disabilities tracked for this age group. ACS data on children ages 5 through 17 years is more comprehensive, inclusive of hearing, vision, ambulatory, self-care, and cognitive disabilities; independent living difficulties is added starting at age 15. The ACS estimates that 9,779 youth ages 5-17 in Montana have one or more disabilities (5.7% of the age 5-17 population). This is the same rate as the United States average. The ACS estimate for the count of youth 0-17 with disabilities is 10,215 (4.4% of the age 0-17 population), which is the same rate as the United States average.

5.7% OF MONTANA YOUTH AGES 5-17 HAVE A DISABILITY

Figure 6. Disability prevalence among Montana youth by age range, 2021

	Percent of Youth with Disabilities in the U.S.	Count of Youth with Disabilities in Montana	Percent of Youth with Disabilities in Montana
Under 5 years*	0.7%	436	0.7%
5 to 17 years	5.7%	9,779	5.7%
All youth (0-17)	4.4%	10,215	4.4%

*For children under 5 years of age, only hearing and vision disabilities are captured by the American Community Survey. Independent living difficulty is not included as a disability for children and youth ages 0-14.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

SPECIAL EDUCATION DATA

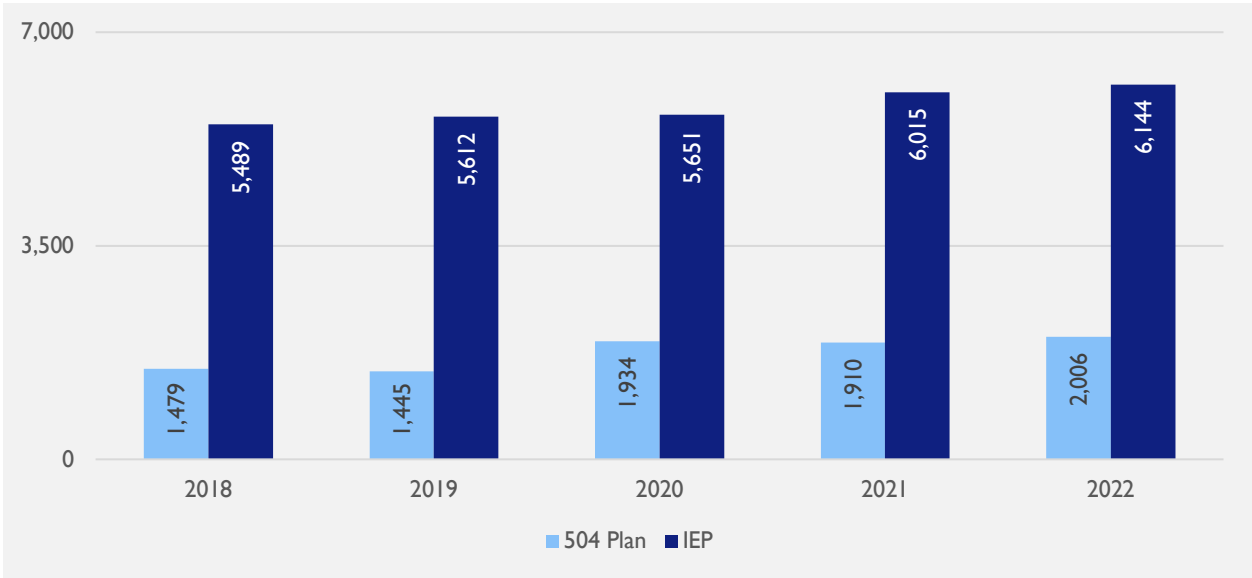
Data on students with IEPs or 504 Plans (see inset) can help Montana VRBS understand the number of students who might be candidates for Pre-ETS. As shown in Figure 7, in the latest school year available (2022/23) 6,144 students ages 14-21 had IEPs and another 2,006 students ages 14-19 had 504 Plans. Over five years, there has been a 12 percent increase in the number of teens and young adults with IEPs and a 36 percent increase in the number of teens and young adults with 504 Plans.

**Background:
IEPs and 504 Plans**

Not all students with disabilities need specialized instruction when in school, but for those who do, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows for the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP). IEPs outline the specialized instruction and related services a student will receive, as well as set goals for measurable growth. For students with disabilities who do not require specialized instruction but may need accommodations to ensure equal access to their education, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act allows for the development of a 504 Plan, which outlines the needed accommodations.

5-YEAR TREND: TEENS WITH 504 PLANS UP 36%; IEP'S UP 12%

Figure 7. Count of Montana youth ages 14-21 with an IEP or 504 Plan, 2018/19 – 2022/23



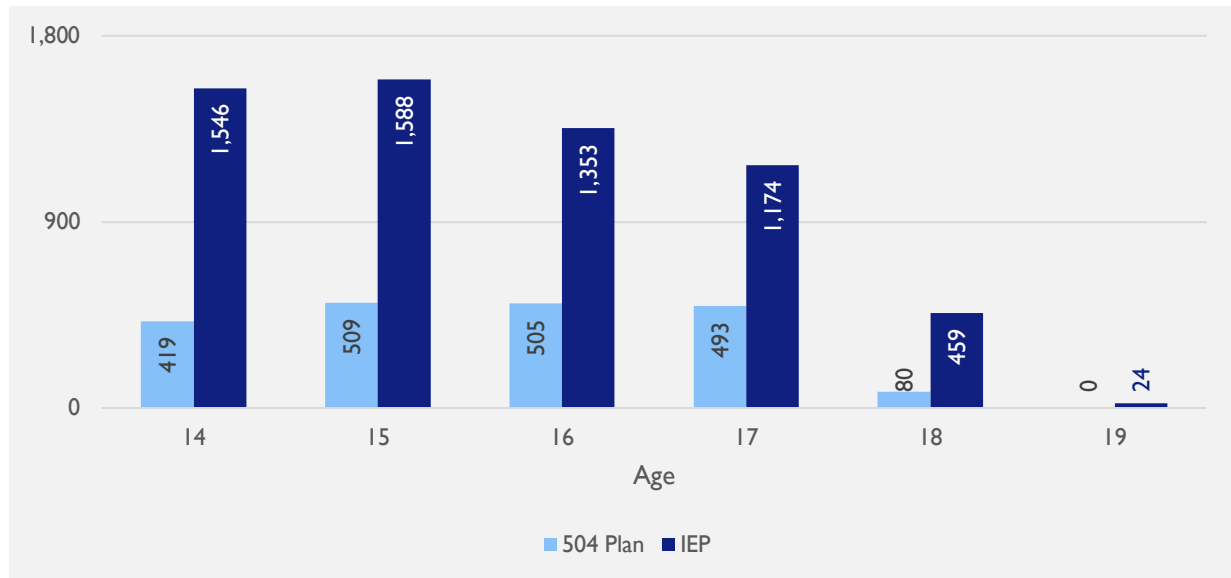
Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction, public records request, November 2023

As shown in Figure 8, data from the 2022/23 school year suggests the count of students with disabilities with IEPs declines with age, while the count of students with 504 Plans is relatively steady until age 18. Montana law requires schools to provide special education services only through age 18,⁶ which is the lowest age cap for special education in the nation. Local education agencies can increase the maximum age.

⁶ 20-7-411, MCA, https://leg.mt.gov/bills/mca/title_0200/chapter_0070/part_0040/section_0110/0200-0070-0040-0110.html

COUNT OF STUDENTS WITH IEPs DECLINES WITH AGE

Figure 8. Count of Montana youth ages 14-21 with an IEP or 504 plan by Age, 2022/23



Note: For ages 20 and 21, either data were suppressed or there were no students of those ages.

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction, public records request, November 2023

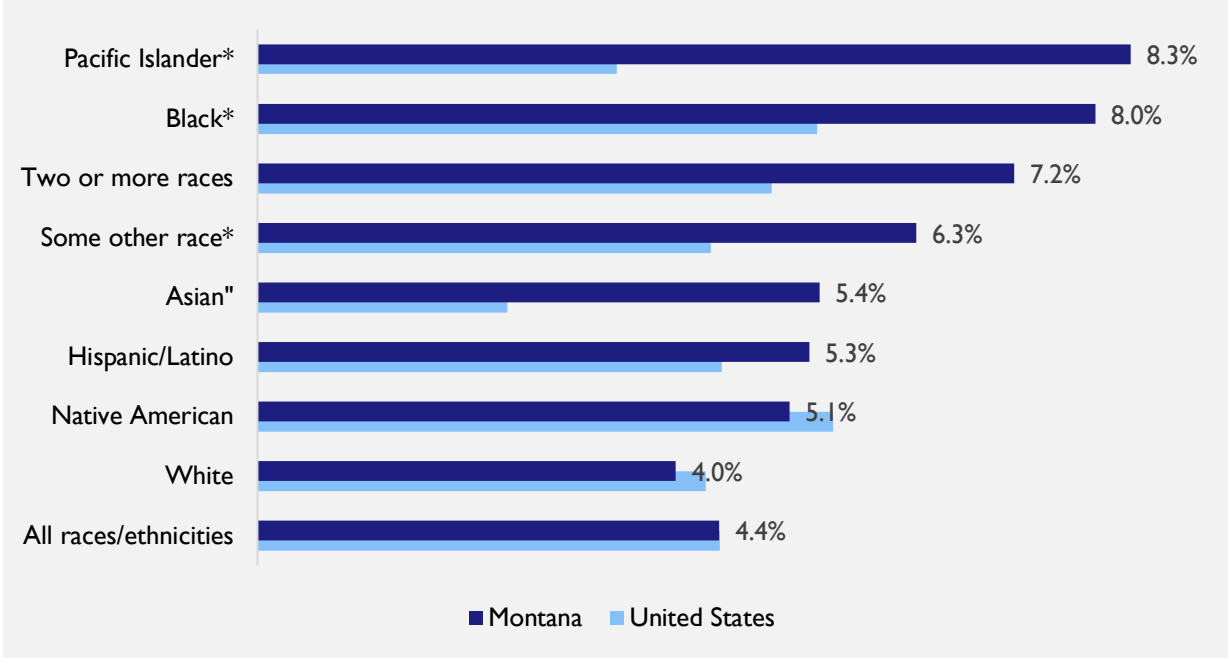
BY RACE/ETHNICITY

AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY ESTIMATES

Data on the race and ethnicity of youth with disabilities is unstable for many racial/ethnic groups due to small sample sizes. Among race/ethnicity identifications that have more stable data, a higher proportion of Montana youth who identify as two or more races have a disability than the United States average, while the proportion of Montana youth with disabilities who identify as Native American is slightly less than the United States average. It is possible this variation is due to sampling error; however, administrative caseload data on exited participants from Montana VRBS may provide an explanation for this finding. Among Montana VRBS exited participants who identify as two or more races, most (72%) identify as Native American and some other race. Therefore, Montana's higher disability prevalence among mixed race youth and lower disability prevalence among Native American youth may be because most mixed-race youth identify as Native American and some other race rather than Native American alone.

A HIGHER PROPORTION OF MIXED-RACE MONTANA YOUTH HAVE DISABILITIES COMPARED TO THE U.S. AVERAGE

Figure 9. Disability prevalence among children and youth (0-17) in Montana by race/ethnicity compared to United States, 2021



	Percent of Youth with Disabilities in the U.S.	Count of Youth with Disabilities in Montana	Percent of Youth with Disabilities in Montana
Pacific Islander*	3.4%	3	8.3%
Black*	5.3%	141	8.0%
Two or more races	4.9%	1,268	7.2%
Some other race*	4.3%	158	6.3%
Asian*	2.4%	70	5.4%
Hispanic/Latino	4.4%	788	5.3%
Native American	5.5%	1,155	5.1%
White	4.3%	7,420	4.0%
Total Youth with Disabilities	4.4%	10,215	4.4%

*High margin of error; interpret with caution.

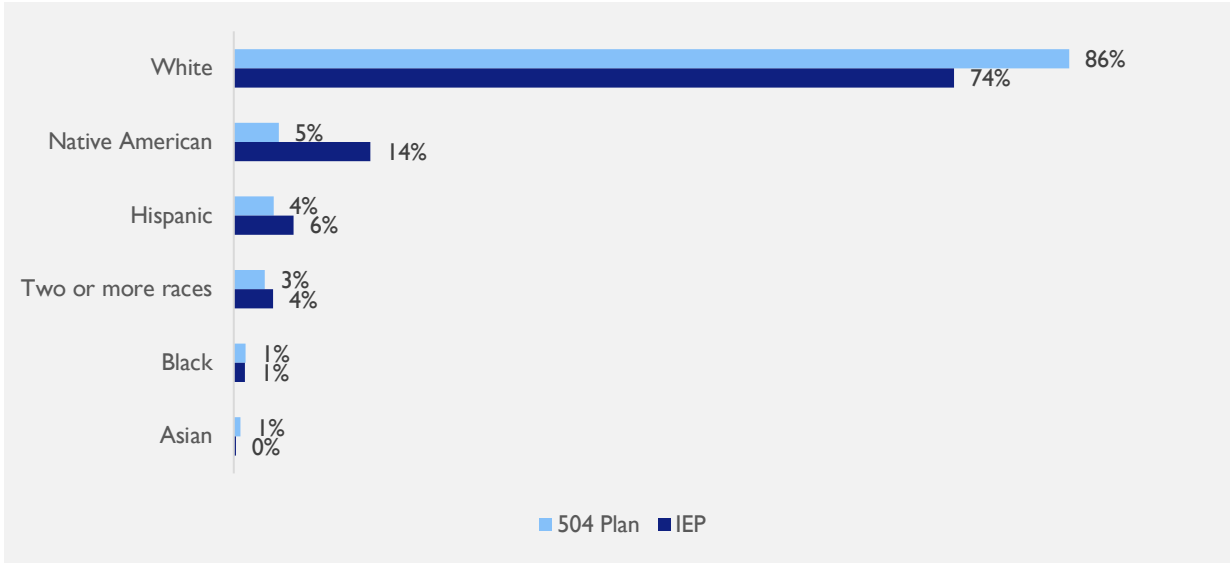
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810 and B18101A-1

SPECIAL EDUCATION DATA

Among the population of students ages 14-21 receiving special education or disability accommodations, most identify as White, which aligns with the overall distribution of the Montana population.

NATIVE AMERICAN STUDENTS COMPRISE A HIGHER PROPORTION OF IEP POPULATION THAN THE 504 PLAN POPULATION

Figure 10. Distribution of students ages 14-21 with IEPs or 504 Plans by race/ethnicity, 2022/23



	Count		Percent	
	504 Plan	IEP	504 Plan	IEP
White	1,726	4,532	86%	74%
Native American	93	860	5%	14%
Hispanic	82	378	4%	6%
Two or more races	64	247	3%	4%
Black	24	70	1%	1%
Asian	14	13	1%	0%
Total	2,003	6,100	100%	100%

Note: Data do not sum to totals presented in Figure 7 due data suppression criteria to protect privacy.

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction, public records request, November 2023

BY DISABILITY TYPE

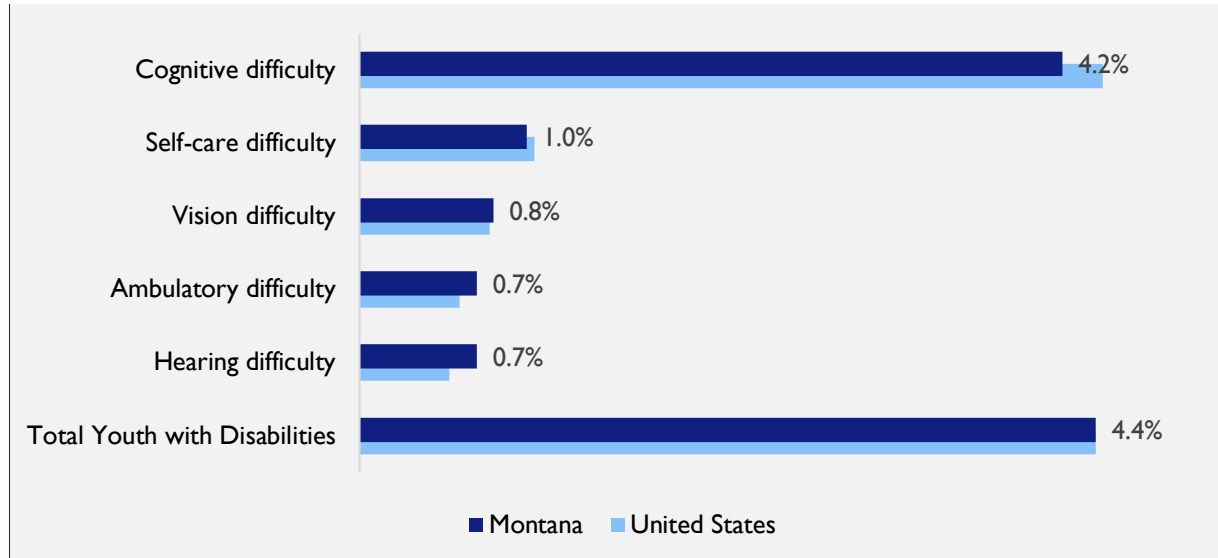
Counts of youth by disability type are analyzed using ACS data to estimate the population-level prevalence of types of disabilities among youth and OPI special education data to understand the disability types of students ages 14-21 with IEPs.

AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY ESTIMATES

An estimated 4.2 percent of Montana children and youth ages 0-17 have a cognitive difficulty, which is the disability type with the highest prevalence among children and youth. Self-care difficulties are the second most common disability type among youth; however, only 1.0 percent experience this disability.

COGNITIVE DIFFICULTY MOST COMMON DISABILITY AMONG CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Figure 11. Disability prevalence among children and youth (0-17) in Montana by type of disability, 2021



	Percent of Youth with Disabilities in the U.S.	Count of Youth with Disabilities in Montana	Percent of Youth with Disabilities in Montana
Cognitive difficulty	4.4%	7,216	4.2%
Self-care difficulty	1.0%	1,650	1.0%
Vision difficulty	0.8%	1,848	0.8%
Hearing difficulty	0.5%	1,647	0.7%
Ambulatory difficulty	0.6%	1,276	0.7%
Independent living difficulty	n/a	n/a	n/a
Total Youth with Disabilities	4.4%	10,215	4.4%

Note: Counts of people with disabilities exceed the overall count of people with disabilities because people can identify as having more than one disability. Independent living difficulty is not included as a disability for children and youth ages 0-14.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

SPECIAL EDUCATION DATA

Data by disability type are not available for students with 504 Plans, but limited data by disability type is available for students with IEPs. While the number of students with learning disabilities tends to decline with age, it remains the most common disability type among high school age students with disabilities. This is followed by students with multiple disabilities and students with other health impairments. Statewide, there are roughly 350 students ages 14-21 with autism and a similar number with emotional disturbance.

LEARNING DISABILITY IS MOST COMMON TYPE OF DISABILITY

Figure 12. Montana students Ages 14-21 with IEPs by disability type, 2022/23

Disability Type	Age				
	14	15	16	17	18
Autism	84	69	85	68	38
Cognitive Delay	49	61	58	52	42
Deaf-Blindness	*	*	*	*	*
Deafness	*	*	*	*	*
Emotional Disturbance	88	99	77	60	23
Hearing Impairment	*	*	*	*	*
Learning Disability	629	682	520	486	157
Multiple Disabilities	410	358	355	277	116
Other Health Impairment	225	276	236	206	70
Orthopedic Impairment	*	*	*	*	*
Speech/Language Impairment	45	29	*	*	*
Traumatic Brain Injury	*	*	*	*	*
Visual Impairment	*	*	*	*	*

*Denotes counts of 10 or fewer. All disability types for ages 19, 20, and 21 were suppressed due to low counts.

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction, public records request, November 2023

BY GEOGRAPHY

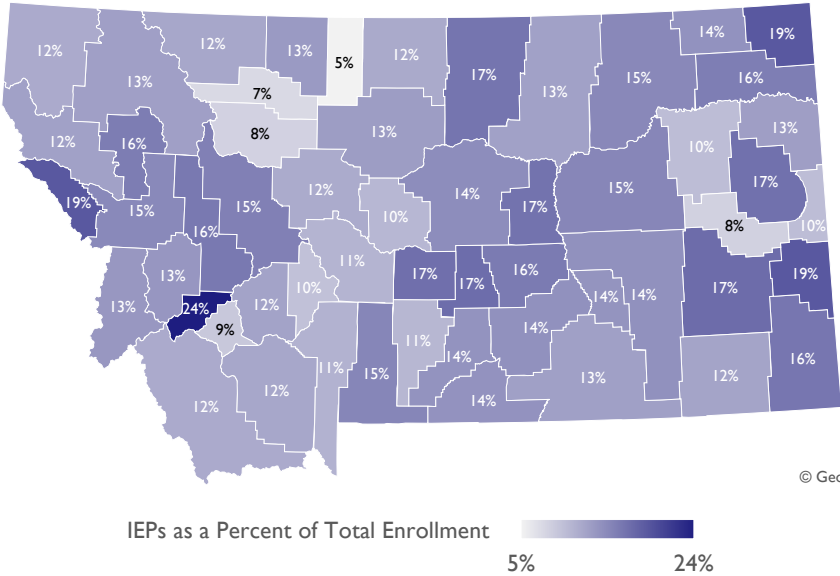
The geographic distribution of children with disabilities is shown using special education IEP data for students of all ages.

SPECIAL EDUCATION DATA

As a proportion of total enrollment, Deer Lodge County has the highest rate of students with IEPs at 24 percent of all public school students countywide. This is followed by Fallon and Mineral counties, which both have IEP rates of 19 percent. In terms of absolute counts of students with IEPs, Yellowstone County has the greatest number (3,385), followed by Missoula County (2,119).

DEER LODGE COUNTY HAS THE HIGHEST RATE OF IEPS

Figure 13. Montana students with IEPs as a percent of total enrollment (all ages) by county, 2022/23



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County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent
Beaverhead	12%	Flathead	13%	McCone	10%	Roosevelt	16%
Big Horn	13%	Gallatin	11%	Meagher	11%	Rosebud	14%
Blaine	17%	Garfield	15%	Mineral	19%	Sanders	12%
Broadwater	10%	Glacier	12%	Missoula	15%	Sheridan	19%
Carbon	14%	Golden Valley	17%	Musselshell	16%	Silver Bow	9%
Carter	16%	Granite	13%	Park	15%	Stillwater	14%
Cascade	12%	Hill	12%	Petroleum	17%	Sweet Grass	11%
Chouteau	13%	Jefferson	12%	Phillips	13%	Teton	8%
Custer	17%	Judith Basin	10%	Pondera	7%	Toole	13%
Daniels	14%	Lake	16%	Powder River	12%	Treasure	14%
Dawson	17%	Lewis and Clark	15%	Powell	16%	Valley	15%
Deer Lodge	24%	Liberty	5%	Prairie	8%	Wheatland	17%
Fallon	19%	Lincoln	12%	Ravalli	13%	Wibaux	10%
Fergus	14%	Madison	12%	Richland	13%	Yellowstone	14%

Note: Rates for Treasure and Petroleum counties are estimated due to data suppression.

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction, public records request, November 2023 (SPED data); Montana Office of Public Instruction, GEMS database (enrollment data)

YELLOWSTONE COUNTY HAS THE GREATEST NUMBER OF STUDENTS WITH IEPs

Figure 14. Count of Montana students with IEPs (all ages), 2022/23

County	Count	County	Count	County	Count	County	Count
Beaverhead	144	Flathead	1,932	McCone	24	Roosevelt	384
Big Horn	299	Gallatin	1,561	Meagher	20	Rosebud	209
Blaine	221	Garfield	28	Mineral	128	Sanders	179
Broadwater	68	Glacier	321	Missoula	2,119	Sheridan	97
Carbon	195	Golden Valley	21	Musselshell	106	Silver Bow	402
Carter	26	Granite	52	Park	255	Stillwater	188
Cascade	1,362	Hill	354	Petroleum	*	Sweet Grass	55
Chouteau	96	Jefferson	232	Phillips	87	Teton	88
Custer	279	Judith Basin	29	Pondera	69	Toole	85
Daniels	40	Lake	704	Powder River	29	Treasure	*
Dawson	211	Lewis and Clark	1,563	Powell	113	Valley	165
Deer Lodge	246	Liberty	17	Prairie	12	Wheatland	48
Fallon	106	Lincoln	291	Ravalli	748	Wibaux	15
Fergus	235	Madison	116	Richland	235	Yellowstone	3,385

*Denotes count of 10 or less.

Source: Montana Office of Public Instruction, public records request, November 2023

ESTIMATING THE FOCUS POPULATION FOR VRBS SERVICES

FOCUS POPULATION: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **The number of Montanans receiving VRBS services is roughly aligned with the focus population**, which is defined as the count of people with disabilities who are choosing to be in the labor force but are not employed.
- **While a greater proportion of people with disabilities are unemployed compared to people without disabilities, the employment gap is relatively small.** 91 percent of people with disabilities in the labor force are employed, compared to 96 percent of people without disabilities, resulting in an employment gap of 5 percent.
- **People with independent living difficulties have the highest unemployment rate among people with disabilities.**

DEFINITION OF “FOCUS POPULATION” AND EMPLOYMENT GAP

The “focus population” represents likely participants for VRBS services; that is, people with disabilities who are in the labor force and looking for work, but currently unemployed.

Individuals in this focus population group may be currently receiving VRBS services, may have received VRBS services in the past, or may have never received VRBS services, either in the past or currently.

Using 2021 ACS data, the following analysis estimates the size of the VRBS focus population overall and by disability type.

This analysis also calculates employment rates and the employment gap for the focus population. Employment rate is the percentage of people in the labor force who are employed. Employment gap is the difference in employment rates between the non-disabled population and the population experiencing disability. The formula used to calculate the employment gap is as follows:

$$\text{Employment Gap Percentage} = \text{Employment Rate for People without Disability} - \text{Employment Rate for People with Disability}$$

OVERALL FOCUS POPULATION ESTIMATE

People with disabilities are much more likely than people without disabilities to elect to stay out of the labor force. Half (50%) of working age (ages 18-64) people with disabilities living in the community (not institutionalized or living in group quarters) in Montana are not in the labor force, which means they are neither working nor seeking work. This is equivalent to 35,062 people with disabilities who have elected to stay out of the labor force. In comparison, only

17% of people without disabilities have elected to stay out of the labor force (or 105,115 people).⁷

Among people with disabilities who elect to be in the labor force, as shown in Figure 15, 35,561 working age Montanans with disabilities are in the labor force, either employed or not employed. Of those 35,561 people with disabilities, 91% are employed and 9% (or 3,217) are unemployed. The definition of “unemployed” for the ACS is a person not currently employed, but looking for work and available to take a job if offered one.⁸

In comparison, the employment rate for working age individuals without disability is 96%, which represents an employment gap of 5% between people with disabilities and people without disabilities.

When looking at the employment rate of all disabled individuals (in or not in the labor force) and comparing that rate to all people without disability (in or not in the labor force), the employment gap jumps to 33.7%.

The VRBS focus population is 3,217 people with disabilities who are in the labor force and actively seeking work, but currently unemployed. The broader focus population, which also includes people with disabilities who are not in the labor force, is 38,279 people with disabilities who are not employed.

Figure 15. VRBS focus population estimates and employment gap, Montana, 2021

Labor Force Status	Overall Population with Disability (Ages 18-64)	Overall Population without Disability (Ages 18-64)	Employment Rate with Disability	Employment Rate without Disability	Employment Gap	Estimated Focus Population
In the Labor Force	35,561	464,464	91.0%	96.4%	5.4%	3,217
Not in the Labor Force	35,062	98,498	N/A	N/A	N/A	35,062
In and Not in Labor Force	70,623	562,962	45.8%	79.5%	33.7%	38,279

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table C18120

Comparing the VRBS caseload to the focus population is a rough approximation of the reach of VRBS services. In a single quarter of 2021, Montana VRBS served an average of 2,318 participants. The estimated focus population in Montana in 2021 was 3,217, which is relatively

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table C18120

⁸ Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov)

similar to the number of disabled Montanans served in any given quarter in 2021. This suggests VRBS participation is fairly aligned with the demand or need for services; however, it should be noted that the VRBS data reflect participants served in a single quarter, not the full year. This suggests that the full-year VRBS participant caseload is likely higher than 2,318 and somewhat more aligned with the focus population.

VRBS PARTICIPANT CASELOAD ROUGHLY ALIGNS WITH ESTIMATED FOCUS POPULATION

Figure 16. VRBS participants served as a percentage of all unemployed Montanans with disabilities and the estimated focus population, average per quarter in 2021 (VRBS) and annual for 2021 (Montana)

Participants Served (All Ages)	All Working Age Montanans with Disabilities who are Not Employed (Ages 18-64, in and Not in Labor Force)	Participants Served as Percent of All Working Age Montanans with Disabilities	VRBS Focus Population (Unemployed Montanans Ages 18-64 with Disabilities in Labor Force)	Participants Served as Percent of Focus Population
2,318	38,279	6%	3,217	72%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table C18120

FOCUS POPULATION BY DISABILITY TYPE

Looking at the disabled population that elects to stay out of the labor force, 70% of Montanans with independent living difficulties are not in the labor force, followed by 54% of people with vision difficulties and 54% of people with cognitive difficulties. As a reminder, people with independent living difficulties responded “yes” to the following question: “due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition” do they have difficulty “doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping.” The highest labor force participation rate is among people with self-care difficulties (30% staying out of the labor force) and people with hearing difficulties (41%).

Among the population of people with disabilities that elects to be in the labor force, people with independent living difficulties have the highest unemployment rate, followed by people with cognitive difficulties (18% and 14%, respectively), whereas only three percent of people with ambulatory difficulties in the labor force are unemployed and only three percent of people with self-care difficulties in the labor force are unemployed.

WORKING AGE PEOPLE WITH INDEPENDENT LIVING DIFFICULTIES MOST LIKELY TO BE UNEMPLOYED OR OUT OF THE LABOR FORCE

Figure 17. Estimated VRBS focus population and labor force participation among Montanans with disabilities by type of disability, 2021

	Count of Montanans with Disabilities in the Labor Force who are Unemployed (Focus Population)	Percent of Montanans with Disabilities in the Labor Force who are Unemployed (Focus Population)	Count of Montanans with Disabilities who Elect to Stay Out of the Labor Force	Percent of Montanans with Disabilities who Elect to Stay Out of the Labor Force
Hearing difficulty	762	7%	7,532	41%
Vision difficulty	642	11%	6,913	54%
Cognitive difficulty	2,332	14%	19,819	54%
Ambulatory difficulty	635	3%	17,311	47%
Self-care difficulty	436	3%	7,364	30%
Independent living difficulty	1,303	18%	16,898	70%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates, 2021, Table B18120

VRBS CLIENT CHARACTERISTICS COMPARED TO DISABLED POPULATION

To understand how the Montana VRBS client caseload compares to the working age Montana population with disabilities, ACS prevalence data is compared to Montana VRBS client characteristics. However, in the case of data by disability type, Montana VRBS categories vary from American Community Survey categories. Consequently, one-to-one comparisons are not possible, and the variation is significant enough that approximate comparisons are also not possible. Therefore, only Montana VRBS client caseload data by disability type is shown in this section (ACS prevalence data by disability type can be found in Figure 3). Comparisons are presented for subgroups that are more aligned across the two data sources, such as by age, race/ethnicity, and by county.

CHARACTERISTICS COMPARISON: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **The Montana VRBS client demographic composition is generally representative of the broader population of people with disabilities in the state**, including by race/ethnicity and age.
- **Missoula County has the highest proportion of people with disabilities participating in Montana VRBS services.** Comparing Missoula County’s estimated 13,811 people with disabilities (of all ages) in 2021 to the count of current and exited clients in the Madison system through March 31, 2023 who are identified as RSA participants (795) results in 5.8 percent of people with disabilities participating in VRBS services in the period tracked. Hill County also has comparatively higher rates of VRBS participation.

ALL CLIENTS

As discussed above, when looking at the estimated focus population for VRBS services, there is fairly close alignment between the VRBS participant caseload and the number of Montanans with disabilities in the labor force who are unemployed (Figure 16). Looking at the broader focus population, which includes people with disabilities who are not in the labor force, VRBS serves approximately 6 percent of the disabled population in a given quarter in 2021. Please see caveats with these data within the section “Prevalence by Geography.”

RACE/ETHNICITY

As displayed in Figure 18, the racial and ethnic composition of Montana VRBS participants roughly mirrors the racial and ethnic composition of Montana’s disabled population, particularly for White, Native American, and Latino populations.

RACIAL/ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF VRBS PARTICIPANTS ROUGHLY MIRRORS MONTANA POPULATION

Figure 18. Distribution of VRBS participants by race and ethnicity compared to working age Montanans with disabilities, 2021 (Montana) and 2022 (VRBS)

Race	Count of Montana VRBS Participants	Count of Working Age Montanans with Disabilities	Percent of Montana VRBS Participants	Percent of Working Age Montanans with Disabilities
White	2,443	60,733	87.0%	86.0%
Two or more races	46	3,387	1.6%	4.8%
Black	50	236	1.5%	0.3%
Asian	29	473	1.0%	0.7%
Native American	276	5,174	8.4%	7.3%
Pacific Islander	11	5	0.4%	0.0%
Some other race	n/a	615	n/a	0.9%
Ethnicity	2,808	70,623	100%	100%
Hispanic/Latino	149	3,184	5.3%	4.5%
Not-Hispanic/Latino	2,659	67,439	94.7%	95.5%
Total	2,808	70,623	100%	100%

Note: VRBS participant counts reflect the average caseload of all four quarters of 2022.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810 and B18101A-1; U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

DISABILITY TYPE

VRBS and the Census Bureau categorize disabilities differently, so direct comparisons are not possible. For example, the distribution of people with disabilities by type of disability based on the ACS sums to more than 100% because respondents are allowed to select more than one disability, whereas the data for VRBS participants reflects the participant’s primary disability. Secondary disability in the VRBS data is a separate calculation. Additionally, the ACS includes the category Independent Living Difficulty (challenges doing errands alone due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition), which does not crosswalk well with VRBS disability categories given that the disability could have a physical, mental, or emotional basis. Finally, several ACS disability question prompts include “due to a physical, mental, or emotional condition,” which effectively bundles mental health disabilities into other disability categories, while the VRBS category of Psychological or Psychosocial Disability is standalone.

VRBS participant data by primary disability is provided in Figure 19, while ACS data by disability type is provided in Figure 3.

THE MOST COMMON DISABILITIES AMONG VRBS PARTICIPANTS ARE COGNITIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL OR PSYCHOSOCIAL

Figure 19. VRBS participants by primary disability, quarterly average, 2022 (VRBS)

Primary Type of Disability (VRBS)	Count of Montana VRBS Participants	Percent of Montana VRBS Participants
Visual	132	4%
Auditory or Communicative	114	4%
Physical	737	24%
Cognitive	1,070	36%
Psychological or Psychosocial	958	32%
	3,011	100%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards (Average of 2022 Quarters)

AGE

Age categories for the disabled population in Montana (used by the ACS) vary somewhat from age categories used by VRBS, but there is general parity. When looking at the population ages 5-64, 13% are youth between the ages of 5 and 17 years, which is similar to the percentage of youth under age 19 served by VRBS (11%). The majority of VRBS participants (89%) are ages 19 and over, compared to 87% of the general disabled population ages 18 to 64.

VRBS PARTICIPANT AGE DISTRIBUTION GENERALLY ALIGNS WITH OVERALL DISTRIBUTION AMONG PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Figure 20. Distribution of Montanans with disabilities by age compared to the VRBS caseload, 2021 (Montana) and 2022 (VRBS)

Montana Age Range	Montanans with Disabilities Count	Montanans with Disabilities Percent	Montana VRBS Participant Age Range	Montana VRBS Participant Count	Montana VRBS Participant Percent
5 to 17 years	10,215	13%	Under 19	345	11%
18 to 64 years	70,623	87%	19 to 59 years	2,440	81%
			60 and over	227	8%
TOTAL	80,838	100%		3,011	100%

Note: VRBS participant counts reflect the average caseload of all four quarters of 2022. While VRBS data includes people age 60 and over, Montanans with disabilities ages 65 and over was not included for comparison since the count overwhelmed the data (45% of Montanans with disabilities are age 65 and over) and VRBS is focused on the working age population.

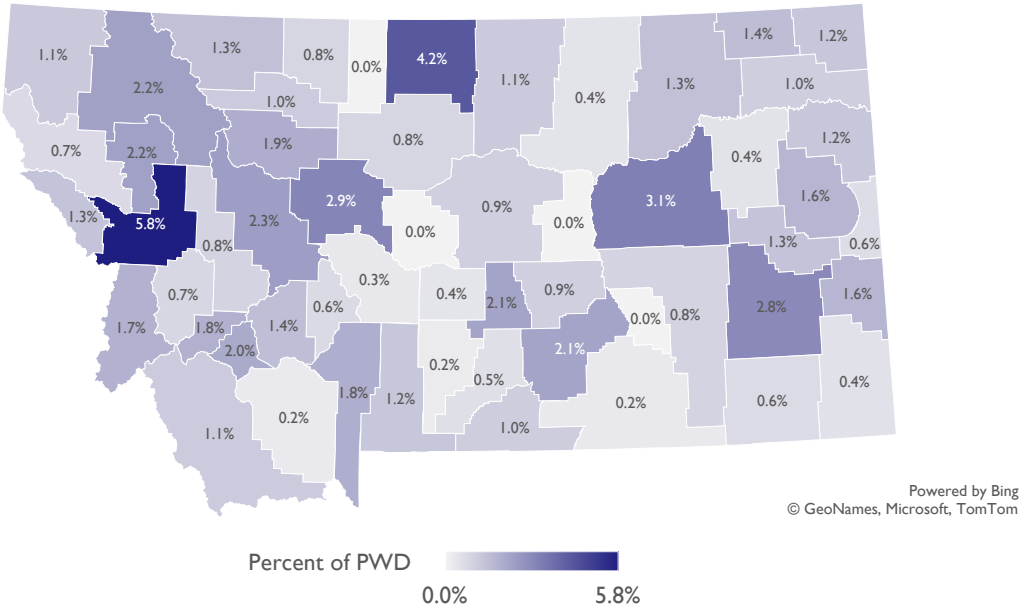
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810; U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

GEOGRAPHY

Client distribution by county is provided in Figure 21. The map and table display the geographic distribution of 3,225 current and exited clients in the Madison system through March 31, 2023 who are identified as RSA participants. The map displays the percentage of VRBS participants per person with disabilities as estimated by the American Community Survey (and displayed in Figure 5). Missoula County has the highest concentration of VRBS-participating people with disabilities in the state, followed by Hill County and Garfield County. Liberty and Petroleum had no VRBS participants in the period captured.

MISSOULA HAS HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF VRBS CLIENTS

Figure 21. VRBS participants in Madison system through March 31, 2023 per count of people with disabilities (PWD) by county



County	Percent of PWD	County	Percent of PWD	County	Percent of PWD	County	Percent of PWD
Beaverhead	1.1%	Flathead	2.2%	Madison	0.2%	Roosevelt	1.0%
Big Horn	0.2%	Gallatin	1.8%	Meagher	0.3%	Rosebud	0.8%
Blaine	1.1%	Garfield	3.1%	Mineral	1.3%	Sanders	0.7%
Broadwater	0.6%	Glacier	1.3%	Missoula	5.8%	Sheridan	1.2%
Carbon	1.0%	Golden Valley	2.1%	Musselshell	0.9%	Silver Bow	2.0%
Carter	0.4%	Granite	0.7%	Park	1.2%	Stillwater	0.5%
Cascade	2.9%	Hill	4.2%	Petroleum	0.0%	Sweet Grass	0.2%
Chouteau	0.8%	Jefferson	1.4%	Phillips	0.4%	Teton	1.9%
Custer	2.8%	Judith Basin	0.0%	Pondera	1.0%	Toole	0.8%
Daniels	1.4%	Lake	2.2%	Powder River	0.6%	Treasure	0.0%
Dawson	1.6%	Lewis and Clark	2.3%	Powell	0.8%	Valley	1.3%
Deer Lodge	1.8%	Liberty	0.0%	Prairie	1.3%	Wheatland	0.4%
Fallon	1.6%	Lincoln	1.1%	Ravalli	1.7%	Wibaux	0.6%
Fergus	0.9%	McCone	0.4%	Richland	1.2%	Yellowstone	2.1%

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services administrative data from Madison system through Q1 2023 (VRBS participants only); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

BARRIERS AND SERVICE NEEDS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

This section summarizes the vocational rehabilitation needs of people with disabilities in Montana as informed by stakeholder surveys, focus groups, and interviews conducted for the needs assessment. When possible, detail is provided on variation in needs by geography, population, or other characteristics.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS

The following sections describe barriers that VRBS clients or non-participants may face that interfere with their basic needs and impact their ability to achieve their vocational goals. We first describe client and non-participant assessment of barriers faced and then summarize VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondent perspectives on potential participant basic needs, job-related, and Pre-ETS service challenges.

BARRIERS TO SUCCESS: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **Transportation is a significant barrier** to employment and participation in vocational services for adults and youth. According to staff, contractors, and partners, individuals who are blind or visually impaired face additional transportation barriers.
- **Most people with disabilities struggle to meet some of their basic needs**, negatively impacting their ability to find and keep a job. Outside of transportation, VRBS clients and non-participants identified other basic needs challenges, including housing, behavioral health, physical health, food, clothing, and benefits security.
- **People with disabilities cited a wide array of job-related challenges** including limited work experience, limited opportunities to explore careers, and limited relevant skills.
- **Clients generally face fewer barriers than non-participants** in meeting their basic needs related to employment.
- **Pre-ETS participants face challenges with access to information**, particularly as they transition from high school to post-secondary education or employment options. Many students do not know where to go to ask questions and have varied parental support or engagement.

BASIC NEEDS

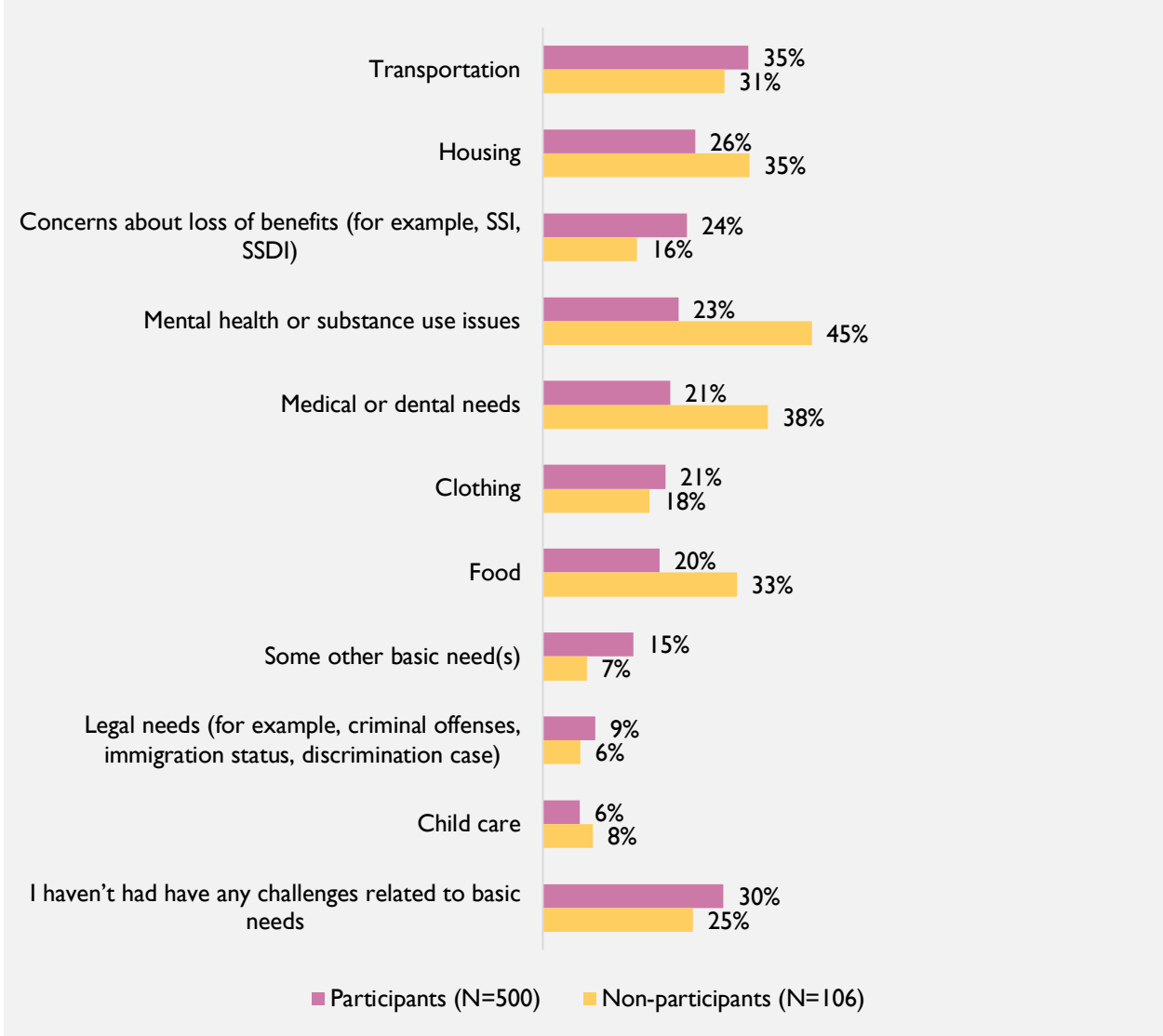
Stakeholders universally identify broad-based challenges with basic needs that impact the ability of people with disabilities to work.

CLIENT AND NON-PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

VRBS clients and non-participants were asked about the challenges they faced in meeting their basic needs while trying to find or keep a job. Transportation, housing, mental health or substance use issues, and medical or dental needs were among the top five barriers cited by most client or non-participant survey respondents, as shown in Figure 22. For clients, concern over losing benefits was also one of the most frequently identified barriers, whereas food challenges were one of the more frequently identified challenges among non-participants. Individuals not receiving VRBS services generally experienced more basic needs challenges. Focus group participant feedback about basic needs challenges aligned with survey respondents, focusing on transportation, housing/cost of living, behavioral health, and physical health.

TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING, BEHAVIORAL HEALTH, AND MEDICAL OR DENTAL NEEDS ARE TOP BASIC NEEDS CHALLENGES

Figure 22. Percent of VRBS participants and non-participants identifying challenges to basic needs



Source: Montana VRBS Participant and Non-Participant Surveys, 2023

TRANSPORTATION: Individuals with disabilities experienced similar transportation challenges in urban and rural regions, including:

- **Unreliable paratransit.** Rides will come early or late, despite an individual scheduling a specific time for their ride.

“I will tell them I have an appointment time, and they will be late and tell me that I didn’t tell them I had an appointment.” – client focus group

- **Limited fixed route bus service.** Clients with access to buses in urban and rural areas appreciated the higher reliability of this service but remarked that the routes and times limited the bus systems' usability. Some individuals said that buses are not always accessible.
- **Vehicle costs.** People commented that the high cost of vehicle ownership, modifications/accommodations, gasoline, and car repairs created barriers to vehicle ownership and maintenance/safety.
- **Reliance on others.** Some people with disabilities said they prefer to have a friend or family member drive them.

“It’s more of a hassle than anything; it’s easier to call a family member.” – non-participant focus group

HOUSING: Housing and the high cost of living challenges were also experienced similarly throughout the state, regardless of rurality.

- **High cost.** Focus group participants reflected on the high cost of housing, exacerbated by the influx of people to Montana during the pandemic, and the mismatch of low incomes and high housing costs.

“You have to have a pretty good job to have a place to stay here. The cost of living is inordinate.” – non-participant focus group

- **Application fees.** One individual experiencing homelessness talked about how a non-refundable application fee required for each rental application creates an additional hurdle for him to secure housing.
- **Waiting lists.** Others discussed the waiting list for vouchers and affordable/accessible living options.
- **Quality.** Focus group participants noted how some of the affordable options provided less stable and less safe living conditions.

“I tried Morning Star, too. I heard that place isn’t all that great. It has drugs there, so not a lifestyle I want to be exposed to again.” – non-participant focus group

- **Housing First.** People reflected on the challenges of getting a job without stable housing.

“It’s kind of pointless working if you don’t have a place to live; it’s a vicious circle.” – non-participant focus group

HEALTH/BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: While survey respondents receiving VRBS services were much less likely to cite physical health and behavioral health challenges impacting their ability to

work than non-participants, over one-fifth of clients said they experienced these barriers. Focus group participants discussed challenges with health needs in more depth, sharing:

“I have low self-confidence and anxiety. As a result, I struggle to stay on task, especially when I get too much information at a time. I can’t take in too much information. I struggle to ask for help or advocate for myself.” – client focus group

“I’ve struggled with drug abuse. When I first applied for voc rehab I wasn’t ready to work.” – client focus group

“There’s a lot of work here, but people aren’t capable of handling it because they are physically or mentally impaired in some way.” – non-participant focus group

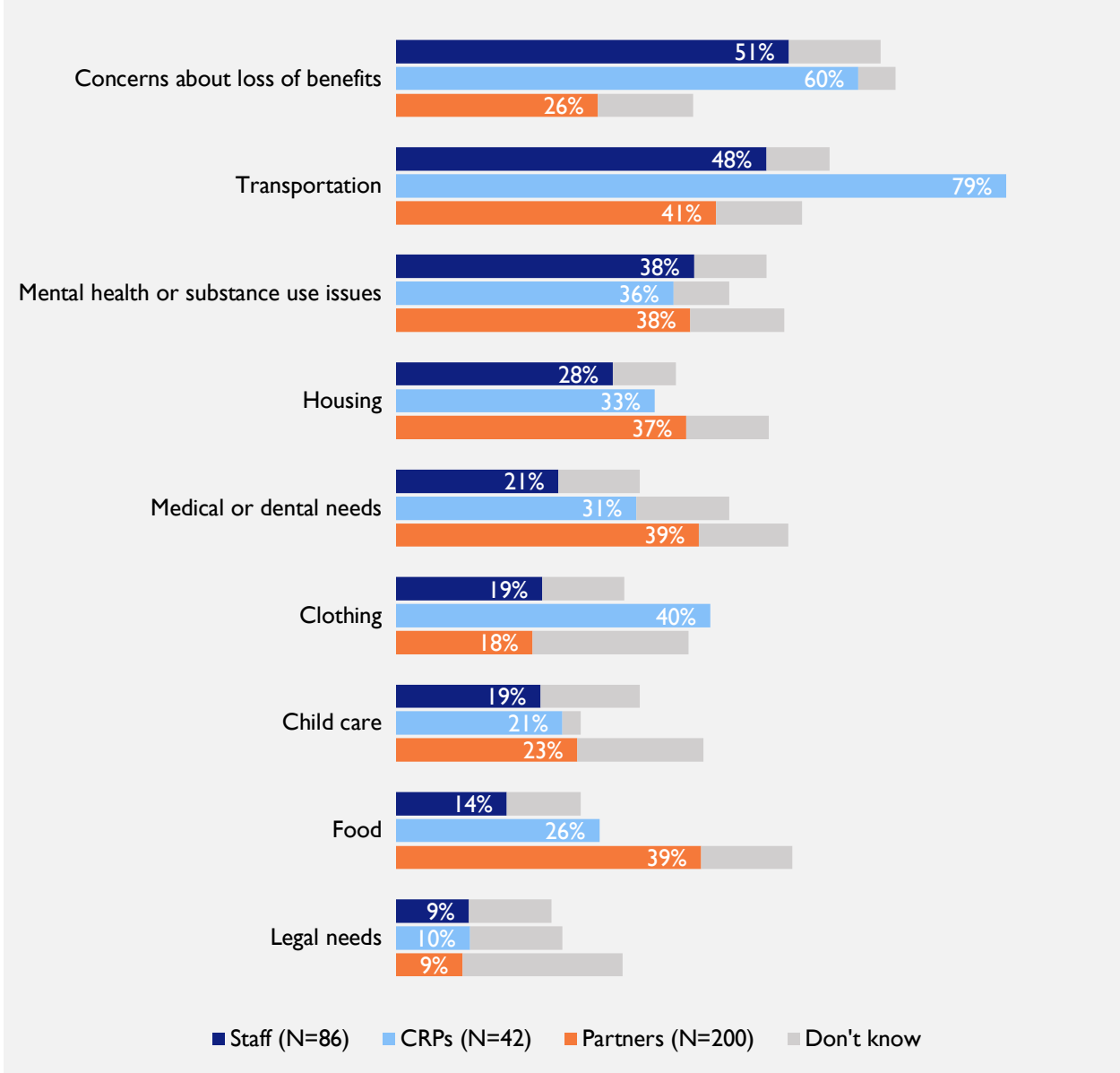
“I don’t think men get enough attention for mental health disorders. We don’t talk about it, and it gets so bad that people end up killing themselves. Helping people with that part would up your changes with a good job.” – non-participant focus group

STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

Similar to client and non-participant responses, transportation, concerns about loss of benefits, and mental health or substance use issues were identified as barriers by VRBS, CRP, and partner agency staff survey respondents. Additionally, as shown in Figure 23, more than one-third of partner respondents identified housing, medical or dental needs, and food barriers, and 40 percent of CRP respondents cited clothing as a barrier.

LOSS OF BENEFITS AND TRANSPORTATION CONSIDERED TOP BARRIERS TO BASIC NEEDS BY VRBS STAFF AND PARTNERS

Figure 23. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents selecting that “most” or “all” adults with disabilities face identified barriers to basic needs



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, and Partner Surveys, 2023

TRANSPORTATION: Staff from throughout the state discussed similar transportation issues as clients and non-participants, including the limited hours and limited routes served by public transit options, and increasing costs of public and private transportation. Focus group participants discussed how transportation challenges impact people’s ability to find and keep work in addition to engaging in other facets of life. Staff and partners reflected how

transportation barriers are worse for people who are blind or visually impaired. Partners also discussed the lack of collaboration for supportive services across public services, including transportation.

“In order for clients to get to job services or attend other appointments, they need to drive two or three hours. They have to give up a lot of their interests to just do something.” – staff focus group

“In so many small communities, getting resources that they need requires so much travel. For any more major services, you have to travel and arrange that travel. Bringing services to individuals in smaller communities is really difficult.” – partner focus group

HOUSING: Staff and partners focused on homelessness as a significant and growing barrier to individuals’ ability to work.

“In eastern Montana, we don’t have a homeless shelter. We barely have anywhere for anyone to go... Often, we have to just say, ‘You might have to move to Billings,’ but they don’t have transportation to Billings. It’s a cycle and it’s hard to get over.” – staff focus group

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: Partners and staff report that mental health and substance use issues are often comingled with housing insecurity and transportation challenges. Staff and partners discussed the need to address individuals’ behavioral health needs before focusing on employment.

“It takes a month or two to get someone stabilized. This can be really difficult for getting and keeping a job. I wish people could get a free pass for a few months – to not push them related to work until they get their mental health stabilized.” – partner focus group

CONCERNS ABOUT LOSS OF BENEFITS: Staff discussed how people with disabilities are very concerned about the impact of their earned income on their SSI/SSDI benefits. In a focus group, people with disabilities shared that they have not applied for VRBS because they don’t want to lose their benefits. Montana has changed its approach to benefits counseling services, which may be adding to benefits concerns by staff and contractor stakeholders.

JOB-RELATED CHALLENGES

VRBS serves diverse populations of people with disabilities, including diversity in type and severity of disability as well as diversity in demographic, socio-economic, geographic, and other characteristics that influence job-related challenges. As a result, participating stakeholders

identified a range of job-related challenges, many of which are compounding, particularly for subgroups facing more basic needs challenges.

CLIENT AND NON-PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

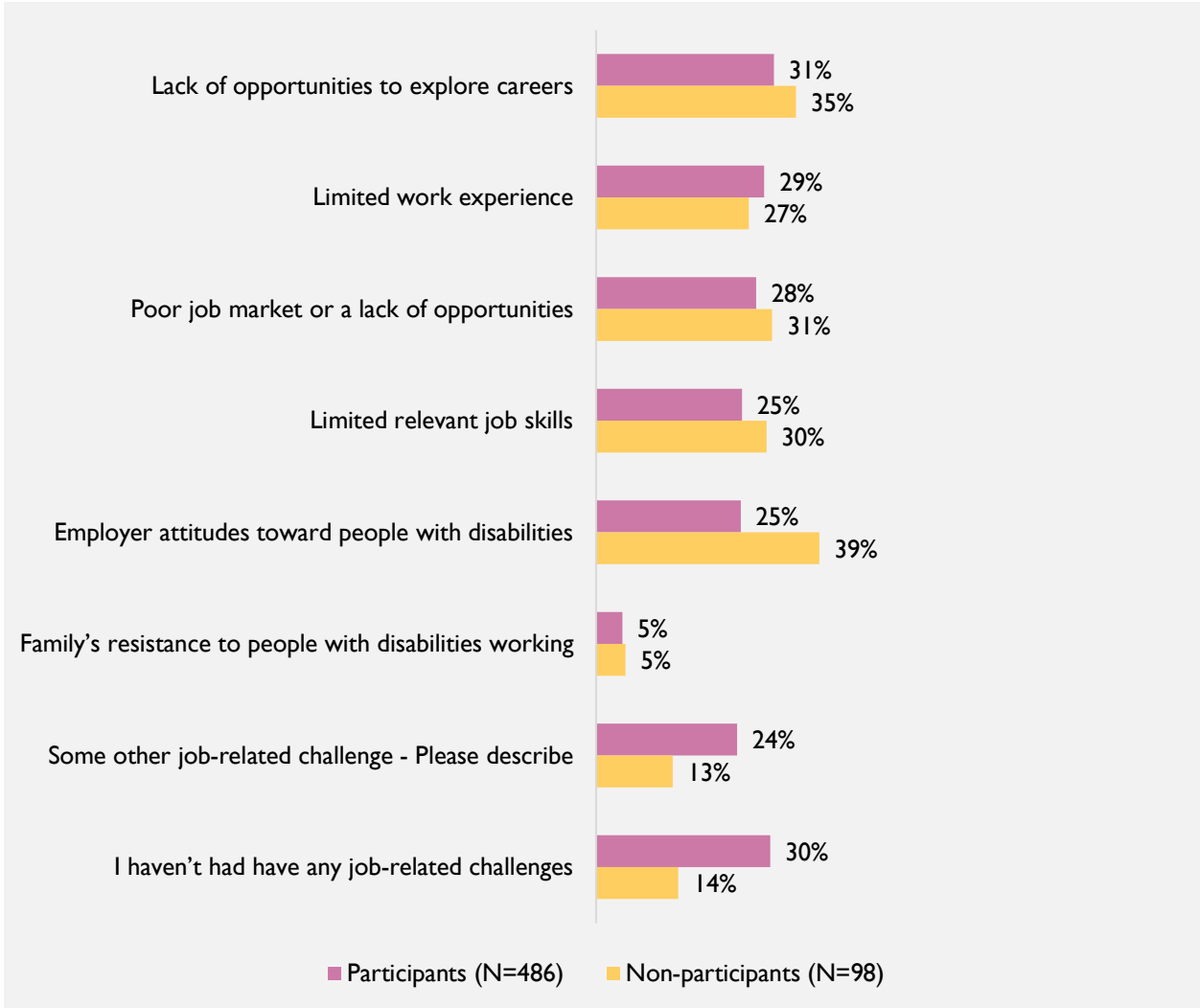
People with disabilities identified a range of job-related challenges. One quarter or more of both clients and non-participants identified the following job-related barriers:

- Lack of opportunities to explore careers.
- Limited work experience.
- Poor job market or a lack of opportunities.
- Limited relevant job skills.
- Employer attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Nearly one-third (30%) of VRBS client respondents indicated that they have not had any job-related challenges, compared to 14 percent among non-participants.

LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE CAREERS THE TOP JOB-RELATED BARRIER IDENTIFIED BY CLIENTS

Figure 24. Percent of VRBS participants and non-participants identifying job-related barriers



Source: Montana VRBS Participant and Non-Participant Surveys, 2023

ALIGNMENT WITH JOB OPPORTUNITIES: Focus group participants discussed the interconnectedness of job-related challenges. People spoke about the challenges of having skillsets, education, experience, and career interests aligned with limited job opportunities in a changing job marketplace.

“I am focused on getting an education to get a career – not just getting a job. Education and experience need to align with career choice.” – non-participant focus group

“Situational awareness is not always there for my son, so safety is a big thing. He needs a ‘just right’ challenge. He needs to be tasked with something that will keep him busy, but also something that will interest him – a good fit.” – parent focus group

ACCOMMODATIONS: Sometimes the “right fit” requires accommodations. Clients and non-participants discussed challenges they faced in finding employment that could accommodate their disabilities.

“Accommodations and accessibility are challenges.” – client focus group

Accommodation needs included physical accessibility and flexibility to support dynamic needs.

“My place of employment is not accessible for wheelchairs.” – client focus group

“I need a job flexible enough to accommodate my dynamic disability.” – client focus group

“Lack of part-time or flexible schedules.” – client survey respondent

EMPLOYER ATTITUDE: Clients and non-participants reflected how employer attitudes about disability or other challenging circumstances (e.g., homelessness) created barriers.

“Some jobs I got weren’t accepting of my disability, so I had to leave.” – client focus group

“There is a stigma of being homeless. If they see 1100 Broadway, employers know this is the Pov [Poverello Center, a homeless shelter]. They won’t say it is because of it, but it will be. The community needs to be embracing of the homeless population, especially if I’m not a criminal.” – non-participant focus group

“I was looking at administrative and retail jobs, and the employers seemed like they had never seen a blind person before. I would show up and the person interviewing me would say, ‘Um, how are you going to do the job?’ They would never call me back.” – client focus group

LEGAL BARRIERS: People with disabilities shared how legal issues related to felony records and drug testing required for federal jobs were significant barriers to employment.

“Not too many people will hire an ex-felon. I have 15 years in prison.” – client focus group

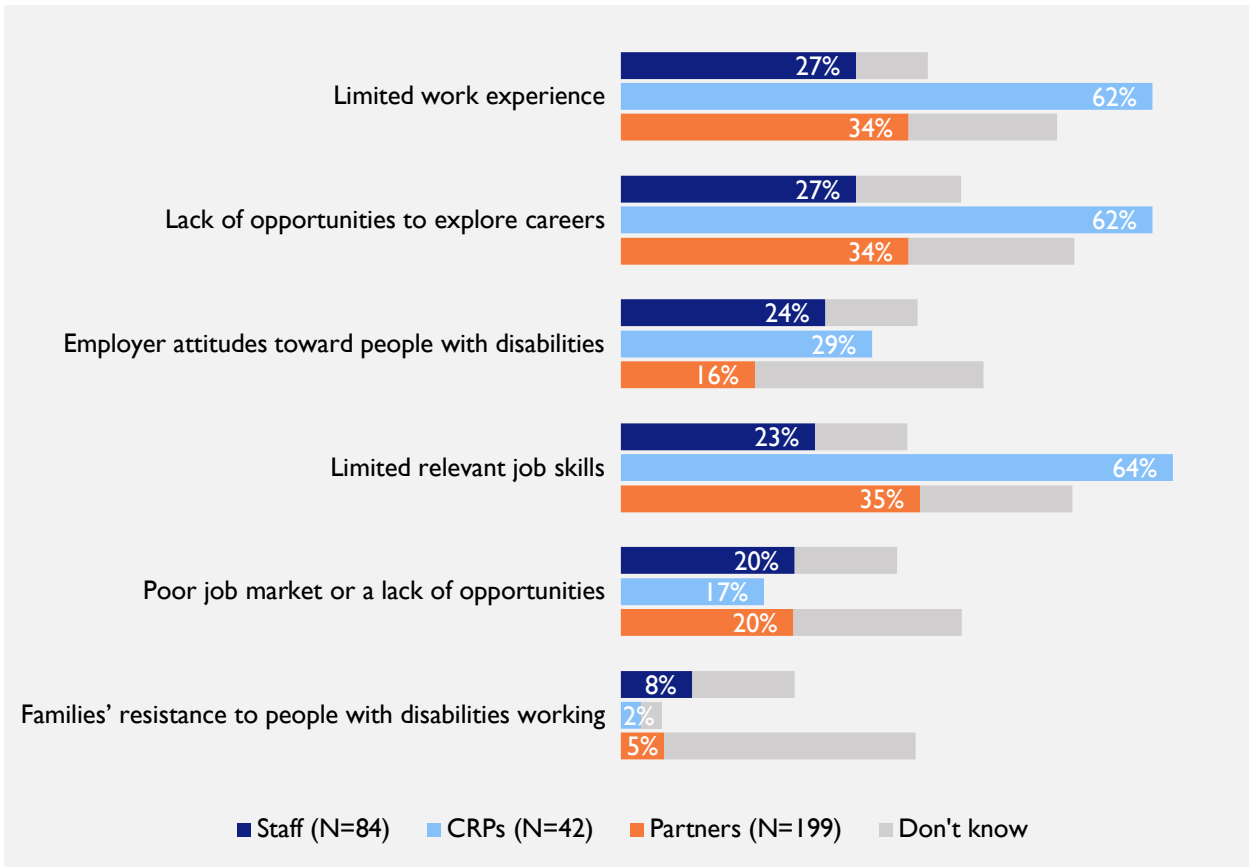
“Drug testing was a big deal for me. Marijuana is the biggest issue. All tribal jobs still have this barrier. That’s why the tribe has a problem with hiring. Federal law is the issue.” – client focus group

STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents identify limited work experience and limited relevant job skills as the top job-related barriers to employment for adults with disabilities. A lack of opportunities to explore careers and employer attitudes towards people with disabilities were also identified as barriers by roughly a quarter of each respondent group. VRBS staff responses align closely with those of clients. CRPs perceive more job-related barriers than any other survey respondent group.

LIMITED WORK EXPERIENCE AND LIMITED RELEVANT JOB SKILLS ARE KEY JOB-RELATED BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

Figure 25. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents selecting that “most” or “all” adults with disabilities face identified job-related barriers



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, and Partner Surveys, 2023

EMPLOYER ATTITUDES: VRBS staff shared perspectives on employer attitudes around disability that suggest limited awareness and understanding of disability and accommodation options.

“In the blind and low-vision world, I notice in conversations that employers say ‘No, the person can’t do this because they can’t see’ before they can even get in there to talk about software or other tools to help people.” – staff focus group

SELF-CONFIDENCE: Staff noted that individuals can create their own job-related barriers by not believing in themselves.

“Blind and visually impaired people may not be aware of what they are capable of. Our training helps them adapt to their blindness. A lot of what we do is training and education on technology and devices and different ways of doing things that make it easier for them.” – staff focus group

PRE-ETS CHALLENGES

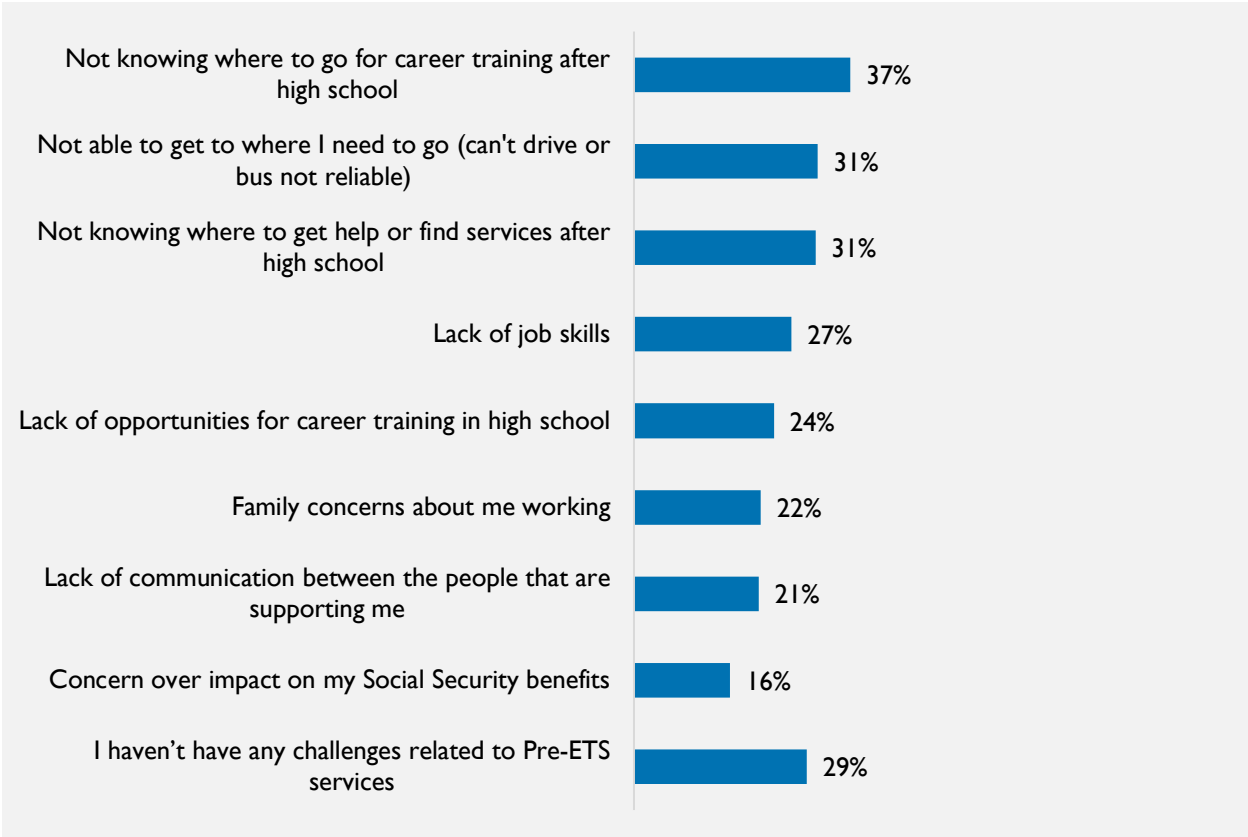
Students receiving Pre-ETS services, parents of students with disabilities, staff, and partners identify transportation and awareness of and connection to resources as students leave high school as the primary Pre-ETS challenges.

PRE-ETS PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

Not knowing where to go for career training after high school was identified by 37 percent of Pre-ETS participants. The percentage of respondents identifying the remaining barriers was fairly uniform, ranging between one-fifth (21%) and nearly one-third (31%), with the exception of concern over the impact of Pre-ETS receipt on Social Security benefits, which was identified by just 16 percent of respondents. Nearly one third (30%) of Pre-ETS participant respondents indicated that they had not had any challenges related to Pre-ETS.

NOT KNOWING WHERE TO GO FOR TRAINING AFTER HIGH SCHOOL TOP PRE-ETS CHALLENGE IDENTIFIED BY CLIENTS

Figure 26. Percent of youth receiving Pre-ETS services identifying challenges to service receipt



Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023, N=268

Because Pre-ETS services are integrated with special education services for students in participating schools, student responses reflect the combined universe of special education and Pre-ETS services. In focus groups, students were often unfamiliar with the term Pre-ETS.

TRANSITIONS: Students in focus groups said they would go to their special education teachers or parents with questions about navigating services after high school. Those who were planning to pursue post-secondary education, particularly in schools they had visited within their Pre-ETS/special education programs, felt surer of their next steps than others. Students in the psychiatric residential treatment facility focus group expressed less certainty about their post-high school options.

“We are not really focused on college, because we are here for our problems. I wanted to do something more academic, but I was told to focus on my treatment.” – psychiatric residential treatment facility student focus group

TRANSPORTATION: Students and parents shared perspectives on transportation challenges and their impact on youth and their families or caretakers. Young people said it was hard to participate in vocational activities outside of school because of transportation challenges.

“It was hard for me in high school to get job experience because I had to ride the bus home, which made it hard for me to work or do anything after school.” – youth client focus group

Parents said transporting their children creates additional burdens on them.

“We live on a farm 25 miles outside of Great Falls. Transportation can be a challenge. Communities around us have limited employment opportunities. Great Falls has more opportunities. Transportation is challenging; some jobs are just a couple of hours so I’d take him (his son) in and run some errands and make it work, but would be helpful to have reimbursement.” – parent focus group

“Caretaking is a big barrier and has a huge impact on families. Transportation alone – I just drove to Billings – it was 16 hours roundtrip to see a doctor.” – parent focus group

SELF-CONFIDENCE: Students talked about how their worries and lack of confidence negatively impact them.

“If I had a magic wand, I would put other people’s minds in a different place. If they are like me with low self-esteem or had home issues, I would help them change their mindsets to knowing they can do it.” – student focus group

STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

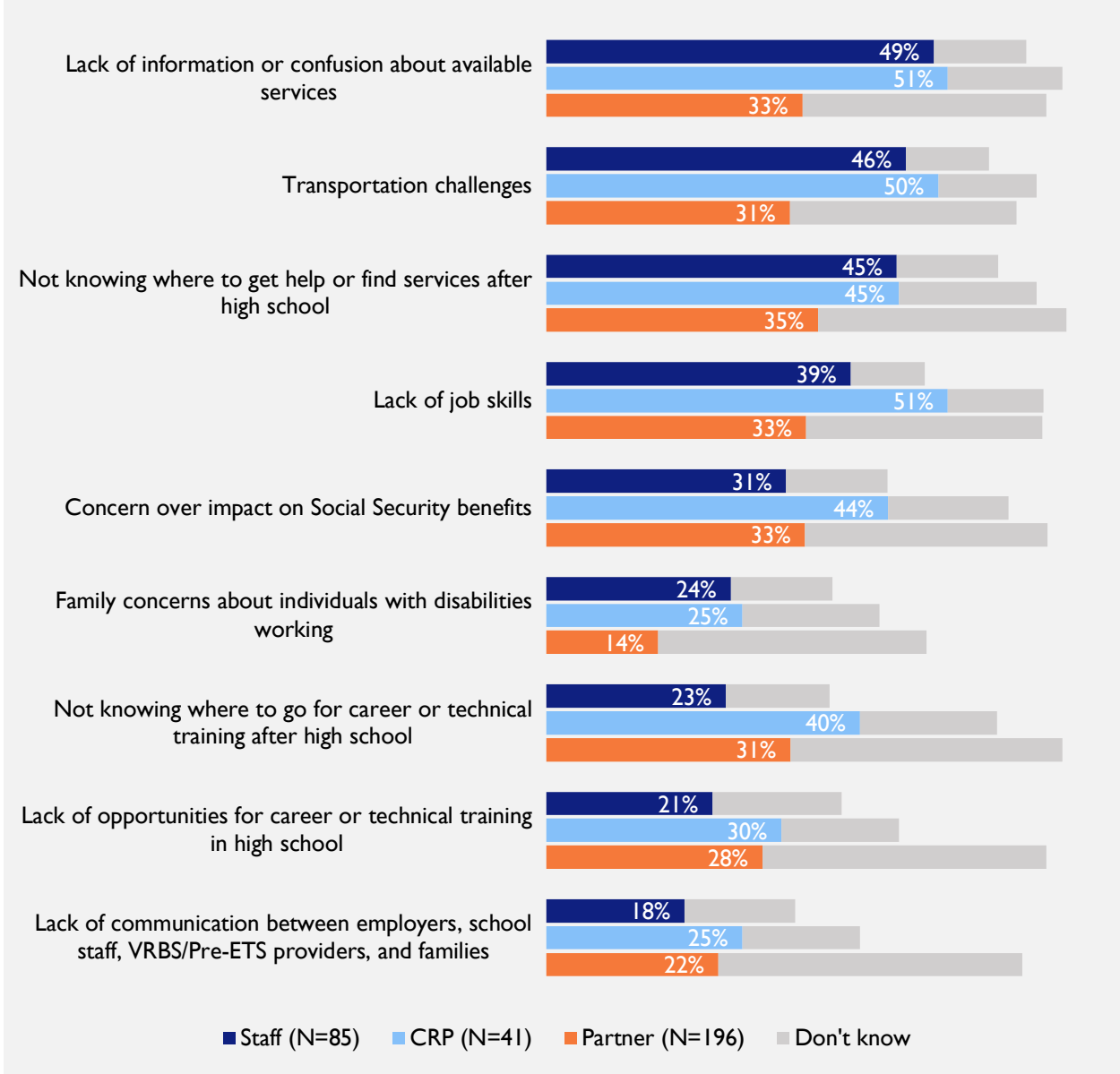
More than one-third of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents indicated that “most” or “all” of youth under 18 with disabilities face the following barriers to Pre-ETS services:

- Lack of information or confusion about available services
- Transportation challenges
- Not knowing where to get help or find services after high school
- Lack of job skills
- Concern over impact on Social Security benefits

There was slight variation in perspectives on barriers by respondent group. Compared to VRBS staff and partner respondents, more CRP respondents identified that “most” or “all” youth face the barrier to Pre-ETS services across all barrier categories.

LACK OF INFORMATION ABOUT AVAILABLE SERVICES A KEY CHALLENGE TO PRE-ETS SERVICES

Figure 27. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents selecting that “most” or “all” youth under 18 with disabilities face identified barrier



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP and Partner Surveys, 2023

TRANSPORTATION: In addition to the multitude of transportation challenges cited for adults with disabilities, staff and partners focused on the challenges for young people with disabilities to obtain a driving license.

“A lot of students struggle because they don’t have a license, and parents don’t have time to transport them since they are working.” – staff focus group

Driver's education is generally hard to access for all students, regardless of disability. Staff felt that private coaches are likely the best option for addressing this challenge.

“We struggle to offer enough driver's ed to meet basic needs. The driver's ed instructor program is in Havre – the only one in the state. Maybe we need to help the driver's ed program to understand their need to accommodate. This is a partnership opportunity. How do we share information about kids with IEPs? We have to work to provide the kids with adaptive equipment; we are probably missing a baseline of accessibility.”
– partner focus group

“The biggest issue is having someone who can do private instruction for driver's ed. I know two people who provide this service. It's a 1.5 to 2-year waitlist to get people into this service.” – staff focus group

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT: Staff discussed how family engagement and family attitudes varied, particularly as it relates to transitioning students into VRBS services for ongoing support.

“I feel like it is a mixed bag of really supportive parents and those who have heard ‘no’ and ‘can’t’ from doctors and professionals, so this is their mindset. We don't have capacity to try to change their minds and get kids into [VRBS] services. We should be doing this though! This is about getting the word out, meeting parents at the school at least once a year. Saying, here's what services look like.” – staff focus group

VARIATION IN BARRIERS FACED AMONG SUBGROUPS

The barriers that individuals with disabilities face vary somewhat by subgroup within the VRBS client population. Figure 28 illustrates whether survey respondents in any given subgroup reported a basic needs, job-related, or Pre-ETS challenge significantly more or less often than the percentage of individuals not in that subgroup (e.g., rural vs. non-rural). As noted in the table:

- **Some groups identified more widespread barriers compared to others.** Individuals with more than one disability, respondents with behavioral health disabilities, and individuals experiencing homelessness were more likely to report basic needs, job-related, or Pre-ETS challenges compared to their counterparts.
- **Some groups reported more barriers related to basic needs.** American Indians and people who were low-income were more likely to identify barriers to basic needs than non-American Indians or people who were not low-income, respectively.
- **Other groups reported slightly fewer barriers.** Rural respondents reported slightly fewer barriers compared to non-rural residents.

PEOPLE WITH MORE THAN ONE DISABILITY MORE LIKELY THAN THEIR COUNTERPARTS TO IDENTIFY BARRIERS

Figure 28. Participant identification of barriers by key subgroups

Key:

○	No significant difference between target population and comparison group
●	Target population reported fewer challenges for at least one challenge category
◐	Target population reported more challenges for up to half of challenge categories
●	Target population reported more challenges for more than half of challenge categories

How to read this chart: This chart displays variation in how different client subgroups (target survey respondents) report barriers, compared to people not in that subgroup (comparison survey respondents). It is not comparing subgroups to each other. For example, survey respondents with more than one disability were more likely to identify basic need challenges for more half of the basic need response options (e.g., transportation, clothing, housing) and challenges to Pre-ETS options, and were more likely to identify challenges for up to half of the job-related response options compared to survey respondents with one disability.

Target Survey Respondents	Basic Needs Challenges	Job Related Challenges	Pre-ETS Challenges	Total Challenges	Comparison Survey Respondents
Rural	●	●	○	●	(Non-rural)
IDD	●	◐	◐	◐	(No IDD)
Deafness or hearing impairment	○	○	◐	◐	(No deafness or hearing impairment)
English language learner	○	◐	○	◐	(Not an English language learner)
Veteran	◐	○	○	◐	(Not a veteran)
American Indian	●	●	○	◐	(Not American Indian)
Substance use disorder	◐	○	◐	◐	(No substance use disorder)
Blind or vision impairment	◐	◐	◐	◐	(No blindness or vision impairment)
Brain injury disability	◐	◐	◐	◐	(No brain injury)
Mobility disorder	◐	◐	◐	◐	(No mobility disorder)
Neurodiverse	◐	◐	◐	◐	(No neurodiversity)
Low income	●	◐	◐	◐	(Not low income)
Behavioral health disability	●	◐	◐	●	(No behavioral health disability)
Homeless	●	◐	◐	●	(Not experiencing homelessness)
More than one disability	●	◐	●	●	(One disability)

Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

SERVICE DEMAND AND RECEIPT

SERVICE DEMAND AND RECEIPT: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **Service provision to both adults and students increased** from program year 2021 to 2022.
- **The greatest share of respondents received career services, followed by training services and supportive services.** The service gap (the percentage of respondents who indicated that they needed but did not receive a service) was lowest for supportive services. Across all services, the reported service gap generally ranged from 3 percent to 18 percent, except for work-based learning, where 23 percent of respondents said they needed but did not receive the service, and soft skills training, which had the largest reported service gap (31%).
- **Vocational counseling, job search assistance, and career exploration were the career services in most demand.** VRBS clients, non-participants, staff, CRPs, and partners aligned in the identification of these three career services: they were the most received by clients, the most in-demand by non-participants, and identified needed by “most” or “all” of adults with disabilities by the greatest shares of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents. Among VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents, vocational counseling, job search assistance, and career exploration were also viewed as most adequate in the community, suggesting sufficient supply to meet demand.
- **Staff felt challenged to support growing client demand for self-employment** with time-consuming business plan development and implementation support requirements.
- **Academic education, work-based learning, and soft skills training were the training services in most demand.** VRBS clients, non-participants, staff, CRPs, and partners aligned in the identification of these three training services: they were the most received by clients, the most in-demand by non-participants, and identified needed by “most” or “all” of adults with disabilities by the greatest shares of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents.
- **The soft skills training gap is significant.** Nearly one-third of VRBS participants indicated that they needed but did not receive soft skills training; this was the highest service gap identified. Moreover, soft skills training in the community was identified as “usually” or “always” adequate by the smallest share of the respondent groups. Soft skills training was identified as a gap for the general workforce, not unique to people with disabilities.
- **Compared to career and training services, VRBS clients were less likely to identify receipt of or need for supportive services.** Other than transportation services, fewer staff, CRPs, and partner respondents indicated that “most” or “all” clients need supportive services, aligning with client and non-participant responses that indicate less receipt and less demand for supportive services. However, for clients who would

benefit from them, assistive technology service receipt was perceived as a gap across all stakeholders.

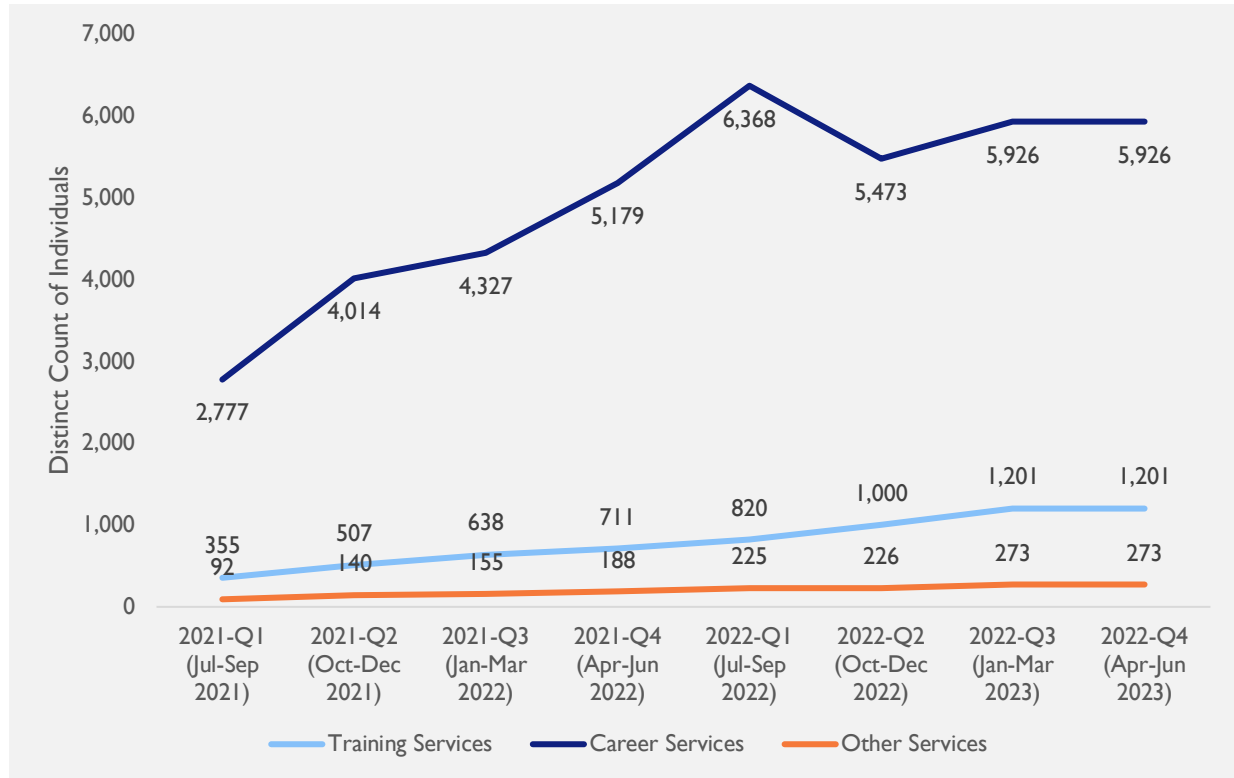
- **Although transportation services were identified as most needed by VRBS staff and partners, they were also considered the least adequate in the community by these respondent groups.** This aligns with approximately one-third of clients and non-participants citing transportation as a basic needs barrier. Approximately 3% of clients received transportation services in program year 2022.
- **Work-based learning service gap was highest among Pre-ETS services.** Pre-ETS respondents were less likely to identify receipt and more likely to identify a service gap (that they needed but did not receive a service) for work-based learning services versus other Pre-ETS services.
- **Pre-ETS service receipt was variable across options.** Most Pre-ETS participants noted that they received opportunities for career exploration, work-based learning, work readiness, and learning about accommodations they need. Despite VRBS staff and partner respondent perceptions of widespread need for Pre-ETS services, they indicated limited service adequacy to address the needs of students with disabilities.

VRBS PROVISION OF CAREER, TRAINING, AND SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

Service provision grew significantly between July 2021 and June 2023, far outpacing caseload growth in the same timeframe (see Figure 63). Training services grew the fastest (238% growth) followed by other supportive services (197% growth). Career services, the most common category of service provided, grew 113 percent.

SERVICE PROVISION HAS GROWN STEADILY SINCE JULY 2021

Figure 29. Number of Participants Provided Training, Career, and Other Services, Program Year 2021 Quarter I (July-September 2021) – Program Year 2022 Quarter 4 (April-June 2023)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

In Figure 30, Figure 35, and Figure 40, quarterly counts of each type of service provided were averaged for program years 2021 and 2022. This provides an estimate of the frequency of types of services provided, the approximate percentage of participants receiving each type of service, and the change in the count of services between program year 2021 and 2022.

CAREER SERVICES

VRBS PROVISION

VRBS most commonly provides career services (compared to training and other or supportive services), with vocational rehabilitation counseling and guidance topping the list (91% of participants receiving this), followed by information and referral services (77%).

VRBS COUNSELING AND GUIDANCE MOST COMMON CAREER SERVICE PROVIDED

Figure 30. Average quarterly program year 2022 career services provided, average quarterly percent of participants receiving career services, and change in count of services provided from program year 2021, by type

CAREER SERVICES	Average Quarterly Count (PY 2022)	Percent of Participants Receiving (PY 2022)	Change from PY 2021
Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling & Guidance*	2,747	91%	42%
Information and Referral Services*	2,326	77%	54%
Job Search Assistance	425	14%	49%
Short Term Job Supports	207	7%	23%
Supported Employment Services	105	3%	25%
Benefits Counseling*	32	1%	12%
Extended Services	19	1%	117%
Assessment*	14	0%	-23%
Customized Employment Services	9	0%	-43%
Diagnosis and Treatment of Impairments	8	0%	-32%
Job Placement Assistance	4	0%	-47%

* Indicates RSA-911 Service Categories that do not require an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

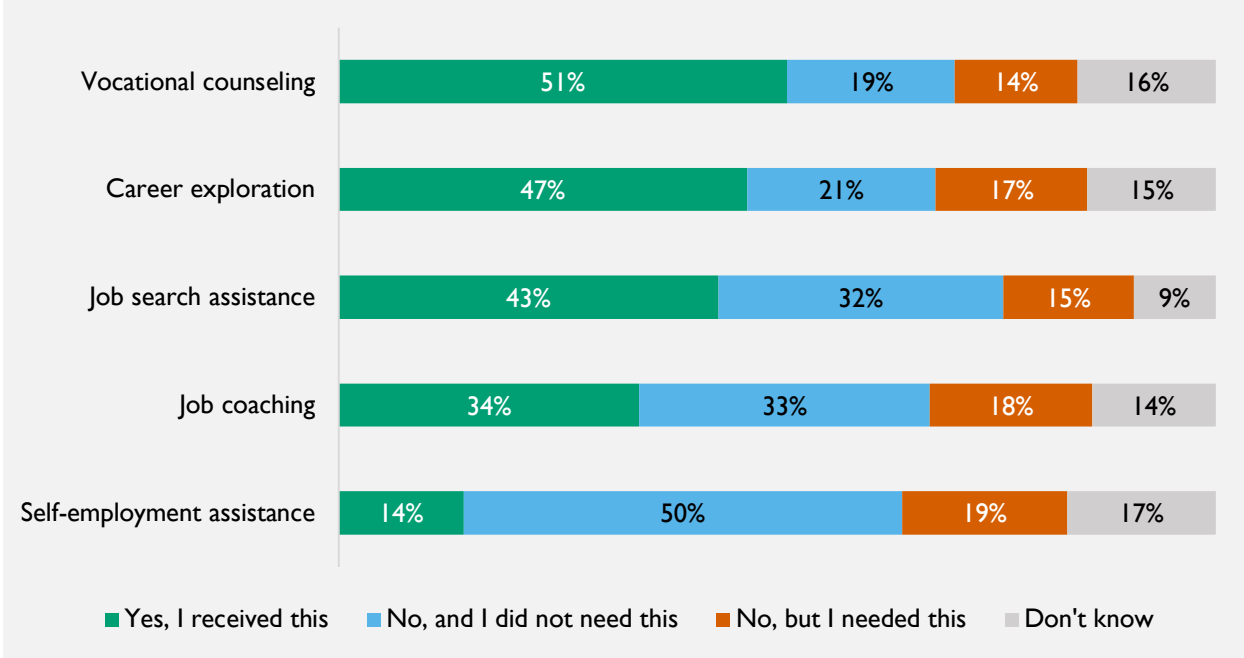
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

VRBS CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

The services received by the largest share of VRBS client survey respondents were vocational counseling (51%), career exploration (47%) and job search assistance (43%). The perceived service gap (percent of VRBS clients who said that they needed a service but did not receive it) was fairly uniform for career services, ranging from 14 percent to 19 percent. The percentage of individuals who did not know if they received a career service ranged from a low of nine percent for job search assistance to a high of 17 percent for self-employment.

ABOUT HALF OF CLIENTS SAY THEY RECEIVE VOCATIONAL COUNSELING SERVICES

Figure 31. Percent of VRBS client survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed VRBS career services



Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

VOCATIONAL COUNSELING, CAREER EXPLORATION, AND JOB COACHING:

Clients who participated in focus groups discussed their desire to have more information and guidance as they gain skills, look for work, and set themselves up for success with jobs. Some wanted to have a mentor or peer work with them, and others wanted more in-depth counseling or guidance from their VRBS counselors and/or CRPs.

JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE: Clients talked about searching for jobs without assistance, and how this commonly resulted in an employer not being prepared to interview someone with a disability.

“I applied at a nursing home as an activity assistant, but they were really looking for a personal assistant. I showed up for the interview, and I knew it was a waste of time. Costco didn’t want to hire me because they were worried about me getting carts in the parking lot because a car could hit me. They weren’t willing to adjust the job scope to meet my abilities.” – client focus group

SELF-EMPLOYMENT: Clients and non-participants expressed a desire for more self-employment options.

“Self-employment through artistry should be more a focus here.” – tribal VR client

BENEFITS COUNSELING: Some focus group participants shared that they did not receive needed benefits counseling.

“I found my own benefits counselor, which I connected to through my mother’s friend. I talked about benefits counseling with VRBS, but it didn’t move forward because of staff turnover.” – client focus group

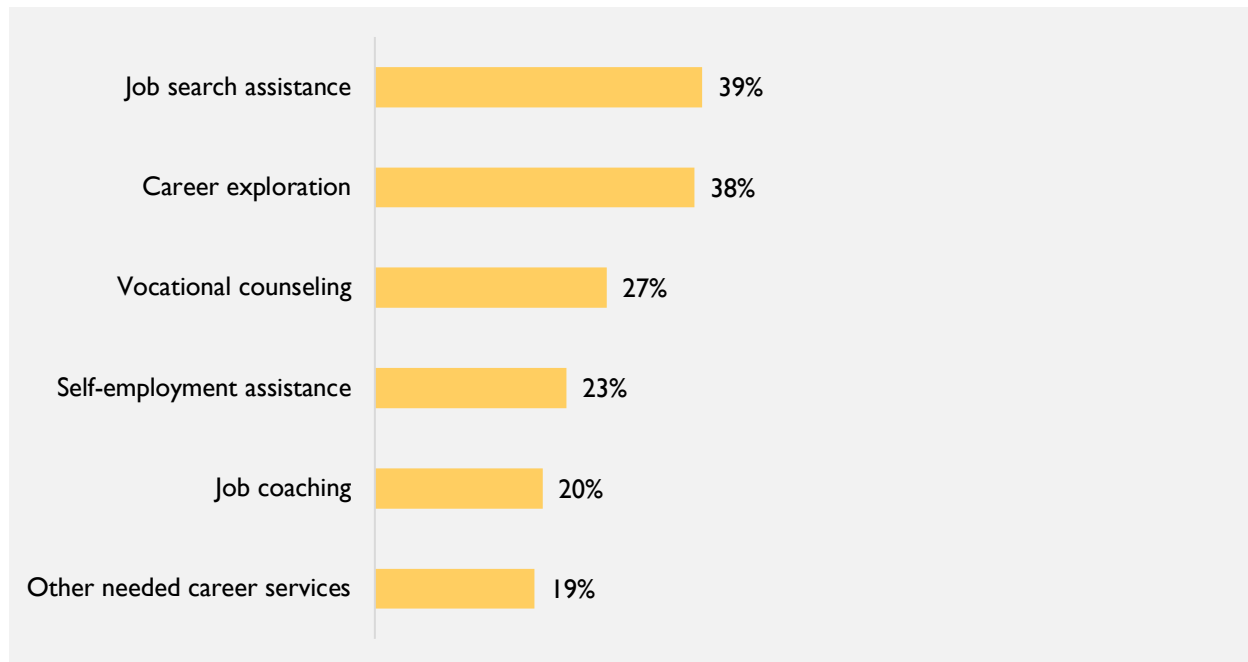
“My counselor talked to me about benefits counseling, but she was new to the job and it didn’t happen.” – client focus group

NON-PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

The career services in need by the greatest share of non-participant survey respondents were job search assistance (39%) and career exploration (38%), as shown in Figure 32.

JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE AND CAREER EXPLORATION IN NEED BY GREATEST SHARE OF NON-PARTICIPANTS

Figure 32. Percent of non-participants who identified career service need



Source: Montana VRBS Non-Participant Survey, 2023

Non-participants in focus groups expressed a desire for in-depth support to help them navigate vocational needs as well as broader service needs to address their full range of needs across varied service systems.

“The real important thing is a good social worker – it’s so much paperwork for us – a good social worker will help us! There aren’t any at the Pov [Poverello Center, a homeless shelter].” – non-participant focus group

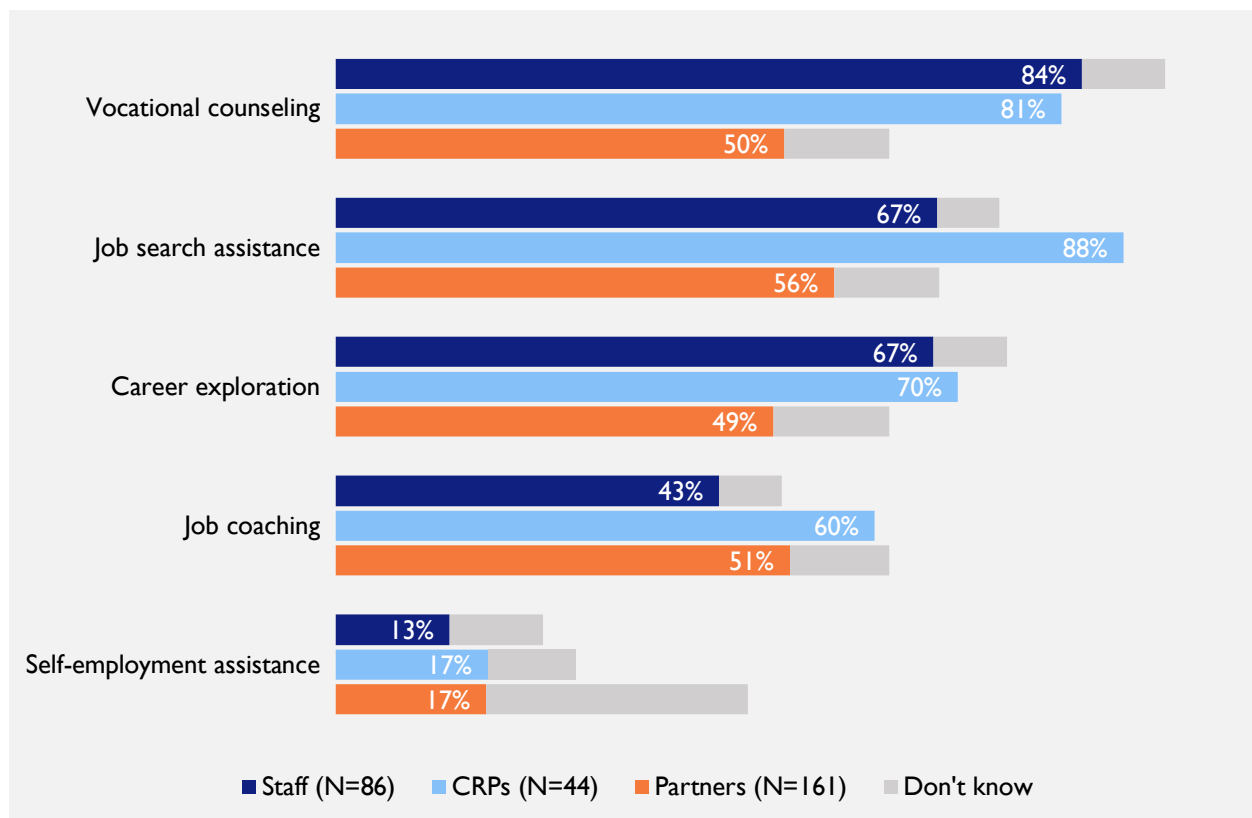
STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents were more likely to identify vocational counseling, job search assistance, and career exploration as career services needed by “most” or “all” adults with disabilities. Among the respondent groups, partner survey respondents were slightly less likely to identify “most” or “all” adults in need of each career service. Focus group participants and interviewees affirmed the importance of these core VRBS services.

“Job development and job assessment, where people get a trial to place someone in a job, is helpful for our clients to get a baseline and help decide what is fulfilling and a good fit for them and the employer.” – Developmental Disabilities Program stakeholder

VRBS STAFF AND PARTNERS IDENTIFY VOCATIONAL COUNSELING AND JOB SEARCH ASSISTANCE AS MOST NEEDED CAREER SERVICES

Figure 33. Percent of staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that “most” or “all” adults with disabilities need the identified career service to achieve their employment goals

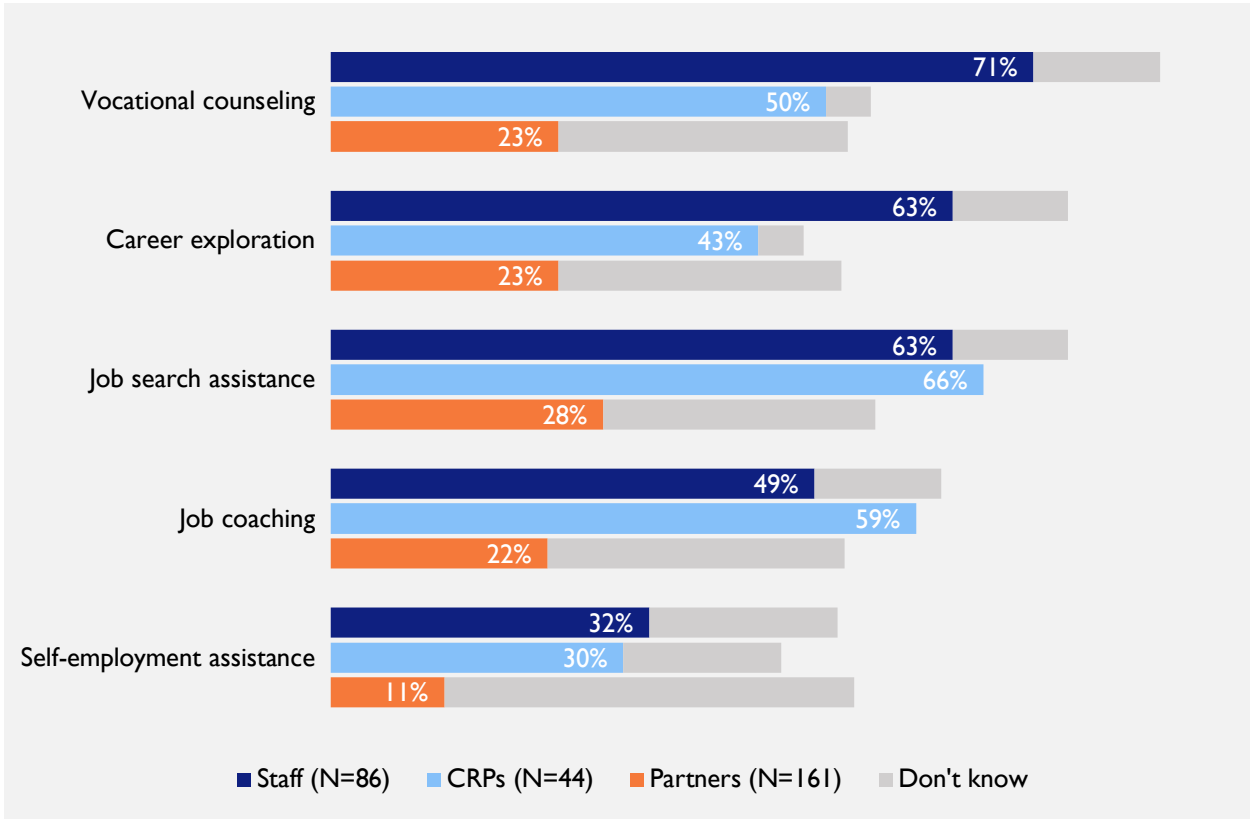


Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

When considering adequacy of services in the community, VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents were more likely to indicate that the most in demand services—vocational counseling, career exploration, and job search assistance—were “usually” or “always” adequate in their community to address the needs of adults with disabilities. Staff and CRPs said self-employment was the least adequate. A sizeable proportion of respondents (particularly partners) indicated that they didn’t know whether services were adequate.

VOC COUNSELING, CAREER EXPLORATION, AND JOB SEARCH HELP MORE LIKELY CONSIDERED ADEQUATE IN THE COMMUNITY

Figure 34. Percent of staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that services were “usually adequate” or “always adequate” in the community to meet needs of adults with disabilities



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

SELF-EMPLOYMENT: Staff discussed challenges in supporting clients to achieve self-employment goals. Clients seeking to be self-employed are required to develop a small business plan, the development and implementation of which is time-consuming for counselors to support. VRBS has developed and continues to refine procedure manuals to support counselors in this work; however, staff struggle to invest the time needed for clients to succeed with self-employment.

“In a perfect world, we would have a resource that we could send clients to for help on how to do self-employment. Because again, it is really, really time-consuming and lots of clients think they can do this, that they will work for themselves and life will be perfect. They don’t know there is so much to it. Again, counselors don’t have time to devote to that.” – staff focus group

Staff also talked about the mismatch of using self-employment requirements for clients who are contracting for work. VRBS has recently begun addressing this need.

“We also have a few clients who are contracting with someone to do things. But we still have to treat them as a self-employment plan, even though it is not their business: they are just contracting, they have to do the business plan and jump through all those hoops. It would be nice to have something separate for contract employment because it is really not self-employment.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Consider developing a specialized focus on business plan writing for VRBS clients/people with disabilities collaboratively with WIOA partners.

Recommendation: Clarify the self-employment service scope and work with VRBS counselors and CRPs to ensure understanding and consistent implementation.

Recommendation: Analyze the impact of the newly implemented alternative to self-employment for VRBS clients who work as contractors for other businesses.

BENEFITS COUNSELING: Very few clients use benefits counseling services, so they are not included in the above charts. Staff and partners discussed differences in benefits counseling approaches and understanding in focus groups and interviews. They said that some programs focus on how to empower people to maximize wages while others focus on how to limit work hours to maintain Social Security benefits. VRBS centralized this service with MSU-Billings to consistently focus on financial independence through full-time work through benefits counseling. Very few clients are using benefits counseling services.

*“The job coach (with a client co-enrolled in Job Services and VRBS) learned about the limited number of hours a client so they don’t lose benefits. This can be a point of contention when they are looking for full-time work. We need to understand this outside of the client, so clients aren’t in the crossfires of these policy differences.”
– WIOA partner focus group*

Recommendation: Increase the reach of benefits counseling services to clients, including to people who are not yet employed.

Recommendation: Work with WIOA and other partners, including mental health centers and Medicaid, to increase alignment in benefits counseling services and philosophy.

TRAINING SERVICES

VRBS PROVISION

The most commonly provided training services were job readiness (provided to 10% of participants) and miscellaneous training (also provided to 10% of participants).

JOB READINESS TRAINING PROVIDED TO APPROXIMATELY 10% OF CLIENTS

Figure 35. Average quarterly program year 2022 training services provided, average quarterly percent of participants receiving training services, and change in count of services provided from program year 2021, by type

TRAINING SERVICES	Average Quarterly Count (PY 2022)	Percent of Participants Receiving (PY 2022)	Change from PY 2021
Job Readiness Training	309	10%	41%
Miscellaneous Training	295	10%	78%
Four-Year College or University Training	170	6%	
Junior or Community College Training	114	4%	82%
Occupational or Vocational Training	67	2%	109%
Disability Related Skills Training*	39	1%	8%
Graduate College or University Training	32	1%	73%
On The Job Training	8	0%	675%
Basic Academic Remedial or Literacy Training	6	0%	-26%
Registered Apprenticeship Training	1	0%	
Randolph-Sheppard Entrepreneurial Training	0	0%	
Customized Training	0	0%	

* Indicates RSA-911 Service Categories that do not require an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

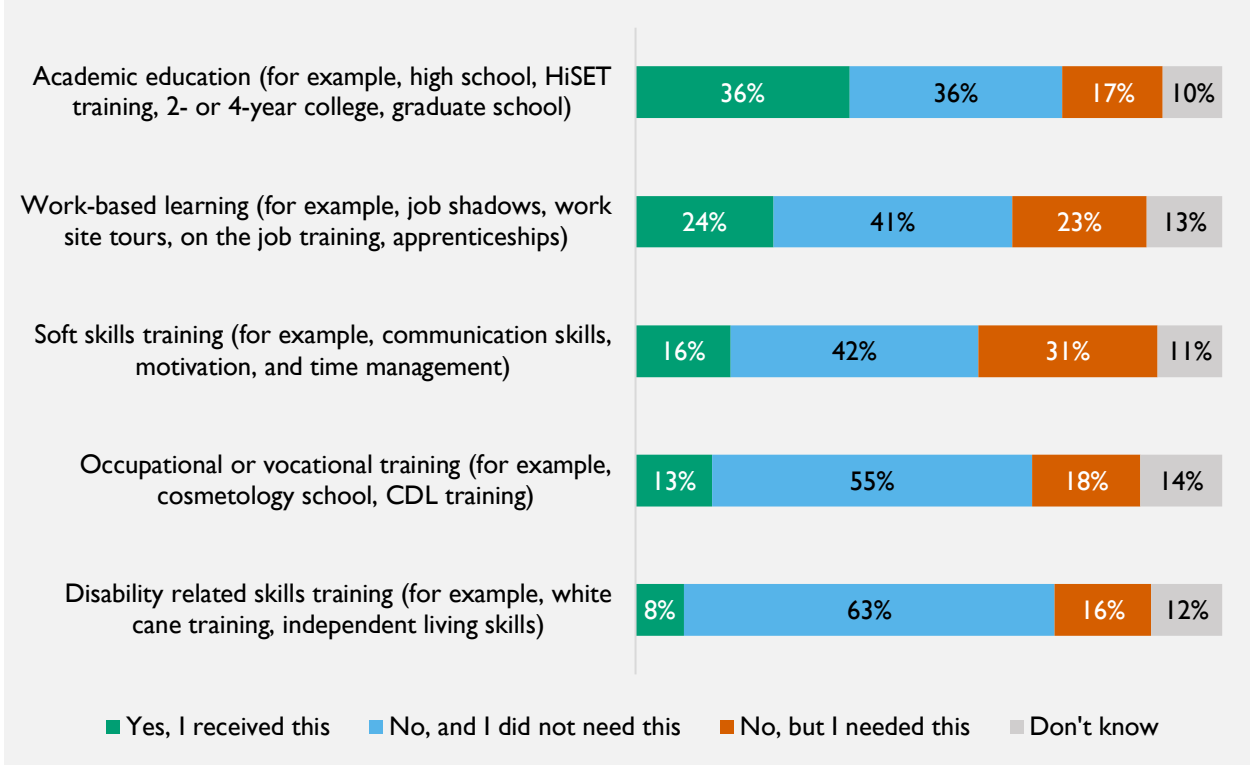
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

VRBS CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

One-third of VRBS clients indicated receipt of academic education and nearly one-quarter noted receipt of work-based learning. Overall, the percentage of clients reporting receipt of training services was smaller than the percentage reporting receipt of career services, but larger than the percentage noting receipt of supportive services. The percentage of client respondents indicating that they needed but did not receive training services was highest for soft skills training (31%) and work-based learning (23%) compared to other training, career, and supportive services, suggesting greater service gaps for these training services.

ACADEMIC EDUCATION RECEIVED BY GREATEST SHARE OF CLIENTS; SOFT SKILLS TRAINING HAD GREATEST PERCEIVED GAP

Figure 36. Percent of VRBS client survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed VRBS training services



Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

SOFT SKILLS: Clients talked about their desires for better communication, advocacy, and conflict resolution skills.

“I want to have skills to address issues without worrying about conflict.” – client focus group

“I want to be able to advocate for myself and my children.” – client focus group

“Soft skills training would be beneficial for a lot of us. It might help with some of the communications issues.” – client focus group

EDUCATION: Clients viewed education services as a strength of VRBS. Clients in focus groups discussed pursuing additional education after being frustrated in their employment search.

“Lower-level jobs are more physical, so employees are worried about hiring me as a blind person. They would be urgently hiring, and then see me with my cane and never

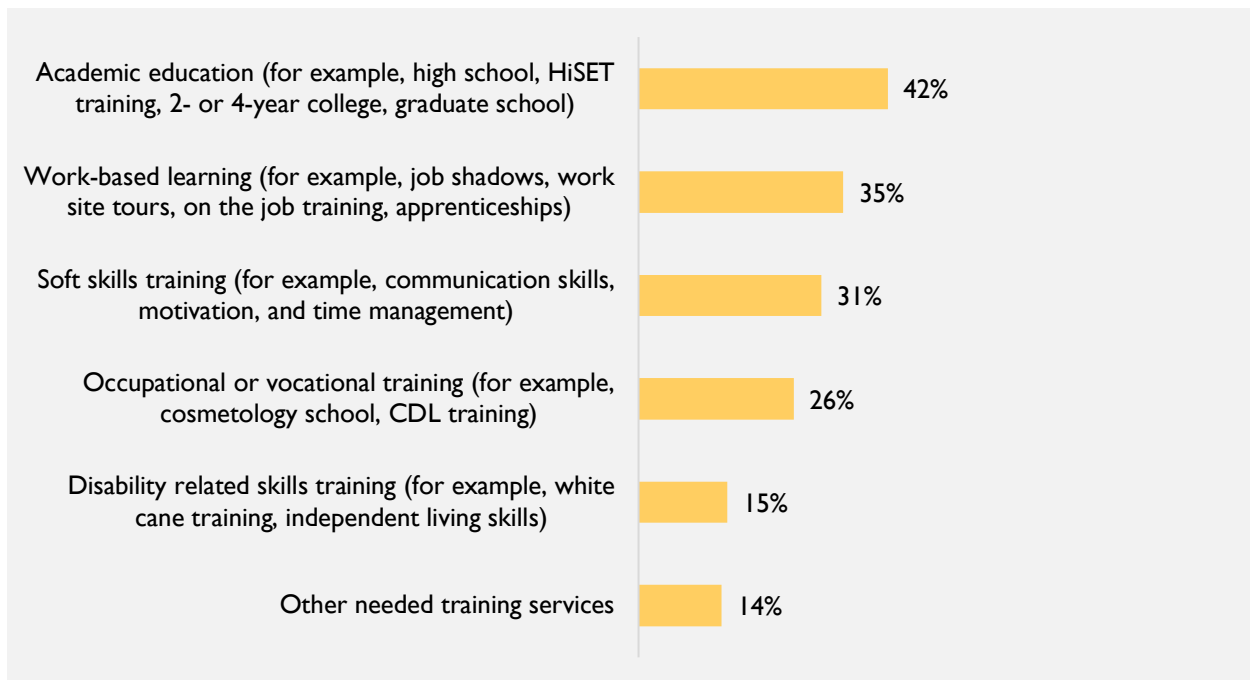
get back to me. I decided on my own to go back to school and I went to my counselor with my decision.” – client focus group

NON-PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

Non-participants identified academic education (42%), work-based learning (35%), and soft skills training (31%) as the training services they needed most to help find or keep a job; like career services, the training services in most demand by non-participants map to the training services received by the greatest shares of VRBS clients, suggesting similar need patterns across clients and non-participants.

MORE NON-PARTICIPANTS EXPRESSED NEED FOR ACADEMIC EDUCATION, WORK-BASED LEARNING, AND SOFT SKILLS TRAINING

Figure 37. Percent of non-participants who identified training service need



Source: Montana VRBS Non-Participant Survey, 2023

EDUCATION: Non-participants reflected on the importance of continuous learning through education and training.

“COVID changed the work economy a lot with people working remotely. We live in a time with such technological capacity; we are not in a timeframe where people work in one job for 30 years anymore. We always need to be learning and growing, to be fluid, to succeed in the changing marketplace.” – non-participant focus group

SOFT SKILLS: Focus group attendees discussed how soft skill or work habit deficiencies created employment barriers, and how they needed support to develop these skills.

“Once you stop working, you stop being oriented to the work habit. Coming back is hard. I need support.” – non-participant focus group

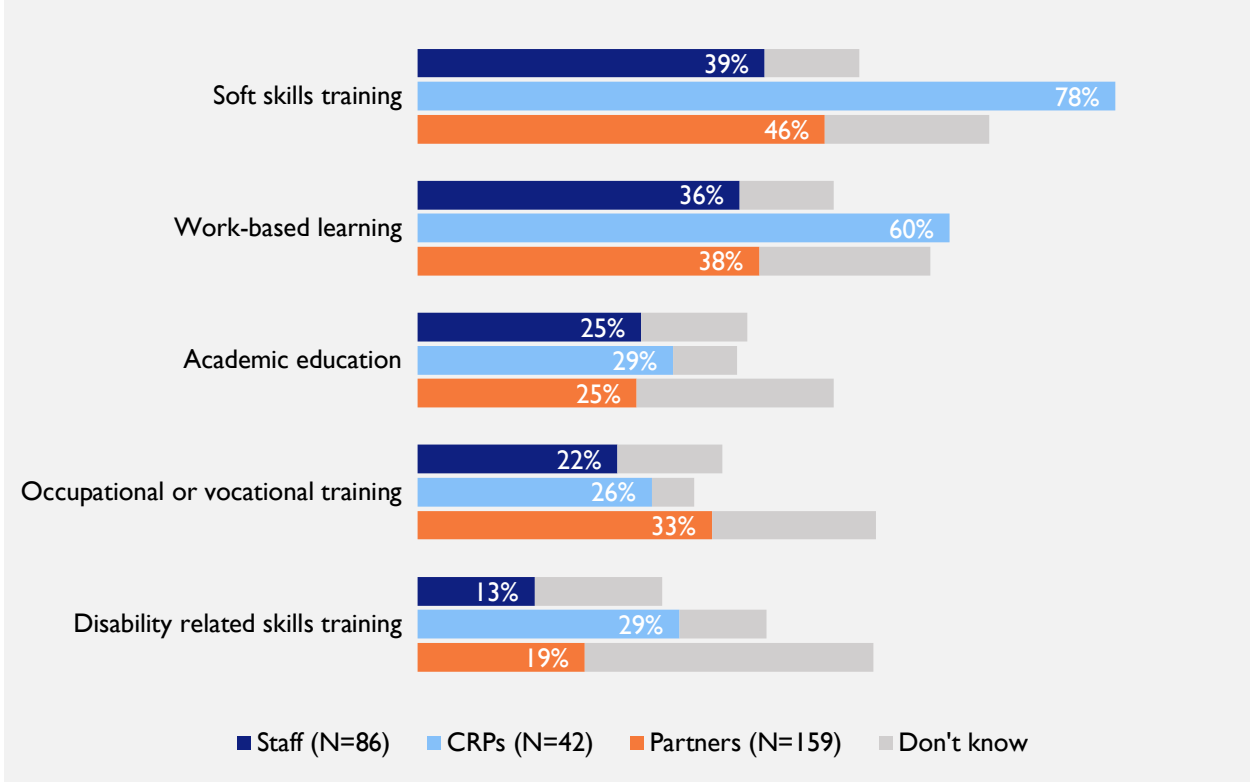
“Life is about routines. We have set schedules for a lot of what we do. Going from homelessness to being required to do things in a timely manner – it’s a lot.” – non-participant focus group

STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents were more likely to identify that “most” or “all” adults with disabilities need soft skills training, work-based learning, and academic education to achieve their employment goals. These responses align with the client and non-participant responses regarding training service needs.

SOFT SKILLS TRAINING AND WORK BASED LEARNING PERCEIVED AS MOST NEEDED TRAINING SERVICES

Figure 38. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that “most” or “all” adults with disabilities need the identified training service to achieve their employment goals



Source: Montana Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

SOFT SKILLS: Like people with disabilities, staff and partners focused on how client challenges with work habits and soft skills created employment barriers.

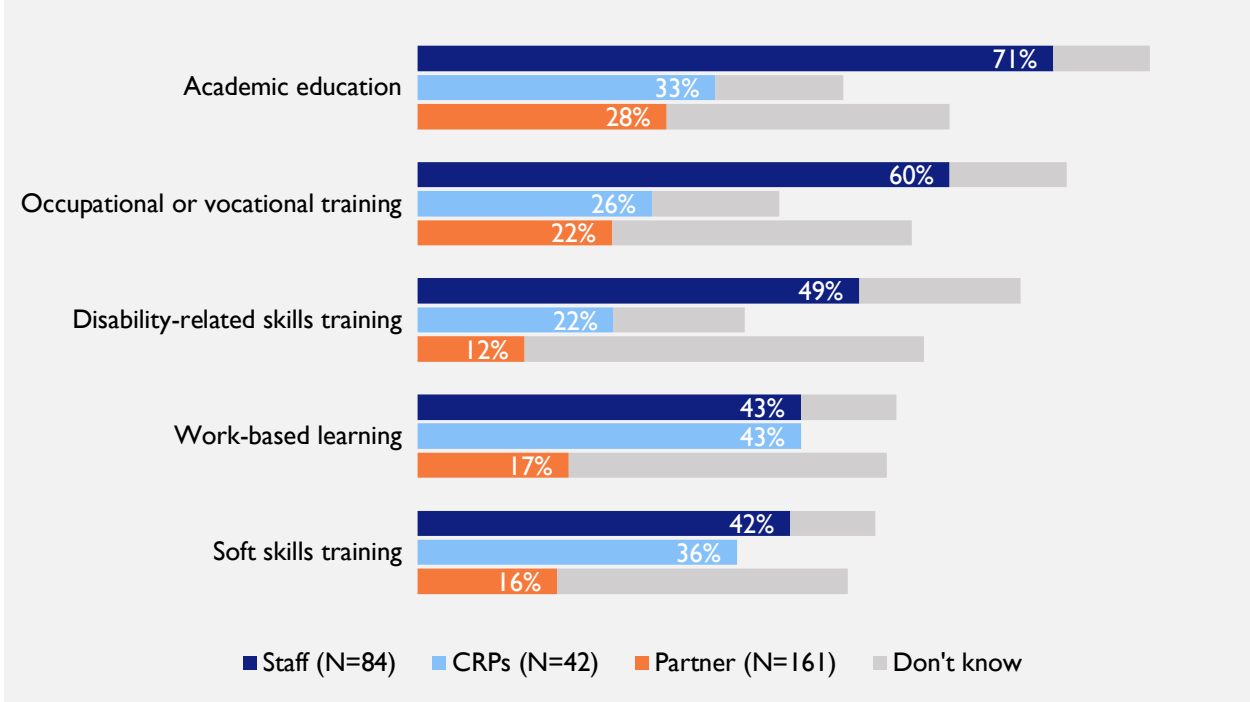
“I can think of one case right now. They are homeless. We are obviously helping with their employment needs to the best of our ability, but it is difficult for them to meet work skills, showing up on time, making sure they are at appointments.” – staff focus group

“There is a lack of soft skills: being off cell phones at work, needing to be present, needing to call in when you are sick. This is the biggest complaint for people in general, not just people with disabilities.” – WIOA partner focus group

Academic education and occupation or vocational training were identified as “usually” or “always” adequate in the community by the greatest share of VRBS staff and partner respondents. Soft skills training, on the other hand, was identified as “usually” or “always” adequate by the smallest share of the respondent groups. Perception of adequacy also varied by respondent type, with VRBS staff more likely to identify services as “usually” or “always” adequate compared to CRP or partner respondents. Partners were more likely to say they didn’t know whether training services were adequate.

ACADEMIC AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING SERVICES MOST ADEQUATE

Figure 39. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that services were “usually adequate” or “always adequate” in the community to meet needs of adults with disabilities



Source: Montana Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

EDUCATION: Staff expressed pride in their ability to successfully connect clients with education opportunities to enhance people’s careers.

“We are most successful in school, getting them into college – and that leads to gaining in their career in the future. We definitely offer as many services as we can, the adaptive equipment that they need, and checking in with them, asking, ‘Hey, how are classes going, any issues?’ Everyone is so individualized, but I think we do a pretty good job at clients interested in going to school.” – staff focus group

Partners discussed gaps in education services, focusing on preparing people with disabilities to apply for and enter post-secondary education to maximize opportunities for success. This includes counseling individuals and their families on the costs and benefits of pursuing additional education, helping to ensure they make a ‘good bet’ on college.

“Sufficient consultation is needed to help students with their decisions. We need to talk to our students about the gamble of college. The worst thing you can do is take debt and get no credits or no degree.” – post-secondary education partner focus group

Partners recommended earlier applications and commitments to colleges to maximize time to set the student up for success.

“Most schools have a rolling admissions process. The upside is the ability to access with last minute decision. The downside is we don’t have enough staff to action what is needed for students in any way needed to set them up for success.” – post-secondary education partner focus group

Completing applications before May 1st allows students receiving Pell Grants to be prioritized for accessible and single rooms.

“Because of the housing crunch, I would recommend committing to institutions sooner. By February, a student should have their housing app in, FAFSA filed, working with Pre-ETS to get everything you need in place. Students can get a class schedule early, know where they will be living, and what their financial package is.” – post-secondary education partner focus group

Recommendation: Analyze the approach to enhancing counseling for clients and Pre-ETS participants considering higher education options.

Recommendation: Consider ways to support clients and Pre-ETS participants in applying for post-secondary institutions earlier to ensure sufficient time to prepare housing, financial aid, and class schedule options for incoming students.

SOFT SKILLS: Stakeholders universally recognize the deficits in soft skills services for people with disabilities and for people in general. This broad workforce development need is an opportunity for partnership with WIOA partners and businesses.

Recommendation: Improve the definition of soft skills services to support the full scope of work skill and soft skills needs.

Recommendation: Consider developing soft skills services collaboratively with WIOA partners and businesses to address broader workforce soft skill deficits.

WORK-BASED LEARNING: VRBS staff felt uncertain of how work-based learning was understood. Partners discussed the Montana work-based learning collaborative and its focus on innovations related to youth.

Recommendation: Clarify the work-based learning service scope and work with CRPs and VRBS counselors to ensure understanding.

Recommendation: Determine whether broader WIOA collaboration could benefit implementation of work-based learning.

SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

VRBS PROVISION

In the category of “other services,” which we refer to as supportive services in this report, transportation services were the most common service provided. However, only about 3 percent of participants received transportation services in program year 2022.

APPROXIMATELY 3% OF CLIENTS RECEIVE TRANSPORTATION SERVICES

Figure 40. Average quarterly program year 2022 other services provided, average quarterly percent of participants receiving other services, and change in count of services provided from program year 2021, by type

OTHER SERVICES	Average Quarterly Count (PY 2022)	Percent of Participants Receiving (PY 2022)	Change from PY 2021
Transportation*	75	3%	66%
Maintenance*	69	2%	112%
Technical Assistance Services	42	1%	50%
Rehabilitation Technology*	37	1%	
Other Services	29	1%	143%
Interpreter Services*	11	0%	
Personal Assistance Services*	1	0%	
Reader Services*	0	0%	

* Indicates RSA-911 Service Categories that do not require an Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

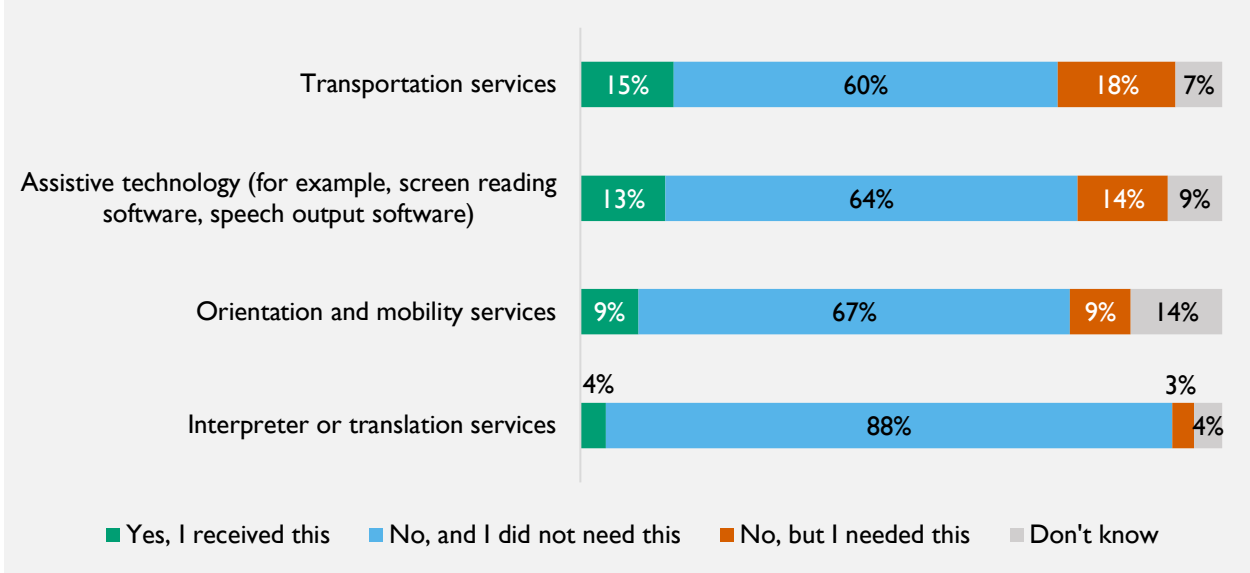
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

VRBS CLIENT PERSPECTIVE

Compared to career and training services, VRBS clients said they were less likely to identify receipt of or need of supportive services. Fifteen percent of client survey respondents said they received transportation services, and 13 percent identified receipt of assistive technology. The greatest supportive service gap was identified for transportation services, where 18 percent of respondents indicated that they needed but did not receive this service. This is consistent with the largest percentage of clients (35%) identifying transportation as a basic needs challenge (see Figure 22).

VRBS CLIENTS LESS LIKELY TO REPORT SUPPORTIVE SERVICE NEED OR RECEIPT

Figure 41. Percent of VRBS client survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed VRBS supportive services



Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

TRANSPORTATION: Client frustration with transportation services includes the lack of options in addition to service delivery inefficiencies.

“I have been working with VR for four months to get a hand control switch so I can drive.” – client focus group

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY: Clients who received assistive technology services shared challenges with service receipt.

“I wish I would have heard about MonTECH sooner. I did it all on my own, and then VRBS/BLV paid for it.” – client focus group

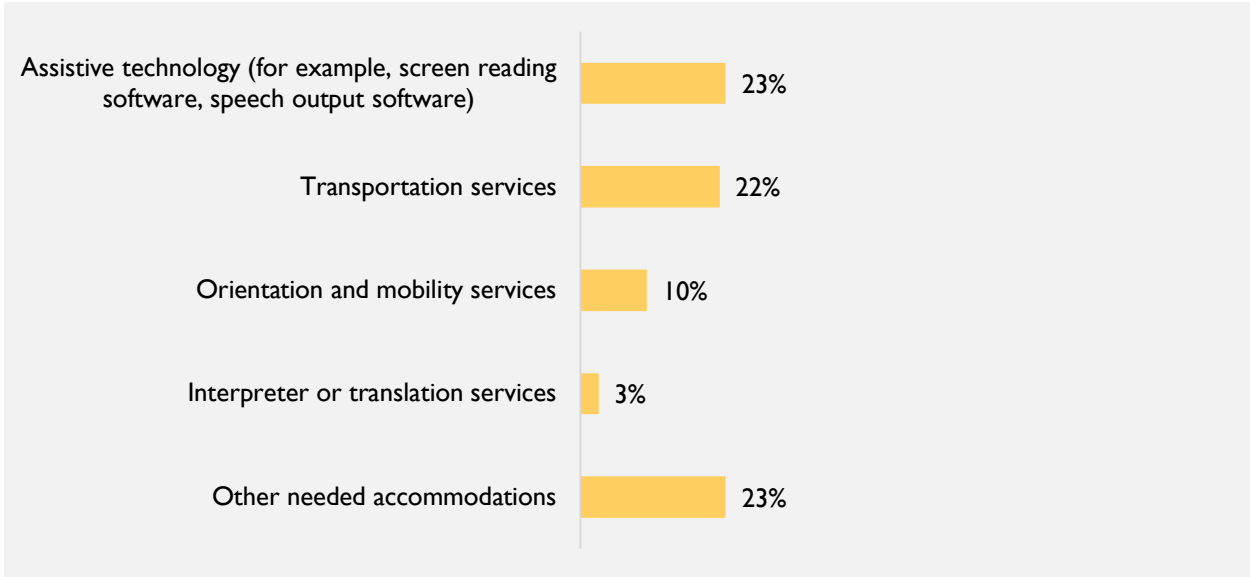
“MonTECH was hard to find as someone who walks and takes the bus. I learned about it from Missoula Job Services when they did a presentation at Council Groves where I live. They told me about it because they saw I am visually impaired. When I started school, I looked into it in case they had stuff that would help me read handouts. I couldn’t figure out how to use the OrCam. I should have asked, but I felt overwhelmed.” – client focus group

NON-PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVE

Nearly one-quarter of non-participant survey respondents identified assistive technology (23%) and transportation services (22%) as supportive services needed to find or keep a job.

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY AND TRANSPORTATION ARE GREATEST NON-PARTICIPANT SERVICE NEEDS

Figure 42. Percent of non-applicants who identified supportive service need



Source: Montana VRBS Non-Participant Survey, 2023

TRANSPORTATION: Non-participants shared how they would benefit from more transportation choices, more bus stops/routes, more times covered by transit providers, gas vouchers, and other cost reimbursements for personal vehicles.

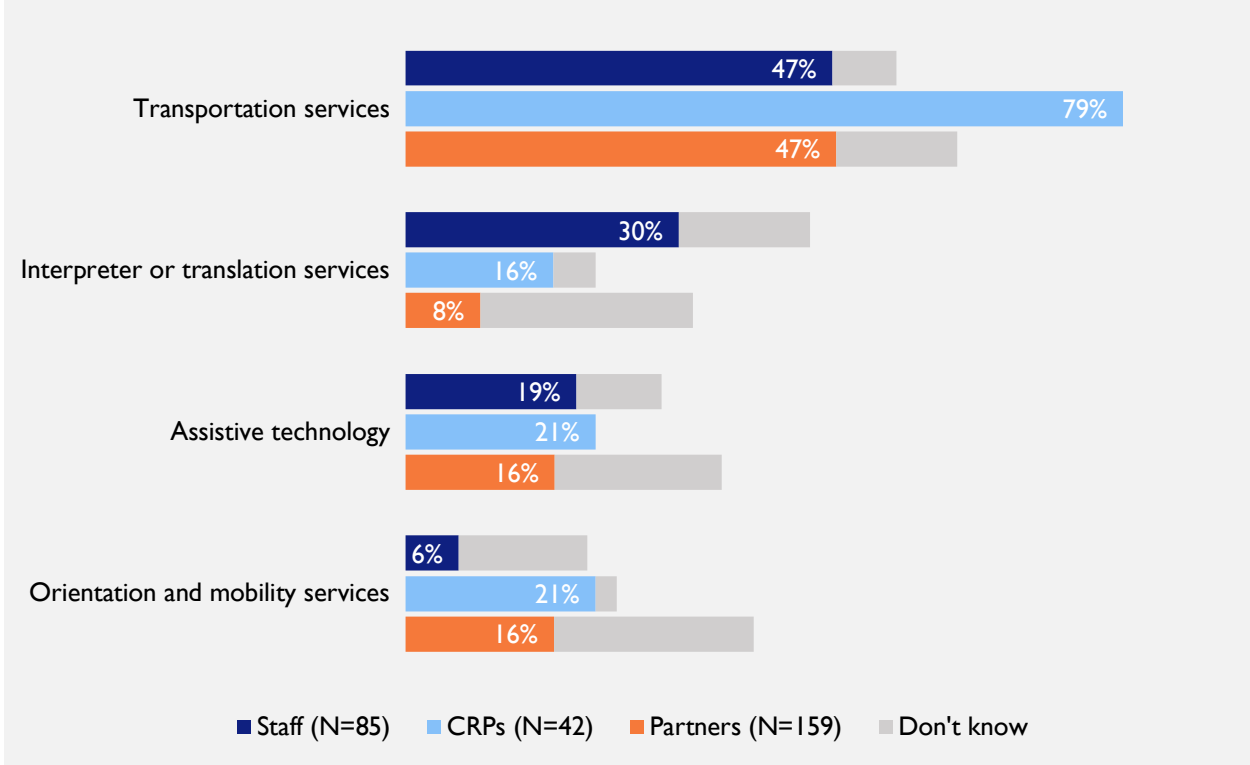
OTHER ACCOMMODATIONS: Non-participants discussed other needed supportive services, including tents, sleeping bags, socks, computer access, and housing.

STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

Other than transportation services, fewer staff, CRP, and partner respondents indicated that “most” or “all” clients need supportive services, aligning with client and non-participant responses that indicate less receipt and less demand for supportive services.

TRANSPORTATION AND ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY GREATEST PERCEIVED NEED BY VRBS STAFF AND PARTNERS

Figure 43. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that “most” or “all” adults with disabilities need the identified supportive service to achieve their employment goals

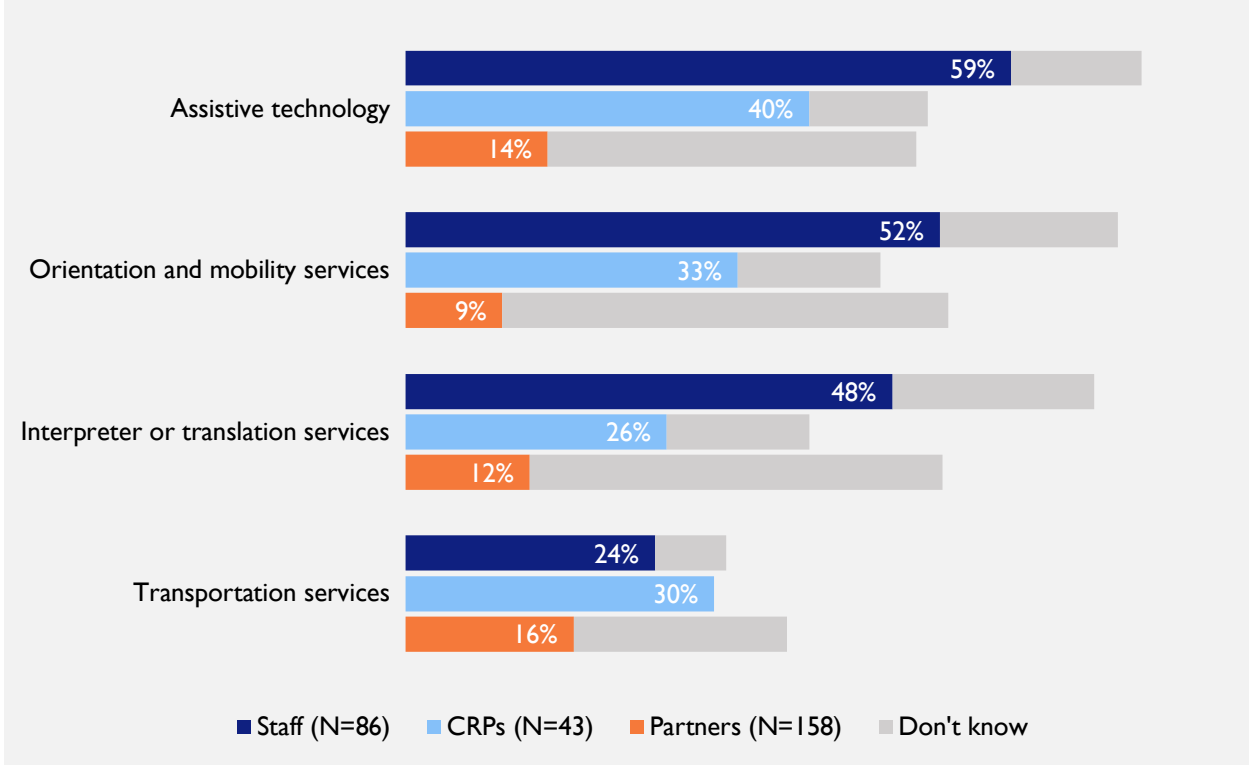


Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

Although transportation services were identified as most needed by VRBS staff and partners, they were also considered the least adequate in the community by these respondent groups. A greater share of VRBS staff respondents considered supportive services to be “usually” or “always” adequate than did CRP or partner respondents.

TRANSPORTATION SERVICES PERCEIVED AS LEAST ADEQUATE SUPPORTIVE SERVICE

Figure 44. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that services were “usually adequate” or “always adequate” in the community to meet needs of adults with disabilities



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY: Staff appreciated how the partnership with MonTECH out of Missoula and Billings helps clients meet their assistive technology needs.

“I think we do this pretty well here because of MonTECH out of Billings and Missoula. We refer clients to them, tell them their barriers, and MonTECH works with them... to figure it out.” – staff focus group

Staff reflected on how their capacity limitations negatively impact client access to these services.

“I’m having a hard time getting clients to agree to have their part of the buy-in of what kind of assistive technology they need because they don’t know their options. This ties into counseling and guidance; we don’t have the time to help them figure it out.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Enhance referrals and handoffs to MonTECH to support improved client access to assistive technology services.

TRANSPORTATION: Staff, contractors, and partners discussed limited collaboration for supportive services, including transportation, in interviews and focus groups. DPHHS has a transportation coordinator who works with all DPHHS programs (Disability Employment and Transitions Division, Developmental Disabilities Program, Senior and Long Term Care, Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities, Medicaid, etc.) and the Montana Department of Transportation. The legislature created this position to serve as a DPHHS liaison to the Department of Transportation and support innovative problem-solving. The coordinator position is housed in DETD, which has not resulted in the desired collaboration and cost-sharing of transportation solutions.

Recommendation: Explore innovative, collaborative transportation options across agencies, including DPHHS (Medicaid, Big Sky Waiver, BHDD, DDP, TANF), Department of Labor, Veterans Affairs, Tribal agencies, Department of Transportation, and transportation providers with a focus on shared service delivery and layered funding. Consider moving the transportation coordinator position outside of DETD to encourage and enhance cross-department collaboration in addressing transportation challenges.

Recommendation: Include transportation needs and services in Montana’s 2024 Olmstead plan.

Students with disabilities face additional transportation challenges related to accessing driver’s education. Driver’s education is difficult for all students, regardless of disability, to access in Montana. Despite this, stakeholders felt there were opportunities for driver’s education to be more accessible for students with disabilities. Additionally, many stakeholders reflected on the opportunity to increase access through private instruction.

“All the schools are full; it’s impossible to get into driver’s ed class. We have two private instructors who are teachers with lots of limitations. We need more of these classes statewide! It would be good to promote this and have a few sites open statewide.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Partner with driver’s education programs in schools and the Havre-based instructor program to increase awareness of obligations and opportunities to accommodate students with disabilities. Determine how to share information about students with IEPs and provide adaptive equipment to increase accessibility.

Recommendation: Analyze opportunities to increase access to private driver’s education instruction for students with disabilities and ensure sufficient reimbursement to sustain services.

INTERPRETER SERVICES: Post-secondary partners discussed challenges recruiting interpreters for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. According to a higher education stakeholder, interpreter pay is set by the legislature and is less than what high schools pay for interpreter services. *“I have a long-term interpreter retiring and I am scared that I will not be able to replace her.” – post-secondary partner focus group.*

Recommendation: Work with partners to understand post-secondary interpreter rate constraints and support efforts to address constraints.

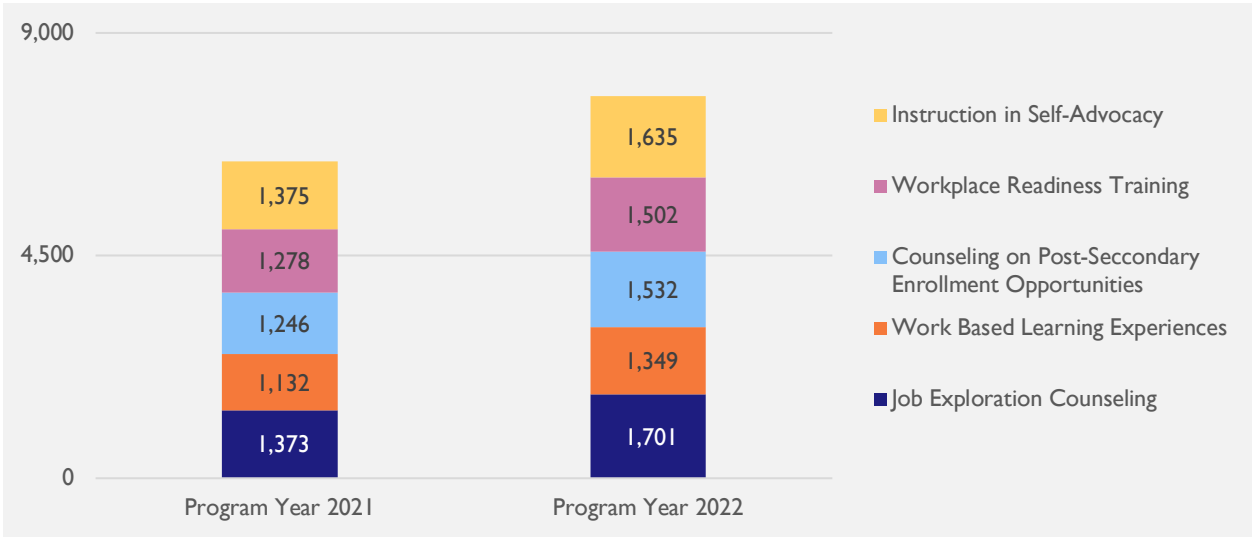
PRE-ETS SERVICES

VRBS PROVISION

Montana’s Pre-ETS program is serving a growing number of students with disabilities (see Figure 45) with an increasing number of services. The most common and fastest growing service is job exploration counseling, growing 24 percent between program year 2021 and 2022. This is followed by 23 percent growth in counseling on post-secondary enrollment opportunities and 19 percent growth in both instruction in self-advocacy and work-based learning experiences. Workplace readiness training services grew 18 percent.

JOB EXPLORATION COUNSELING INCREASED 24%

Figure 45. Average quarterly Pre-ETS count by type of service, program years 2021 and 2022



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

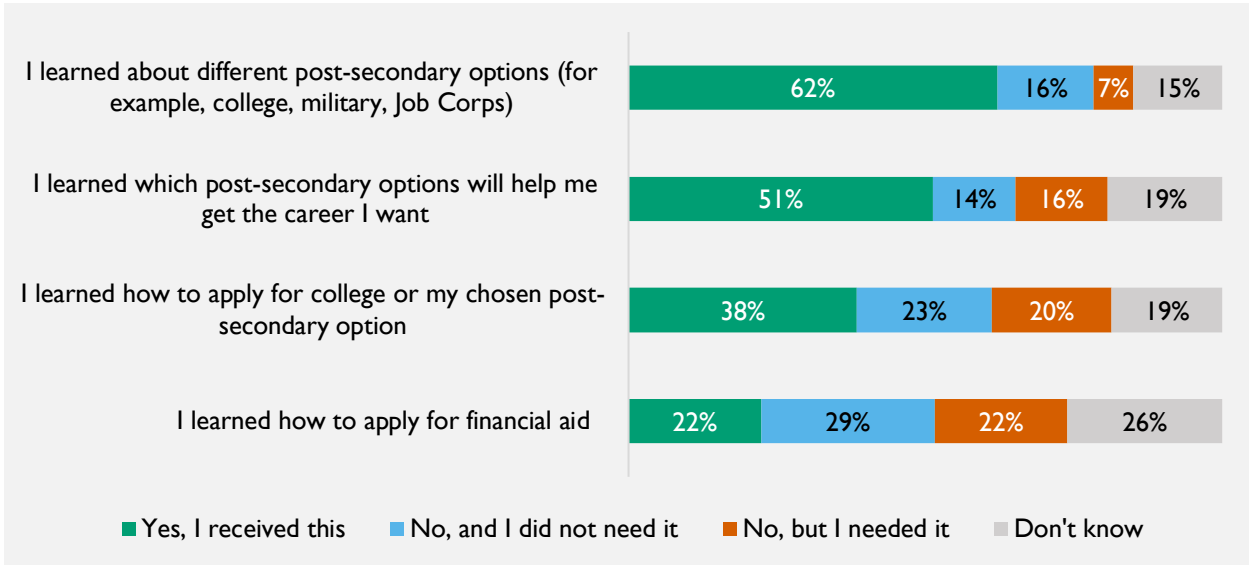
STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

VRBS participants eligible for or receiving Pre-ETS services were both more likely to indicate receipt of pre-ETS services compared to adult clients and also more likely to identify that they needed but did not receive distinct Pre-ETS services. The Pre-ETS services identified as received by the largest share of respondents were learning about good work habits (84%) and exploring what their job interests are (82%). The Pre-ETS services that the greatest share of clients indicated that they needed but not did not receive were a chance to try out a job (32%) and volunteering (28%). Across all Pre-ETS services, smaller shares of respondents received work-based learning services, and the largest shares of respondents received career exploration and workplace readiness services.

Two-thirds (62%) of Pre-ETS participant respondents said they had learned about different post-secondary options and half (51%) had learned which post-secondary options will help them get the career they want. One-fifth of respondents needed to learn how to apply for college or chosen post-secondary option but had not received the service (20%) or needed to learn how to apply for financial aid but had not received the service (22%). More Pre-ETS participants identified that they did not know whether they had received an education exploration service compared to the other Pre-ETS service categories. The high degree of don't know responses may suggest opportunities for greater clarification around these service categories so that participants are more likely to understand their options and recognize their participation.

MOST PRE-ETS PARTICIPANTS HAD LEARNED ABOUT DIFFERENT POST-SECONDARY OPTIONS

Figure 46. Percent of Pre-ETS participant survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed Pre-ETS education exploration services



Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023

LEARNING ABOUT POST-SECONDARY OPTIONS: Students in focus groups shared their positive experiences exploring options for education, training, or work after high school.

“We went to three colleges in the last year. We got to listen to them talk about their services with IEPs and how they would help us as we transition. Learning about disability support programs at colleges made it easier for me to feel comfortable with the decision to pursue higher education.” – Pre-ETS focus group

“I went to a college in Sheridan, Wyoming. It was nice. I decided it wasn’t the school for me, but I was glad to see and experience it as I made this decision.” – Pre-ETS focus group

“When we visited colleges, it made me think about going to welding school, which has impacted the classes and work experience I am taking/doing while in high school.” – Pre-ETS focus group

Students in one focus group talked about how they wish they had a career center that could support them learn about different career pathways, including nursing and automotive skillsets.

Recommendation: Explore opportunities to develop career or innovation centers.

COLLEGE APPLICATIONS: Some Pre-ETS focus group participants expressed a desire for more college application support.

“They should teach us how to apply for colleges.” – psychiatric residential treatment facility focus group

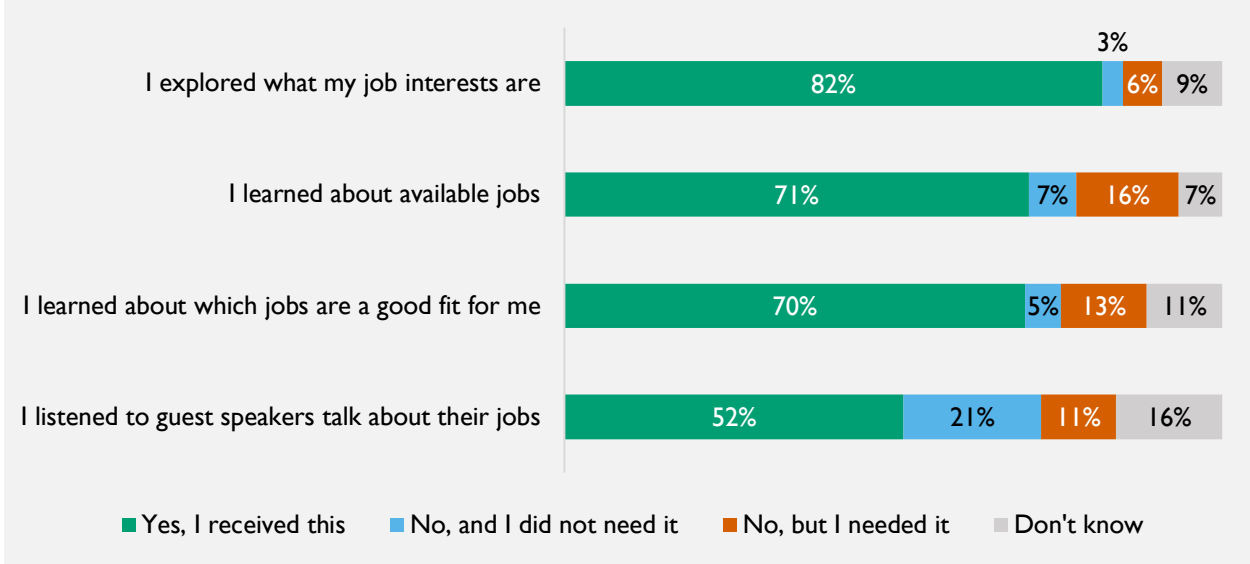
FINANCIAL AID APPLICATIONS: Students talked about how they would like to learn about financial aid options and how to apply for them.

“I would like to know about different scholarships for people with varied needs.” – Pre-ETS focus group

Relatively high proportions of Pre-ETS participants received career exploration services. Most respondents (82%) explored their job interests, and about seven in ten learned about available jobs (71%) or learned which jobs are a good fit (70%). About half of respondents (52%) listened to guest speakers talk about their jobs. Service gaps ranged from 6 percent (job exploration) to 16 percent (learning about available jobs). The number of participants who were unsure whether they had received career exploration services was lower compared to education exploration services, ranging from 7 percent (learning about available jobs) to 16 percent (listening to guest speakers talk about their jobs).

MOST PRE-ETS SERVICE PARTICIPANTS HAD RECEIVED ALL CAREER EXPLORATION OPTIONS

Figure 47. Percent of Pre-ETS participant survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed Pre-ETS career exploration services



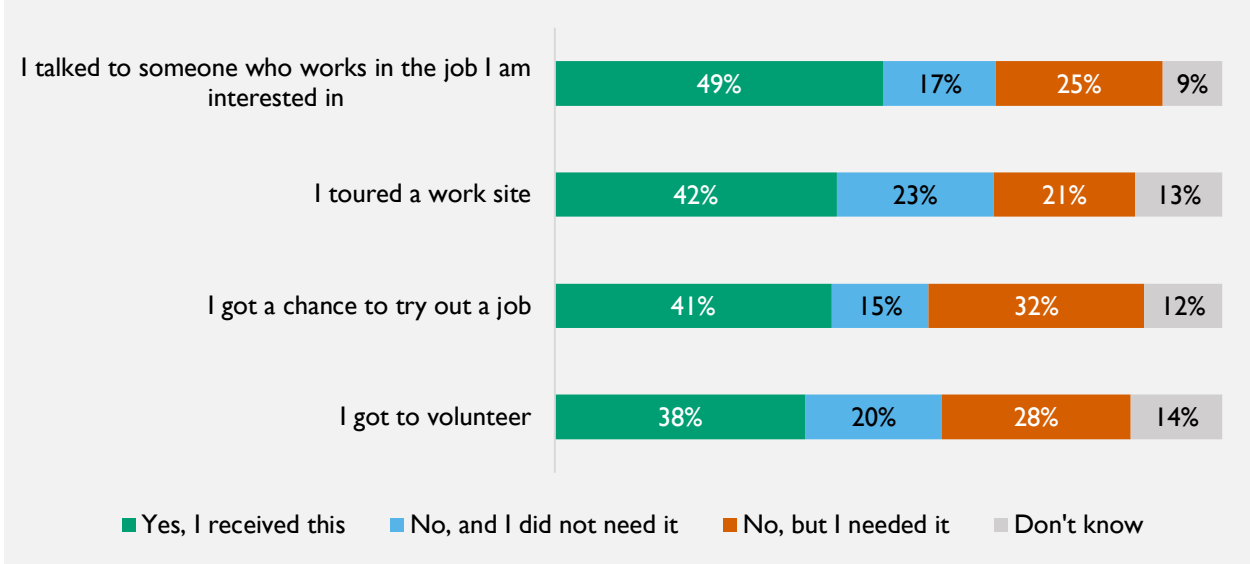
Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023

Survey results align with focus group input. Students shared diverse opportunities they had to explore career options outside of school, including a trip to a lab in Billings Clinic, a visit to the State Police Academy, and career fairs.

Pre-ETS respondents were less likely to identify receipt and more likely to identify a service gap (they needed by did not receive a service) for work-based learning services versus other Pre-ETS services. Just under half of respondents indicated that they had talked to someone who works in the job they are interested in (49%), and just over 40 percent had toured a work site (42%) or tried out a job (41%). Work-based learning service gaps ranged from 21 percent of respondents who needed but did not tour a work site to 32 percent of respondents who needed but did not get a chance to try out a job.

LESS THAN HALF OF PRE-ETS RESPONDENTS INDICATED RECEIPT OF WORK-BASED LEARNING SERVICES

Figure 48. Percent of Pre-ETS client survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed Pre-ETS work-based learning services



Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023

Some focus group participants echoed the survey respondents’ desire for more work-based learning services.

“I want to increase learning in the now – connecting with someone who is in the job I want – through job shadowing or mentoring. Although this exists now, I want more opportunities for connection.” – Pre-ETS focus group

Others expressed satisfaction with their work-based learning opportunities.

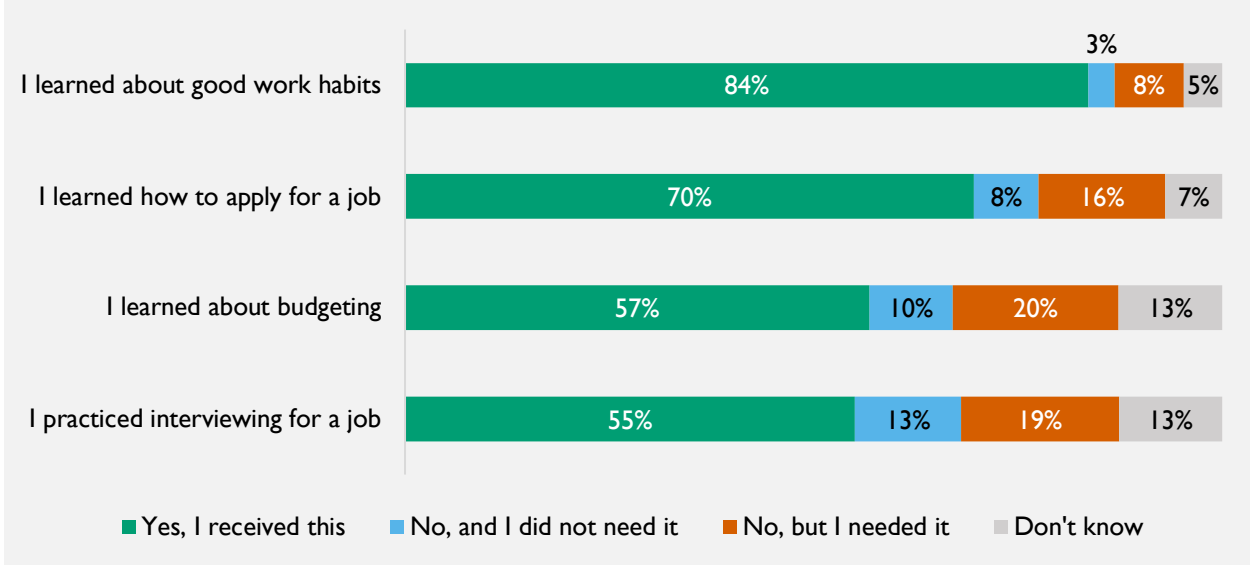
“I attended the Build Montana program and got an internship to learn about how to operate heavy machinery, which is directly related to my employment goals.” – Pre-ETS focus group

“I took a CNA course in Miles City. Overall, it was a good experience. It was hard when there were things I felt like I couldn’t do.” – Pre-ETS focus group

Most Pre-ETS respondents (84%) indicated receipt of services to help them learn about good work habits, and a majority had received the breadth of workplace readiness options. The greatest services gap was noted for services to learn about budgeting (20% of respondents said they needed but did not receive the service) and practice interviews (19% needed but did not receive the service).

MOST PRE-ETS RESPONDENTS INDICATED RECEIPT OF THE FULL RANGE OF WORKPLACE READINESS SERVICES

Figure 49. Percent of Pre-ETS client survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed Pre-ETS workplace readiness services



Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023

FINANCIAL LITERACY: Like survey respondents, many Pre-ETS focus group participants expressed a desire for financial literacy classes, specifically naming that they want to know how to pay taxes, write checks, and balance a checkbook. Multiple students said they wanted the opportunity to take life skills courses with this content.

*“They don’t teach us how to do taxes. Or how to write a check, or sign your name.”
– Pre-ETS focus group*

*“The services offered are not focused enough on supporting people with disabilities.”
– Pre-ETS focus group*

Recommendation: Clarify the scope of financial literacy services to increase consistency of services. Work with WIOA partners to ensure that a full continuum of financial literacy courses is available to meet diverse needs.

WORK HABITS: Students commonly said they learned good work habits from working.

“My experience working helped me improve my communication skills.” – Pre-ETS focus group

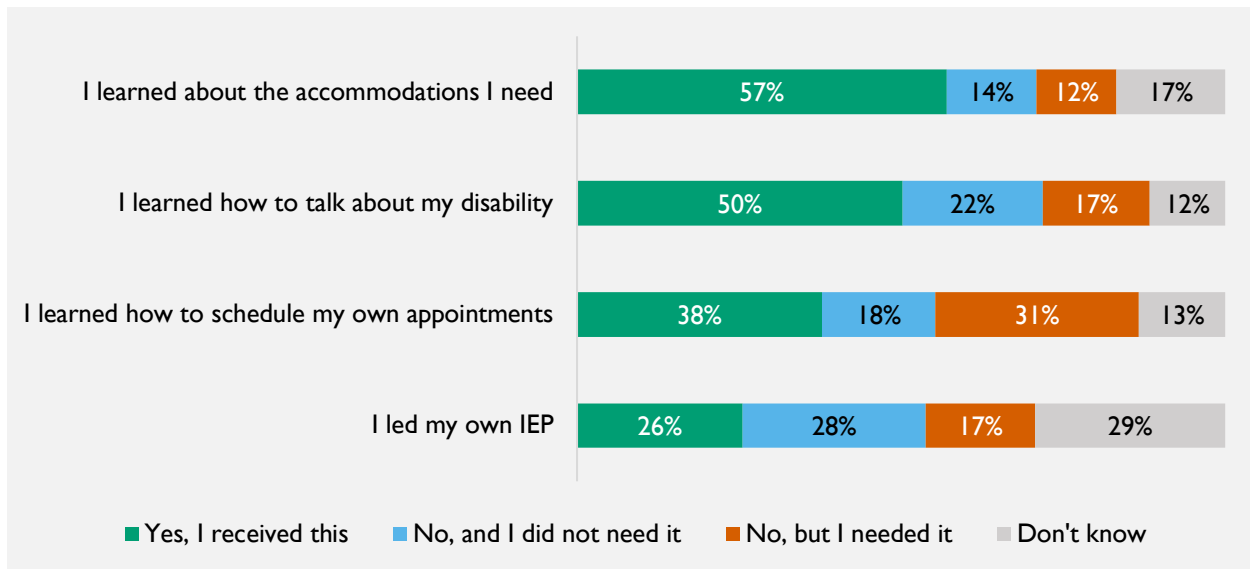
“I am better at time management because of my work experience.” – Pre-ETS focus group

“Even though the content of the job is not related to my career goals, the help I get with socializing through the work is helpful for my ability to be successful working overall.” – Pre-ETS focus group

More than half (57%) of Pre-ETS respondents had learned about the accommodations they needed. Half (50%) learned how to talk about their disability. Fewer indicated leading their own IEP (26%) or learning to schedule their own appointments (38%). Nearly a third of Pre-ETS respondents (31%) said they needed, but did not learn how to, schedule their own appointments.

MOST PRE-ETS RESPONDENTS HAD LEARNED ABOUT THEIR ACCOMMODATION NEEDS

Figure 50. Percent of Pre-ETS participant survey respondents indicating whether they had received or needed Pre-ETS advocacy services



Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023

Students shared many successful experiences they had through support from their special education teachers.

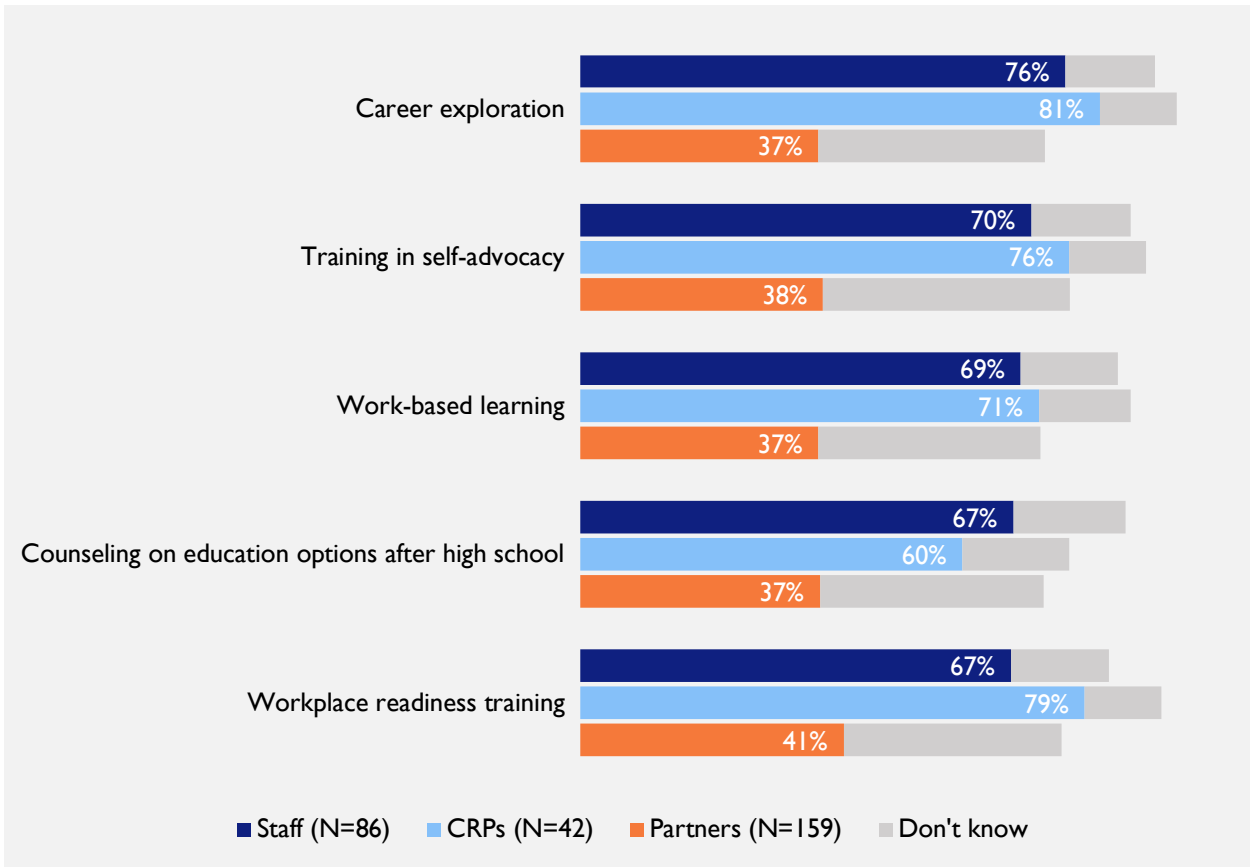
“We have practice sessions for our IEP meetings with our special education instructor. She also makes us cards (like IDs) with a summary of our accommodations in our IEPs to provide to teachers. This helps a lot with communication. We will email teachers if we feel like the teacher is not respecting our IEPs. Our teacher will review the emails before we send them.” – Pre-ETS focus group

STAFF, CRP, AND PARTNER PERSPECTIVE

VRBS staff and CRP respondents were most likely to note that “most” or “all” youth with disabilities needed all Pre-ETS services, defined more broadly. Although smaller shares of partner respondents identified that “most” or “all” youth with disabilities needed Pre-ETS services, this response is influenced by a large share of partner respondents with less familiarity around Pre-ETS services; more than one-third of partner respondents responded “don’t know” when asked how many youth with disabilities need each of the five Pre-ETS services.

STAFF AND CRP RESPONDENTS NOTE UNIVERSAL NEED ACROSS PRE-ETS SERVICES

Figure 51. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that “most” or “all” youth with disabilities need the identified supportive service to achieve their employment goals



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

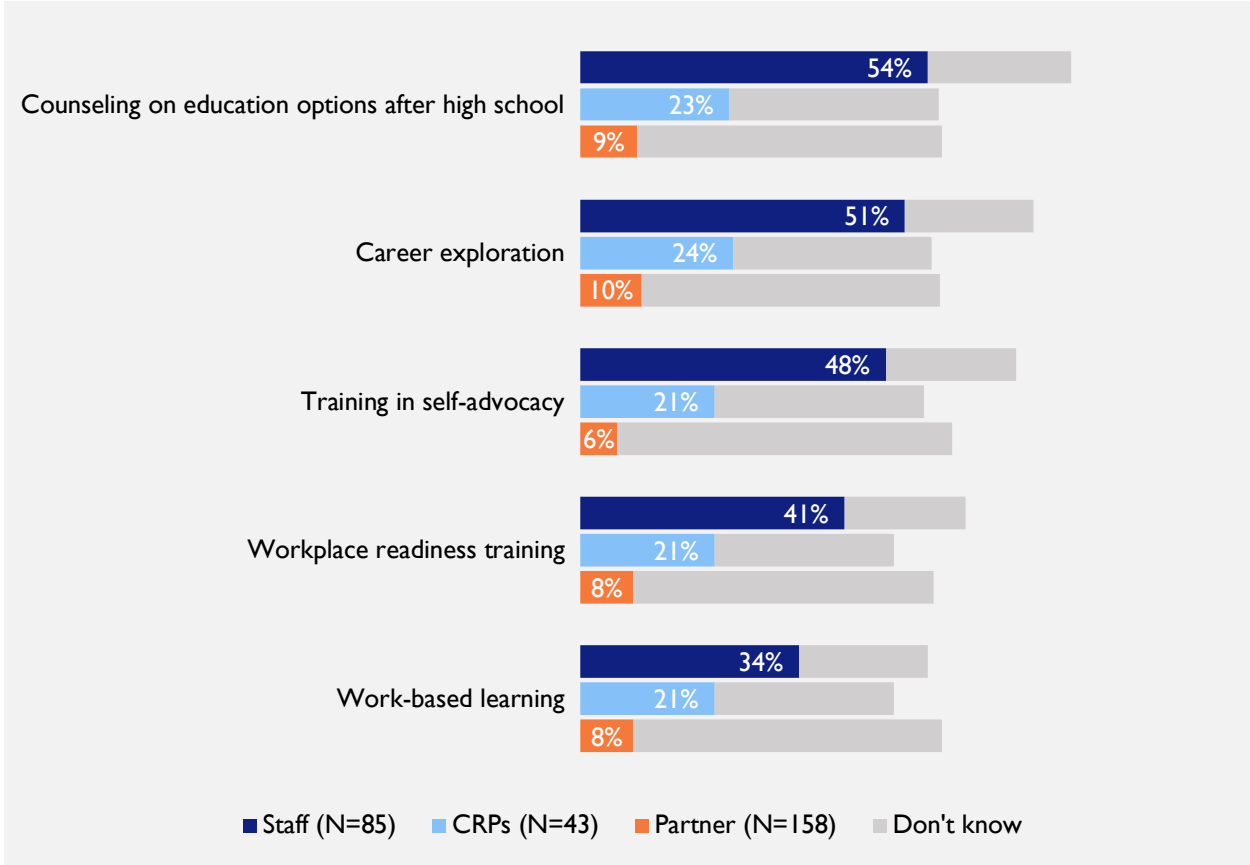
Despite VRBS staff and partner respondent perception of widespread need for Pre-ETS services, they indicated limited service adequacy to address the needs of students and youth under 18 with disabilities. Notably, the percent of respondents selecting “don’t know” regarding service adequacy was high across all Pre-ETS services ranging from 19 percent to 22

percent among staff, 28 to 33 percent among CRP respondents, and 47 to 52 percent among partners. VRBS staff were more likely than CRP respondents to consider services “usually” or “always” adequate, which may in part reflect greater knowledge of services.

“Besides soft skills, workplace readiness, and work-based learning, I think most students are getting self-advocacy support.” – staff focus group

STAFF, VRBS, AND PARTNER RESPONDENTS CONSIDER PRE-ETS SERVICE ADEQUACY LIMITED

Figure 52. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents who identified that services were “usually adequate” or “always adequate” in the community to meet needs of youth with disabilities



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

Adequacy of services in general varies by who is delivering the services. Schools with motivated special education teachers provide the majority of Pre-ETS services. Some regions use contracts to support service provision, which often results in fewer available services because of limited contractor provider capacity or limited willingness to provide youth services if also contracted for adult VRBS services.

WORK-BASED LEARNING: Many special education students participating in Pre-ETS have jobs. A special education teacher shared that in her experience:

“Having a job motivates students to remain in high school. Many have said they wanted to drop out, not seeing the point, and that work became the motivation for showing up to school.” – special education teacher interview

Pre-ETS specialists pushed back on the focus of finding a job for students.

“We let them know they are welcome to get a job, but that’s not the goal of our program. We are focused on careers. They can apply on their own. They think we have this network of people handing out jobs. This is another place to educate schools.” – staff focus group

Parents reflected on the lack of contracted job coaches.

“I would have liked some more opportunities for job coaches. There are not a lot of opportunities and job coaches available. We made it work with my son’s job coach. It seems like there are not enough teachers, coaches, or staff. Sometimes it takes understanding your child and having patience. They have a caseload and are probably pretty busy, but that is important.” – parent focus group

VARIATION IN SERVICE RECEIPT AMONG SUBGROUPS

Access to needed services varied by subgroups within the VRBS and Pre-ETS client population. Figure 53 illustrates whether the percent of survey respondents in any given subgroup who reported a service gap (they needed but did not receive a service) was significantly more or less than the percentage of individuals not in that subgroup (e.g., rural vs. non-rural) who reported a service gap. As displayed in the table, people who were experiencing homelessness, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), individuals with more than one disability, and people with low income were especially more likely than their counterparts to identify service gaps.

HOMELESS MORE LIKELY TO REPORT NEEDING BUT NOT RECEIVING A SERVICE COMPARED TO NON-HOMELESS

Figure 53. Participant identification of service gaps by key subgroups

Key:

○	No significant difference between target population and comparison group
●	Target population reported better outcomes for at least one service gap category
◐	Target population reported more challenges for up to half of service gap categories
◑	Target population reported more challenges for more than half of service gap categories

How to read this chart: This chart displays variation in how different client subgroups (target survey respondents) report service access, compared to people not in that subgroup (comparison survey respondents). It is not comparing subgroups to each other. For example, survey respondents who were experiencing homelessness were more likely to report that they needed but did not receive a service for more than half of the career services and training services options, and more likely to report that they needed but did not receive services for up to half of the supportive service options. There was no significant difference in their report of service gaps for Pre-ETS services compared to people who were not experiencing homelessness.

Target Survey Respondents	Career Services Gap	Training Services Gap	Supportive Services Gap	Pre-ETS Services Gap	Total Services Gap	Comparison Survey Respondents
Living in a migrant community	○	○	○	●	●	(Not living in a migrant community)
Brain injury disability	◐	○	○	○	◐	(No brain injury)
Deafness or hearing impairment	○	○	◐	○	◐	(No deafness or hearing impairment)
English language learner	○	○	○	◐	◐	(Not an English language learner)
Rural	○	○	○	◐	◐	(Non-rural)
Substance use disorder	◐	○	○	○	◐	(No substance use disorder)
Veteran	◐	○	○	○	◐	(Not a veteran)
American Indian	○	○	◐	◐	◐	(Not American Indian)
Behavioral health disability	◐	◐	○	○	◐	(No behavioral health disability)
Blind or vision impairment	○	○	◐	◐	◐	(No blindness or vision impairment)
Mobility disorder	◐	○	◐	○	◐	(No mobility disorder)
Neurodiverse	○	◐	○	◐	◐	(No neurodiversity)
Low income	◐	◐	◐	○	◐	(Not low income)
More than one disability	◐	○	◐	◐	◐	(One disability)
IDD	◐	◐	◐	◐	◐	(No IDD)
Homeless	◑	◑	◐	○	◐	(Not experiencing homelessness)

Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

PEOPLE WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

PEOPLE WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES: SUMMARY FINDINGS

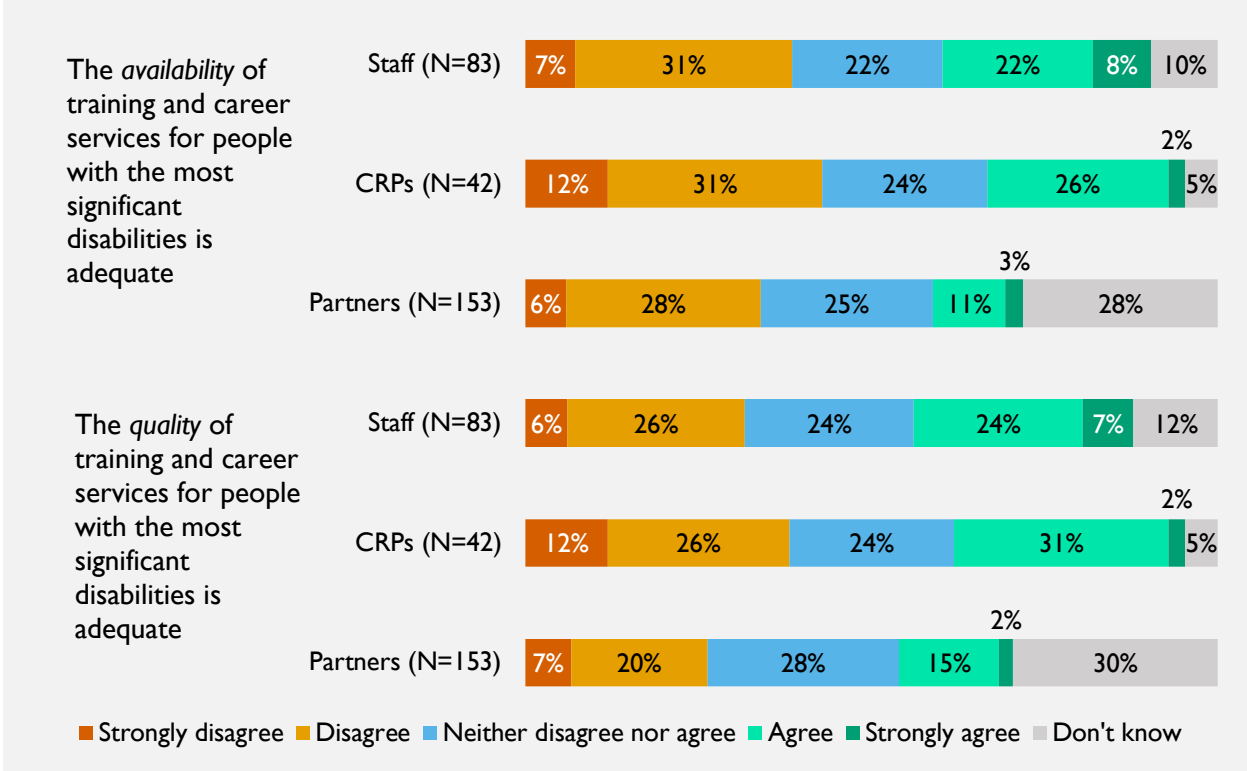
- **Customized employment is a gap for people with significant disabilities.** Montana is reshaping its approach to customized employment to support increased access and use of this service.
- **Supported employment and extended employment are considered effective; however, access is mixed.** VRBS and DDP stakeholders work to coordinate supported and extended employment services for clients. Access is hindered by limited staff and job coach capacity, especially in rural areas.

PEOPLE WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES

VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents were asked to consider the adequacy and quality of training and career services for people with significant disabilities (PWSD). More respondents across all respondent groups were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree than agree or strongly agree that the availability and quality of training and career services for people with significant disabilities is adequate. Partner respondents were less familiar with the availability and quality of training and career services for people with significant disabilities; a larger share of partner respondents responded, “don’t know,” which influences their overall assessment of services.

SERVICE PROVIDERS REPORT INADEQUATE AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY OF TRAINING AND CAREER SERVICES FOR PWSD

Figure 54. VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondent ratings of the availability and quality of career and training services for people with significant disabilities



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYMENT: Some of the perceived inadequacy of training and career services is related to limited access to customized employment services for people with significant disabilities. Montana has been contracting with Mark Gold and Associates to train customized employment providers in the state; however, this contract has produced very few providers. In January 2024, Montana will be shifting its approach to a model that has proven successful in comparable states. In this new approach, people with significant disabilities will start with customized employment services, without first struggling with mainstream VRBS career services.

“Our state as a whole needs to do a lot better at customized employment and carving out jobs for people that could benefit both the business community and disability community.” – DDP DPHHS interview

Recommendation: Analyze outcomes associated with the new customized employment approach and adjust as needed through a continuous improvement process.

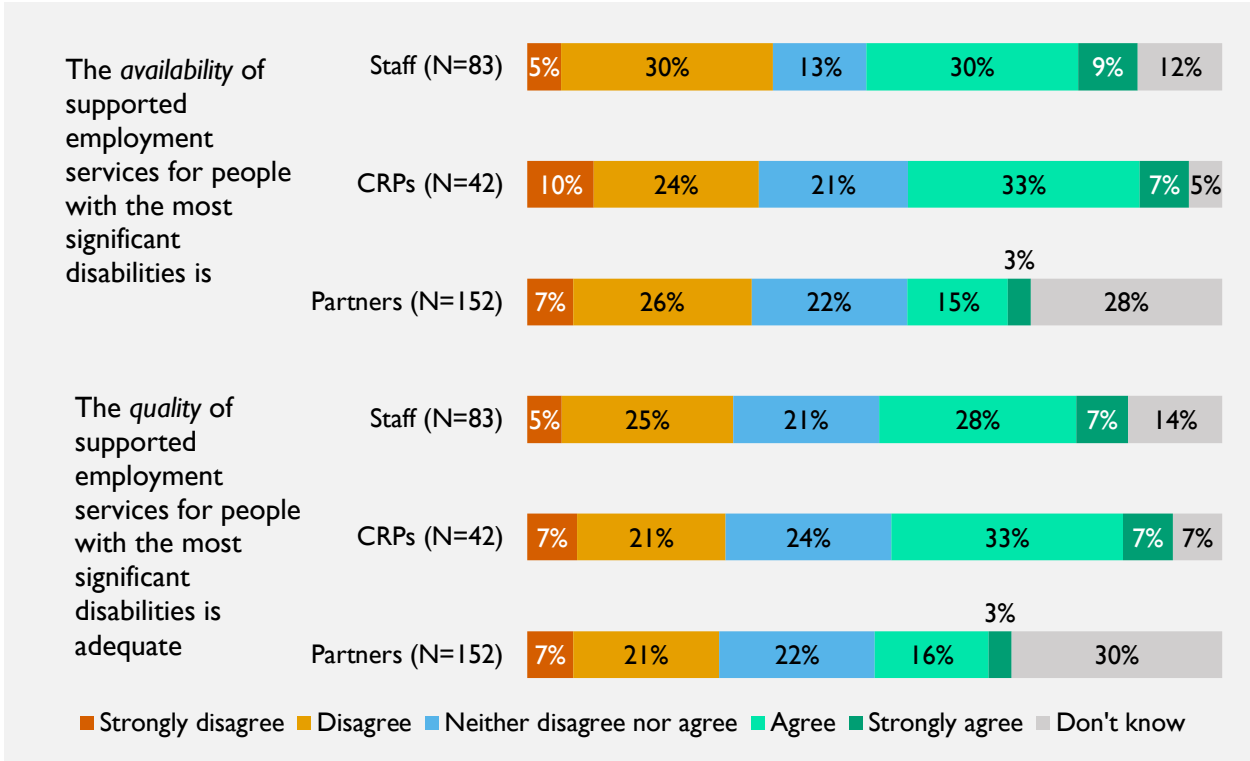
TRANSPORTATION AND JOB-RELATED CHALLENGES: Survey respondents provided additional details on challenges serving people with significant disabilities, reflecting feedback about basic needs and job-related challenges shared earlier in the report. These challenges included transportation, aligning client skills and abilities with jobs, limited job opportunities in small towns and rural areas, and employer reluctance to hire people with significant disabilities.

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Slightly more VRBS staff and CRP respondents agreed or strongly agreed that supported employment services are available and of adequate quality than disagreed or strongly disagreed. Survey respondents serving rural areas were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that supportive service availability was adequate (47% disagreed or strongly disagreed) compared to those serving in more populated areas (18% disagreed or strongly disagreed). Partner respondents were less familiar with the availability and quality of supported employment services for people with significant disabilities; a larger share of partner respondents responded, “don’t know,” which influences their overall assessment of services.

SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES FOR PWSD CONSIDERED MORE ADEQUATE THAN CAREER AND TRAINING SERVICES

Figure 55. VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondent ratings of the availability and quality of supported employment services for people with significant disabilities



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

COORDINATING SERVICES AND RESOURCES: People with significant disabilities are typically served by VRBS and DDP in addition to other potential supporting agencies, requiring coordination of service delivery and funding sources, which complicates serving this population. Limited resources in smaller or more rural communities make this harder.

“We have supportive employment services in our (DDP) waiver. The waiver requires VR to pay for supportive services before DDP. This can be tricky to maneuver.” – DDP interview

“I have some students who have been referred to DD, and that wait list is devastating. In reality, it will take years to care for them. VR will pick up bill for supported employment until the DD waiver kicks in in a few years. Then I try to refer to other agencies who can also support students.” – VRBS staff focus group

EXTENDED EMPLOYMENT: Stakeholders felt that the extended employment program is valuable.

“The extended employment program makes the biggest different for our clients, because the people on our waiting list can access that before they get waiver services.” – DDP interview

“In general, we need more allocations in the waiver program for ongoing job supports. We need advocates to ask for the accommodations to be in place and be enforced. The extended employment has been fairly good for people. It is not as tightly regulated for service providers and is tier-based; the amount of job coaching you qualify for by month differs by tiers.” – Partner focus group

Extended employment services have the same coordination requirements as supported employment.

“When a client is in extended employment and has a DDP cost plan, we try to move them off of extended employment and into our (DDP) waiver so it is meeting all of their needs. I think we do a really good job collaborating with each other.” – DDP interview

STAFF AND CONTRACTOR CAPACITY: CRP staffing shortages and VRBS staff capacity limitations impact people with significant disabilities in many ways that are similar to impacts on the broader VRBS client population.

“I have a lot of people in the most significant category who can’t be served because we don’t have someone who can go over there regularly and meet with those clients.” – staff focus group

CRPs said they didn’t have time to provide sufficient one-on-one job coaching support needed by this population. Additional input from CRPs and staff are provided in further sections.

ASSESSMENT OF UNSERVED OR UNDERSERVED

This section provides an assessment of people with disabilities who may be unserved or underserved by VRBS. Montana VRBS data on clients with barriers to employment are presented to provide context on the number of VRBS participants who may be at risk of being underserved. The assessment provides input on unserved and underserved populations that was received from staff, CRPs, and partners through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Details on subgroups are provided when possible.

UNSERVED/UNDERSERVED: SUMMARY FINDINGS

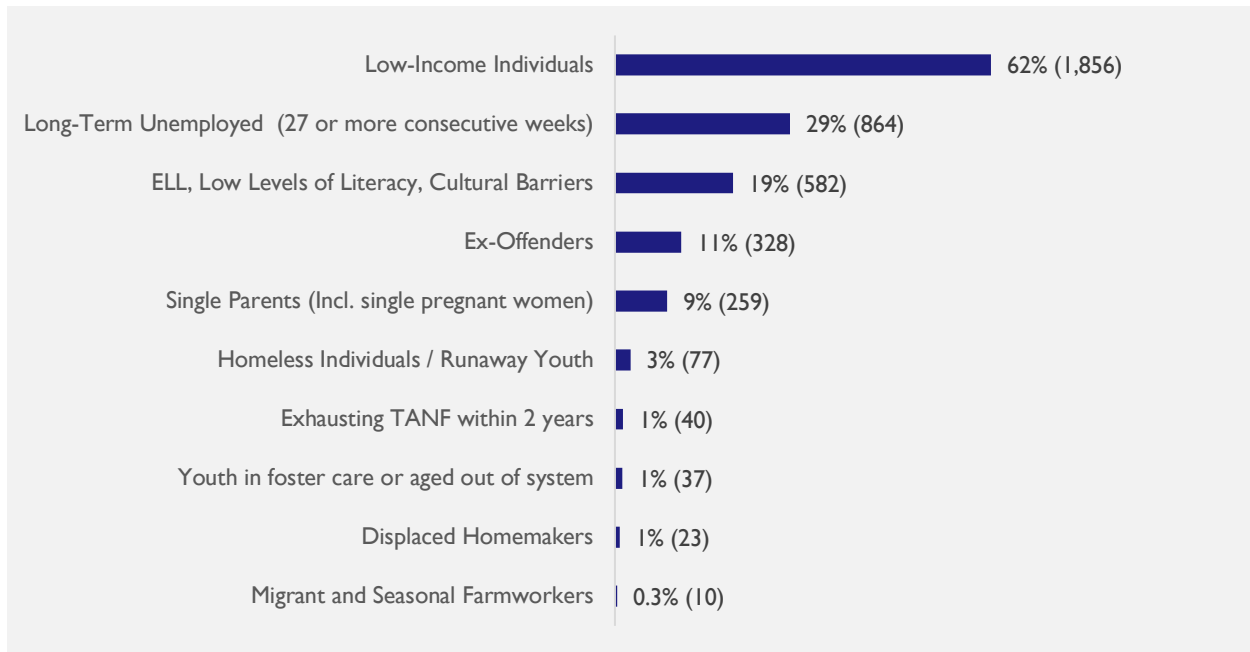
- **More VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents considered people with behavioral health disabilities and brain injuries to be unserved or underserved** compared to people with other types of disabilities. However, respondents felt every type of disability was underserved or unserved to some degree.
- **More staff, CRPs, and partners considered people living in rural areas of the state and those experiencing homelessness to be unserved or underserved** compared to other groups. American Indians, those experiencing low income, and individuals transitioning out of institutional or residential settings were also considered to be unserved or underserved by higher percentages of respondents. As with disability type, respondents said every subgroup was underserved or unserved to some degree.
- **Improving transportation options was the top action recommended** by staff and CRP respondents to improve service provision for unserved and underserved people.

VRBS CLIENTS BY BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT

VRBS program data related to clients show that the most common barrier to employment is having a low income. Other common barriers that may suggest that a subgroup could be more likely to be underserved include having language and cultural barriers, criminal histories, or being a single parent.

MORE THAN HALF OF VRBS CLIENTS ARE LOW INCOME

Figure 56. Percent and count of Montana VRBS clients by barrier to employment, average of program year 2022 quarters (July 2022-June 2023)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

STAKEHOLDER INPUT ON UNSERVED AND UNDERSERVED

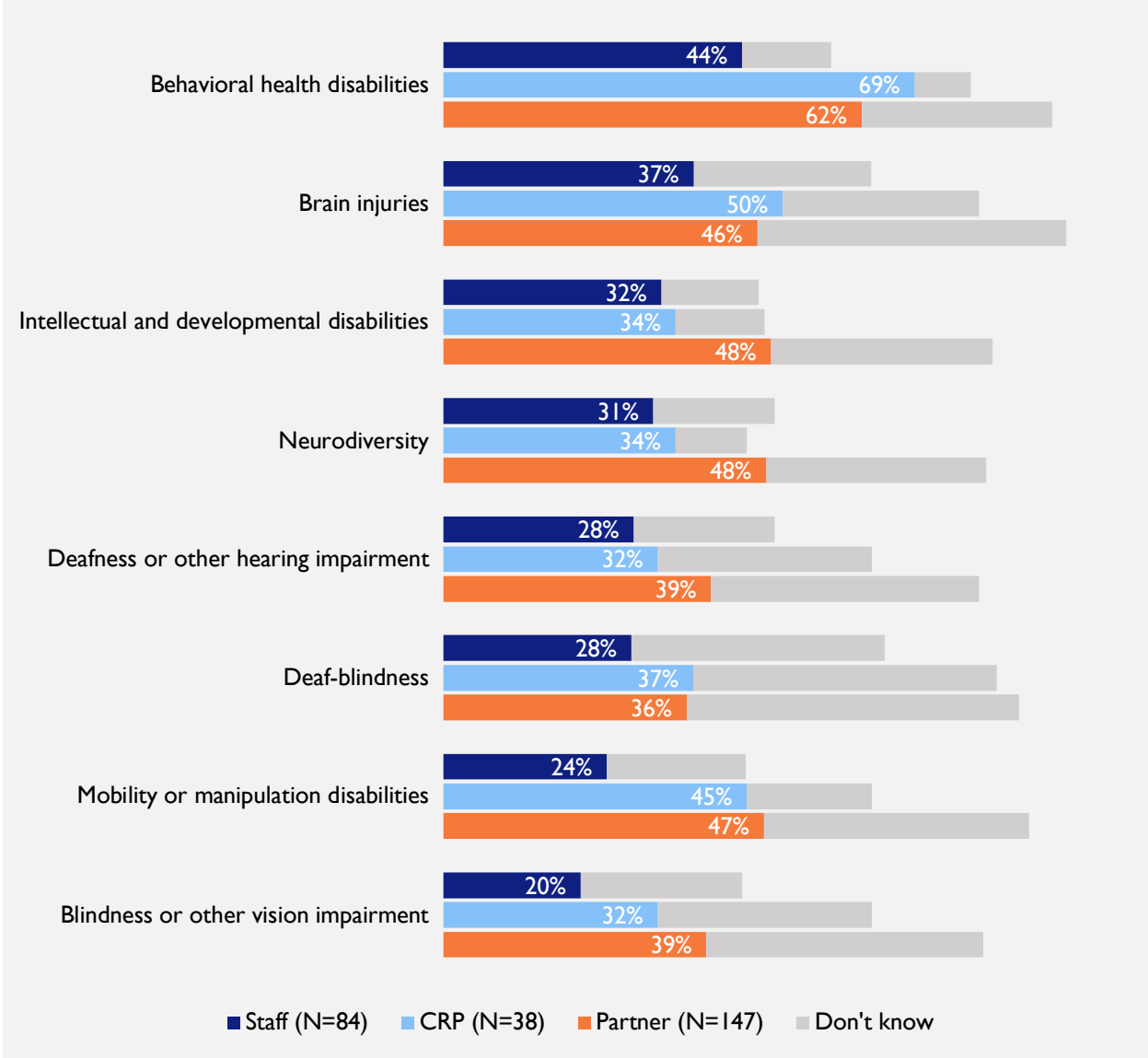
The assessment grouped underserved and unserved questions into two broad groups: (1) people with a specific disability, and (2) people with disabilities in specific subgroups (e.g., low-income, living in rural areas, former prisoner).

BY DISABILITY TYPE

More VRBS staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents considered people with behavioral health disabilities and brain injuries to be unserved or underserved compared to people with other types of disabilities. However, this may also in part reflect respondent knowledge about different disability groups. Staff, CRP, and partner respondents were least likely to select “don’t know” regarding how well served people with behavioral health disabilities are (13%, 8%, and 28%, respectively) compared to people with other disabilities. The percentage of respondents who did not know how well people with different disabilities are served was high across all respondent groups, reaching 37% (staff), 45% (CRP), and 49% (partner) for how well people with deaf-blindness are served.

STAFF AND PARTNERS IDENTIFIED PEOPLE WITH BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DISABILITIES AS MOST UNSERVED/UNDERSERVED

Figure 57. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents who considered people with disabilities to be unserved or underserved, by disability type



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

Feedback from focus group participants and interviewees aligned with feedback from survey respondents in terms of which disabilities are underserved or unserved.

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH: Staff, CRP, and partner stakeholders in focus groups noted that people with behavioral health needs are hard to serve, and serving them is often made harder because of compounding issues such as housing and transportation.

“Getting their mental health needs met impacts their ability to work or use appropriate work behavior. If they can’t address their mental health issues, or they can get their meds because they can’t drive, it impacts how much we can help them. Lack of basic needs being met impacts them down the line.” – staff focus group

As shown in Figure 19, clients with behavioral health needs make up approximately one-third of the VRBS client population. This is a considerable percentage of clients with complex, compounding needs that are hard to serve well. Figure 53 shows that client survey respondents with behavioral health needs identify relatively more service gaps than clients without behavioral health disabilities. Figure 28 reveals that clients with behavioral health disabilities also experience more challenges than respondents without behavioral health needs.

“I realize that VR is under a mandate to tell any individual with a documented disability that comes through the door that they are employable, but when we get people who are unhoused and have severe mental illness and don’t have these foundational things to get through any aspect of life, I question the intent. It turns us into the bad guy. We have to turn back to them and say this individual is not ready to work, there is no treatment team, there is no housing set up. That is a real barrier.” – partner focus group

VRBS is implementing an individual placement and support (IPS) model to improve services to individuals with serious mental illness. IPS is expected to be an effective approach to serving the unserved and underserved population. Partners and staff expressed excitement about this new service coming online.

BRAIN INJURY: Brain injuries can cause physical dysfunction, including vision and hearing issues, cognitive challenges, and behavioral health issues. This complexity means it is hard to ascertain the number of people with brain injuries served by VRBS in the RSA data. Clients with brain injury often must work across additional partner agencies to access the full range of needed services. VRBS staff reflected on the complexity of serving these individuals in focus groups:

“I was finally able to hook into a few agencies who run SDMI (Severe and Disabling Mental Illness Waiver) and BSW (Big Sky Waiver). BSW doesn’t have any long term supports or job coaching. So, we work in-house at VRBS to do some of that, but we don’t have the CRPs to do long-term job coaching. It’s a lot of work to get those agencies to do the long-term work.” – staff focus group

“I have some blind and low vision clients with secondary brain injuries. Job coaches do not know how to work with them. It’s hard to overlap with blindness and brain injury.” – staff focus group

Clients with brain injury who responded to the survey identified relatively more VRBS service gaps than those without brain injury (Figure 53) and relatively more challenges than those without brain injury (Figure 28).

INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES (IDD): Over one-third of VRBS clients have a cognitive disability as their primary disability type. Staff and partners discussed how individuals with IDD receive limited DD services while waiting for a DD waiver slot, and thus are more reliant on VRBS services while waiting. VRBS / Pre-ETS are not designed to meet the full range of needs of individuals with IDD.

“I think there are gaps with the Pre-ETS program. We have a lot of kids on the DD wait list. I’m not sure these folks are getting the VR supports they could. I think a lot of it is related to the capacity to do the work – there are not enough job coaches, etc.”
– DDP interview

Clients with IDD who responded to the survey said they had more service gaps (Figure 53) and more challenges (Figure 28) than respondents without IDD.

DEAFNESS: About four percent of VRBS clients have auditory or communicative disabilities as their primary disability type. Only approximately one percent of clients were deaf (44 clients, 1.3%) in the fourth quarter of program year 2022. Interpretation needs create a barrier to service for people who are deaf.

“I only have a few deaf clients in my area. I’m figuring out how to find a staff person who has the skills. CRPs don’t have someone on staff who can work with someone who is deaf. Interpretation is an additional cost for CRP agencies on top of job coaches.”
– staff focus group

Survey respondents who were deaf said they experienced relatively more VRBS service gaps (Figure 53) and more challenges (Figure 28) than did respondents who were not deaf.

DEAF-BLINDNESS: RSA data show that VRBS serves a very small number of people who have deaf-blindness (seven in program year 2022, quarter 4). Staff believe the actual number of deaf-blind people served is higher and there are issues causing this disability to be miscategorized in the data. Staff also say this is a challenging population to serve well because of extremely diverse needs. VRBS has a project focused on improving services to this population through a holistic tool to better serve this population.

BLINDNESS: Approximately four percent of the client population has visual impairments as their primary disability category, with about half being blind (72 clients, 2.2% in program year 2022, quarter 4). Staff discussed challenges in serving this population, including transportation challenges for VRBS staff who are also blind (“I can’t serve clients in our outer counties because I am blind and don’t drive,”) transportation challenges for clients, and stigma associated with

receiving benefits in the older blind population. Survey respondents who were blind also felt underserved in terms of VRBS service gaps, reporting relatively more VRBS service gaps (Figure 53) than respondents who were not blind. Blind respondents also reported more challenges (Figure 28) than did respondents who were not blind.

SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES: As discussed in the previous report section, many staff and partners feel that people with the most significant disabilities are underserved.

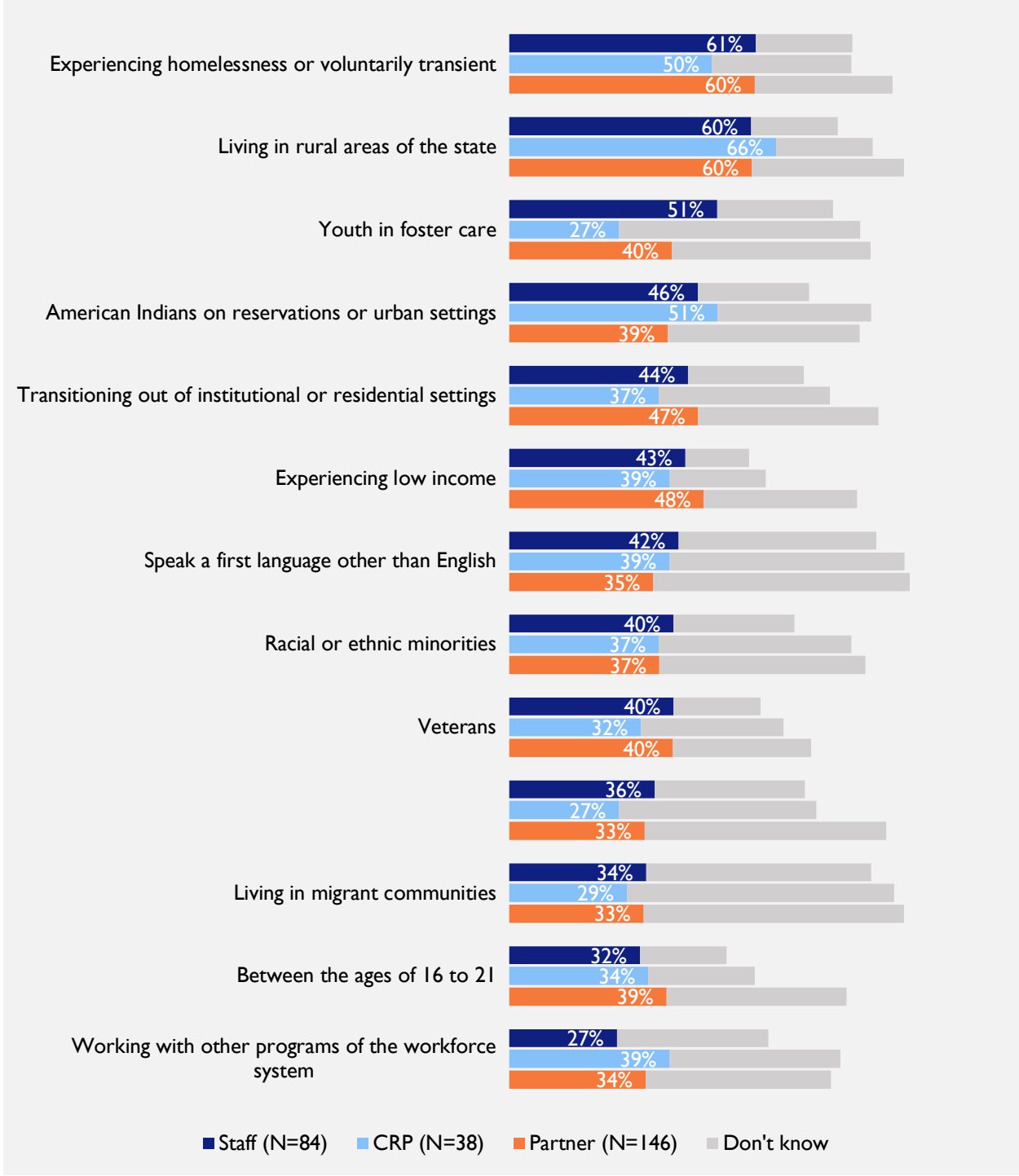
“I had an appointment with a young man this morning who needs attention the most. We don’t have the time and resources to give him what he needs.” – staff focus group

BY SUBGROUP

Examining unserved and underserved populations by subgroup, more staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents considered people living in rural areas of the state and those experiencing homelessness to be unserved or underserved compared to other groups. American Indians, those experiencing low income, and individuals transitioning out of institutional or residential settings were also considered to be unserved or underserved by higher percentages of staff and partner respondents. However, the percentage of respondents selecting “don’t know” was very high across all subgroups, ranging from 16 percent to 66 percent, and the percent of respondents selecting “don’t know” was especially pronounced when responding to how well served individuals living in migrant communities, individuals that speak a first language other than English, and youth in foster care are.

RESPONDENTS CONSIDER RURAL AND HOMELESS TO BE MOST UNSERVED OR UNDERSERVED

Figure 58. Percent of VRBS staff, CRP, and partner respondents who considered people with disabilities to be unserved or underserved, by subgroup



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Partner Surveys, 2023

HOMELESS: VRBS clients who said they are homeless represent about five percent of the 2022 point-in-time count of people who are homeless.⁹ While people who are homeless are only a small number of overall VRBS clients (77 clients, as shown in Figure 56), staff in focus groups echoed survey respondents in their concerns about this population being underserved. It can be hard for unhoused people to participate in VRBS services because they do not have a stable place to live, may not have a consistent way to communicate, and may have compounding factors such as basic needs challenges, behavioral health conditions, and physical health needs that require a holistic, team-based approach to fully address.

“A lot of homeless people are too unstable to get past the application stage. Not having a way to consistently get a hold of them means it doesn’t work. They don’t have enough supports in their lives or stability to really make a go of it.” – staff focus group

“In Billings, we have a wide array of homelessness and transience. Helena is exactly the same. The number of homeless people far exceeds our capability to serve them. Those who are on meds, their meds are getting stolen. It is hard for them to stay on track.” – partner focus group

The assessment of people experiencing homelessness as underserved by staff, CRPs, and partners aligns with the participant identification of service gaps shown in Figure 53. Survey respondents who said they were unhoused identified the most significant perceived gaps in services compared to other subgroups. This respondent population also identified more challenges than respondents who were not unhoused or transient.

RURAL: Focus groups participants and interviewees reflected on the challenges of serving rural populations.

“The area that we have to serve is huge. Trying to get out to places that are hours away and trying to coordinate those services for us is difficult.” – staff focus group

“We have a hard time placing rural and reservation clients in employment because we don’t have service providers in those areas and we don’t have the employer base to hire them. Carving out jobs for them is very difficult. We have some creative providers that are doing good things, but it is hard.” – DPHHS interview

“In rural areas, transportation is a massive, massive, massive problem – and not having CRPs in those areas.” – staff focus group

Clients living in rural areas identified relatively more service gaps than clients not living in rural areas (see Figure 53); however, people with disabilities in rural areas identified fewer overall challenges than survey respondents not living in rural areas in Figure 28. Figure 21 shows that,

⁹ HUD 2022 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations, Montana. https://files.hudexchange.info/reports/published/CoC_PopSub_State_MT_2022.pdf

in general, smaller percentages of people with disabilities in rural counties receive VRBS services.

AMERICAN INDIAN: Approximately eight percent of VRBS’s client population are American Indian (Figure 18), slightly more than the percentage of working age Montanans with disabilities who are American Indian (7%). American Indian clients identified more service gaps and more challenges than survey respondents who were not American Indian (see Figure 53 and Figure 28). Interviewees and focus group participants agreed with staff, CRP, and partner survey respondents that this population is underserved or unserved. Many of the same service challenges cited for people living in rural areas were also cited for American Indians, especially people living on reservations; these include lack of jobs, transportation, housing, and service providers. Additionally, there are service delivery challenges related to tribal and state WIOA and health and human services program coordination, cultural competency, and federal requirements for tribal jobs.

“I believe all Native Americans with disabilities are being underserved.” – Tribal VR interview

*“I think there’s a lot of ignorance in how to serve Native American populations. It’s hard to have a culturally competent relationship. There’s a lack of training in our part.”
– staff focus group*

Outcome data suggest this population is underserved. Figure 89 and Figure 91 provide data on average post-exit wages by race. Post-exit quarterly wages were 18 percent lower for American Indians compared to Whites (\$2,489 compared to \$3,042).

YOUTH IN OR EXITING THE FOSTER SYSTEM: VRBS serves very few individuals (1% or 37 people, Figure 56) who are in or are known to have aged out of the foster system. One interviewee reflected on how youth exiting the foster system are often underserved because these youth are not being identified as former foster children.

“I do not understand students exiting the foster system who come to us (University of Montana) with no resources. This is the biggest fail. There is money here. How do we fix it? If through VR, VR needs to identify it to them at college. There’s Reach Higher Montana. Students need to be connected there. VR needs to ask them if they have been in foster care, do you have the support of your family, can you go to your parents to fill out financial aid forms, and share this with colleges.” – higher education partner interview

REFUGEES: Focus group participants in Missoula shared that they have a large refugee population and that these individuals can be underserved because of language barriers.

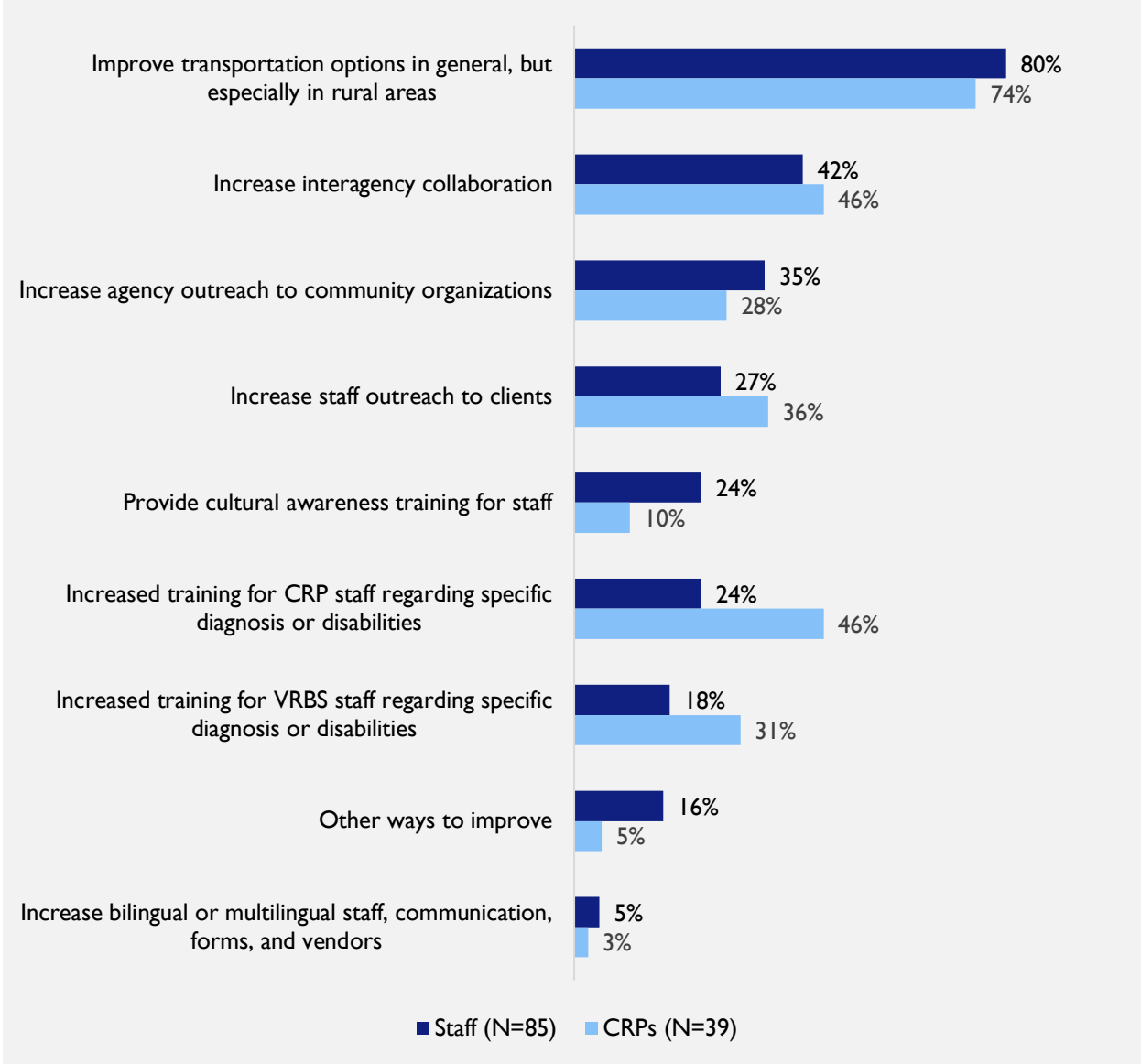
“It is more difficult for them to access any type of service because of language and cultural barriers. It can be hard to even figure out what the disability is.” – partner focus group

HISPANIC/LATINO: Clients who said they were English language learners identified more VRBS service gaps and more challenges than respondents who were not English language learners (see Figure 53 and Figure 28). Outcome data also suggest that this population is underserved. Figure 90 and Figure 91 show post-exit quarterly wages were 27 percent lower for Hispanic/Latino clients compared to clients who did not identify as Hispanic/Latino (\$2,170 compared to \$2,961, respectively).

VRBS staff and CRP respondents provided input on the actions that VRBS can take to improve provision of services to unserved and underserved people. Improving transportation options was identified by the vast majority of both staff (80%) and CRP (74%) respondents. Substantial proportions of staff (42%) and CRP (46%) respondents also suggested increasing interagency collaboration to better serve unserved and underserved individuals. CRP respondents also suggested increasing training regarding specific disabilities (46%) or diagnosis and increasing staff outreach to clients (36%).

IMPROVING TRANSPORTATION SERVICES IS TOP RECOMMENDATION TO IMPROVE SERVICES TO UNSERVED AND UNDERSERVED PEOPLE

Figure 59. Percent of VRBS staff and CRPs who selected actions to improve provision of services to unserved and underserved people



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP Surveys, 2023

Focus groups, interviews and open-ended survey responses provide more detail to these recommendations for increasing access to VRBS services for underserved and unserved populations. Many of these recommendations will be further explored in subsequent report sections focused on VRBS staffing, CRPs, and partners.

Recommendation: Establish and implement IPS services to better serve individuals with behavioral health disabilities.

Recommendation: Collaborate with Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to determine how to strengthen vocational services within the newly defined, less intensive Assertive Community Treatment service requirements. This could include VRBS training or centralized VRBS services for ACT teams.

Recommendation: Participate in HB872/Behavioral Health System for Future Generations committee meetings to understand and influence behavioral health funding decisions.

Recommendation: Analyze approaches to better serving individuals with brain injury in collaboration with partner agencies. Consider the need to develop a brain injury waiver or other focused program to coordinate diverse service needs.

Recommendation: Support Developmental Disabilities Program efforts to reduce the 0208 DD Medicaid waiver waiting list, including processes to ensure Pre-ETS participants are on the waiting list.

Recommendation: Develop organizational performance measures focused on racial and cultural equity.

Recommendation: Work with partners to consider innovative, collaborative models of shared service delivery for rural and tribal regions. This may include cross-training, job sharing, or cross-agency service pathway development.

Recommendation: Increase advocacy for and provide more supportive services.

Recommendation: Analyze opportunities to better serve people with disabilities who identify as Hispanic/Latino, including hiring multi-lingual staff, having forms and online information in Spanish, and conducting increased outreach through partner organizations working with this population.

Recommendation: Identify youth who are in or have exited the foster system and communicate this information to colleges.

Recommendation: Increase awareness and understanding of VRBS and enhance relationships with partners, tribes, businesses, people with disabilities, and families.

Recommendations: Increase investment in cultural competency training for staff, consulting with partners about effective professional development options.

Recommendation: Build program capacity to serve the vocational needs of people with disabilities through increased hiring and retention of staff and CRPs.

VRBS INVESTMENTS AND OUTCOMES

This section examines the resources VRBS invests in supporting the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities, the outcomes of this investment, and whether any program gaps exist. In addition to using Montana VRBS administrative data to assess investments and outcomes, this section provides input on challenges and recommendations garnered from surveys, focus groups, and interviews with staff, CRPs, participants, and businesses.

VRBS STAFF AND AGENCY

VRBS STAFF AND AGENCY: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **Across the agency, there were 11 vacancies, including 8 for VRBS counselors or counselor supervisors.** The Billings office has the highest number of vacancies (3), but the Bozeman office has the highest proportion of vacancies (33% of positions are vacant). Data are as of September 20, 2023.
- **Over the past nine years, VRBS had the highest caseload in September 2016, falling to the lowest in March 2020.** The current caseload (as of October 2023) has rebounded since the March 2020 low, but it has yet to reach the high of September 2016.
- **VRBS staff cite high caseloads, too much paperwork/data entry, and high employee turnover as key challenges to providing services.** Three-quarters of staff respondents also identified pay incommensurate with educational requirements as an organizational challenge when providing services. Nearly half cited new or changing regulations as a barrier.

NUMBER OF STAFF AND COUNSELORS

As of September 20, 2023, Montana's Disability Employment and Transition Division had 95 filled staff positions and 11 vacancies (10%). Among the vacancies, eight (8) were for VRBS counselors or counselor supervisors (see Figure 60) and the remaining three (3) were for other staff positions (Figure 61). As shown in Figure 62, Billings currently has the greatest number of vacancies (3), but as a proportion of the total count of positions, the Bozeman office has the greatest burden of vacancies (2 of 6 positions are vacant, or 33%). Approximately 1 in 5 positions in Billings and Miles City are vacant, while 15% of positions are vacant in Great Falls and Helena. There are no vacancies in Havre, Kalispell, Missoula, or the central office.

BILLINGS, BOZEMAN, BUTTE & GREAT FALLS HAVE COUNSELOR VACANCIES

Figure 60. Count of filled and vacant counselors & counselor supervisor positions by office & bureau, 2023

Office	Vocational Rehabilitation		Blind and Low Vision Services		Pre-ETS		TOTAL		Total Counselor/ Counselor Supervisor Positions
	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	
Billings	3	2	1		1		5	2	7
Bozeman	1	2			1		2	2	4
Butte	2	1		1	0.5*		2.5	2	4.5
Great Falls	3	1		1	1		4	2	6
Havre	2				1		3		3
Helena	3				0.5*		3.5		3.5
Kalispell	4				1		5		5
Miles City	2				1		3		3
Missoula	9		1		1		11		11
Subtotal	29	6	2	2	8	0	40	8	47
TOTAL	35		4		8		49		

* One Pre-ETS specialist serves Helena and Butte, which is denoted in the table by 0.5 in each location to have totals sum appropriately; this denotation is not reflective of full-time equivalency (FTE) in each location.

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services, administrative data request, September 20, 2023

BILLINGS, HELENA & MILES CITY HAVE NON-COUNSELOR VACANCIES

Figure 61. Count of filled and vacant other staff positions by office and bureau, 2023

Office	Administration		Vocational Rehabilitation		Operations and Program Support		Blind and Low Vision Services		TOTAL		Total Other Staff Positions
	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	Filled	Vacant	
Billings			4				2	1	6	1	7
Bozeman			2						2		2
Butte			3				3		6		6
Great Falls			3				4		7		7
Havre			2						2		2
Helena			2	1					2	1	3
Kalispell			3				1		4		4
Miles City			1	1					1	1	2
Missoula			5				3		8		8
Central Office	5		2		8		3		18		18
Subtotal	5	0	27	2	8	0	16	1	56	3	59
TOTAL	4		29		8		17		59		

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services, administrative data request, September 20, 2023

10% OF DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AND TRANSITION DIVISION POSITIONS ARE VACANT STATEWIDE

Figure 62. Summary of vacant positions, total positions, and percent of positions that are vacant by office, 2023

	Vacant	Total Positions	Percentage of Total Positions that are Vacant
Billings	3	14	21%
Bozeman	2	6	33%
Butte	2	10.5*	19%
Great Falls	2	13	15%
Havre	0	5	0%
Helena	1	6.5*	15%
Kalispell	0	9	0%
Miles City	1	5	20%
Missoula	0	19	0%
Central Office	0	18	0%
TOTAL	11	106	10%

* One Pre-ETS specialist serves Helena and Butte, which is denoted in the table by 0.5 in each location to have totals sum appropriately; this denotation is not reflective of full-time equivalency (FTE) in each location.

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services, administrative data request, September 20, 2023

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS SERVED

TREND OVER TIME

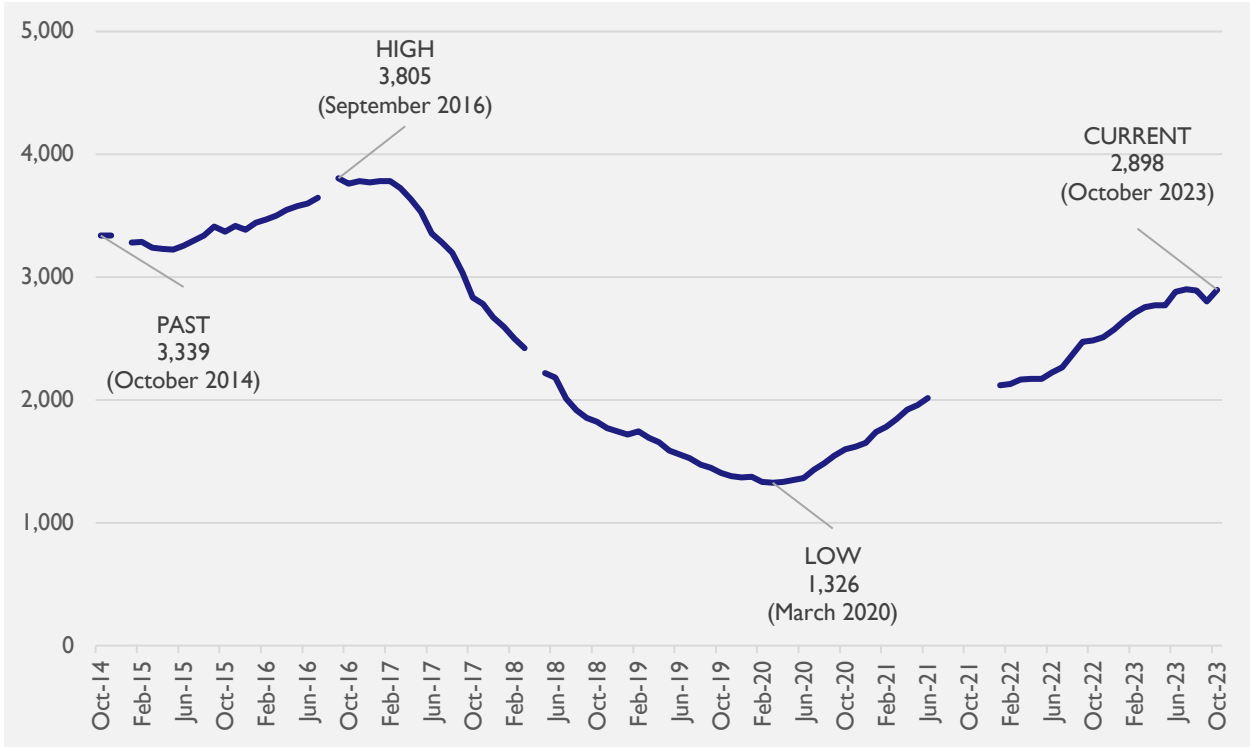
Figure 63 displays nine years of Montana VRBS caseload counts, from October 2014 through October 2023. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of participants served had been falling steadily. The participant count fell 65 percent from the high of 3,805 in September 2016 to the low of 1,326 participants in March of 2020, which corresponded with the start of the pandemic. Since March of 2020, the caseload has steadily increased, more than doubling (+119%) to the current level of 2,898 participants as of October 2023.

Among clients exiting services between March 2021 and March 2023, the average length that a participant received VRBS services was 2.5 years.¹⁰

¹⁰ Bloom Consulting analysis of Madison administrative data, Q2 2021 through Q1 2023 (exit date minus IPE date)

NUMBER OF VRBS PARTICIPANTS REBOUNDED 119% SINCE THE START OF THE PANDEMIC

Figure 63. Total number of participants, October 2014 – October 2023



Note: Breaks in the line indicate periods with no data.

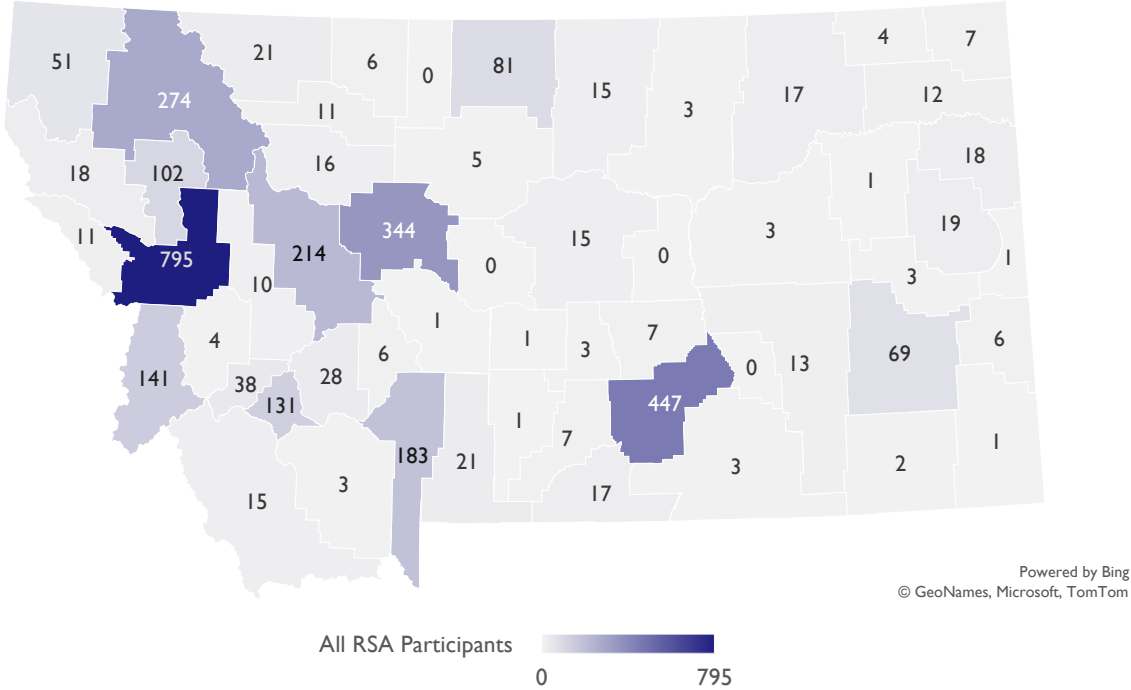
Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services, administrative caseload data, retrieved October 1, 2023

BY GEOGRAPHY

VRBS client distribution by county reflects the overall distribution of people with disabilities in the state (see Figure 4) and is also aligned with where VRBS staff are located (see Figure 60). Figure 64 below shows total client numbers served by county, and Figure 21 shows the percentage of people with disabilities served by county. In general, a higher number and percentage of people with disabilities are served in counties where VRBS staff are located (Cascade, Custer, Flathead, Gallatin, Hill, Lewis and Clark, Missoula, Silver Bow, and Yellowstone) or in adjacent counties in the cases of Lake, Ravalli, and Teton.

MISSOULA COUNTY HAS HIGHEST COUNT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES RECEIVING VRBS SERVICES

Figure 64. RSA participants in Madison system through March 31, 2023 by county



County	Clients	County	Clients	County	Clients	County	Clients
Beaverhead	1	Flathead	274	Madison	3	Roosevelt	12
Big Horn	1	Gallatin	183	Meagher	1	Rosebud	13
Blaine	1	Garfield	3	Mineral	11	Sanders	18
Broadwater	1	Glacier	21	Missoula	795	Sheridan	7
Carbon	1	Golden Valley	3	Musselshell	7	Silver Bow	131
Carter	1	Granite	4	Park	21	Stillwater	7
Cascade	1	Hill	81	Petroleum	0	Sweet Grass	1
Chouteau	1	Jefferson	28	Phillips	3	Teton	16
Custer	1	Judith Basin	0	Pondera	11	Toole	6
Daniels	1	Lake	102	Powder River	2	Treasure	0
Dawson	1	Lewis and Clark	214	Powell	10	Valley	17
Deer Lodge	1	Liberty	0	Prairie	3	Wheatland	1
Fallon	1	Lincoln	51	Ravalli	141	Wibaux	1
Fergus	1	McCone	1	Richland	18	Yellowstone	447

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services administrative data from Madison through Q1 2023 (RSA participants only); U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-Year Estimates, 2021, Table S1810

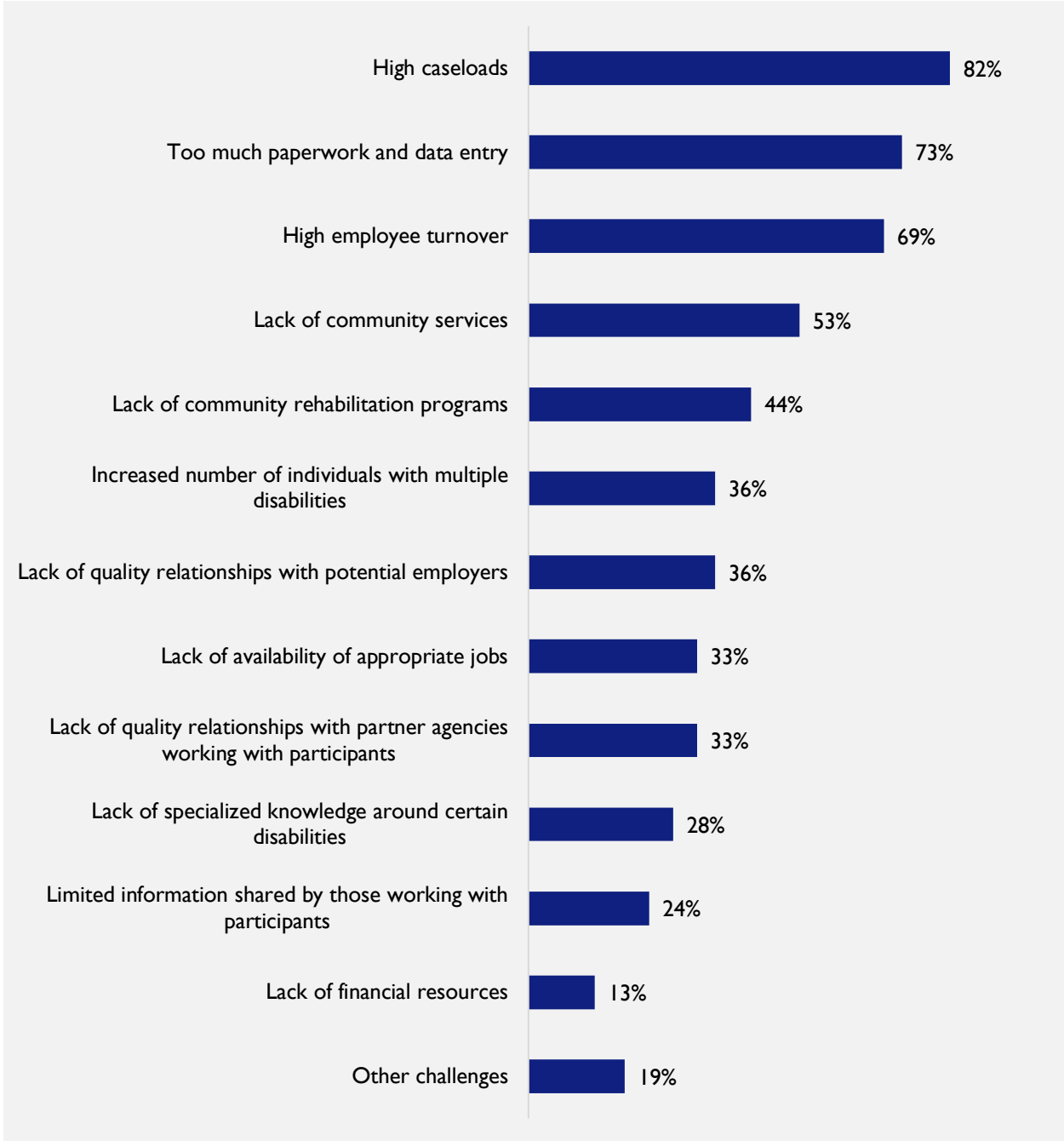
STAFFING AND AGENCY CAPACITY

VRBS staff were asked to provide input on the challenges they face when providing services, both organizational and otherwise, and to provide recommendations for changes that would ameliorate these challenges. When asked what posed challenges to their ability to provide

vocational rehabilitation services, “high caseloads” was selected by the 82 percent of staff respondents, followed by “too much paperwork/data entry” (73%) and “high employee turnover” (69%). More than half of respondents (53%) also cited “lack of community services.”

HIGH CASELOADS MOST CITED AS SERVICE CHALLENGE BY STAFF

Figure 65. Percent of VRBS staff respondents identifying challenges to providing vocational rehabilitation services, by challenge



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

VACANCIES AND TURNOVER: Stakeholders provided significant feedback related to staff vacancies and turnover in focus groups and interviews. Stakeholders shared that many vacancies remain open for long periods of time (more than a year), particularly for specialty positions like orientation and mobility specialists. Staff, partners, and clients reflected on the universal negative impacts created by vacancies and turnover, including higher caseloads for staff, delays in receiving services for clients, and communication lapses impacting partners and clients.

“We have a lot of staff vacancies. We are not even receiving applications for them. That is an unmet need not only for the state as an employer but for all people who are receiving or hope to receive services from VRBS. When there is a vacancy, it can go unfilled for a while.” – staff focus group

“When I started services, I was with (a counselor), and she left about a month later and then I didn’t have a counselor for a few months. There wasn’t much communication. I was in limbo.” – client focus group

“Staff turnover has slowed my progress in training and toward achieving my employment goals because of delays in receiving accommodations.” – client focus group

“The Great Falls office had a mass exodus of VRBS staff. We invited them all to a staff meeting a month ago and discussed good referral processes across offices. But they don’t have any staff. – WIOA partners focus group

“Capacity issues mean we end up addressing crises rather than working proactively.” – DDP interview

CASELOADS: Figure 63 shows the increasing number of participants over the past few years. Many current VRBS staff members have only worked at the agency during this period of increasing participant counts and caseloads. Staff expressed significant stress from the increasing caseloads. VRBS counselors shared that they felt frustrated because they are not able to provide the level of counseling and support that clients need.

“It’s becoming quantity over quality – I can’t do assessments and teach the way I want to help our clients.” – staff focus group

“My position has changed radically in the last few years... And the number of clients has gone up dramatically per counselor and overall. We used to have 7 counselors, now we are down to 3 or 4 and that is not as many as we need. This feeds into the timeliness of clients getting services. It is difficult to stay on top of it.” – staff focus group

“We are splitting people’s caseloads as they leave VRBS. If you are working across a lot of regions, you don’t know the resources well because you don’t live and work there. We are putting Band-Aids on.” – staff focus group

Staff reflected on the impact of order of selection going away.

“It felt like flood gates opened up (when order of selection went away). We don’t have the capacity to serve these people. I am in an area where there just aren’t services. Without order of selection, clients are no longer on a wait list with us, but may as well be on one because they are on one with the provider.” – staff focus group

This increase in client caseloads for staff has been coupled with two changes: (1) updated expectations that counselors meet clients every 90 days versus up to every six months for clients with lower needs and (2) a new data system, which requires an adjustment for everyone to use efficiently.

“VR counselors are required to meet with 15 clients a week. This doesn’t give them time to do much more than whip through the paperwork they are required to do and move on to the next client. This requirement makes it hard for them to really do their job... We can’t be thorough and really get to know that client so that they aren’t just a name on a file.” – staff focus group

PAPERWORK AND DATA: Staff members cited challenges with increasing paperwork/data collection and entry. Staff believe that the additional data collection and entry has reduced their capacity to best serve their clients and collaborate with partners.

“I’m not sure what the cause of the increase in paperwork is about. Some of it is corrective action, some is RSA, some is our system. The pendulum has swung from not a lot to a ton. We need to find a balance. Some of the time-saving mechanisms are not really saving time. A lot of the fundamental steps haven’t changed – application, eligibility, plan, and goals – but all the steps require more time.” – staff focus group

“The amount of detail that has to go into the case management system and the number of clients is really large. Everyone is feeling a pinch on that and trying to get it done on time.” – staff focus group

“The client-to-paperwork ratio is lopsided. We spend more time documenting than with clients. What took a minute now takes three minutes.” – staff focus group

“We are very technocratic in our duties. I feel like a data input specialist versus working with people. I am more worried about getting things entered. This is the focus from central office. It has become so cumbersome with data collection.” – staff focus group

Staff and partners specifically reflected on inefficiencies with the authorizations process.

“It’s really annoying how we do our authorizations. We have to send an authorization for every little thing. We and CRPs are managing five authorizations for one person.”
– staff focus group

Partners and staff struggled to effectively coordinate shared cases/clients because of using different data systems and partners having limited access to Madison. Partners described putting authorizations into three separate systems for the same client and struggling to manage a shared client budget across programs. Coordinating across data systems and sharing information across partners will be covered more thoroughly in the partner section below.

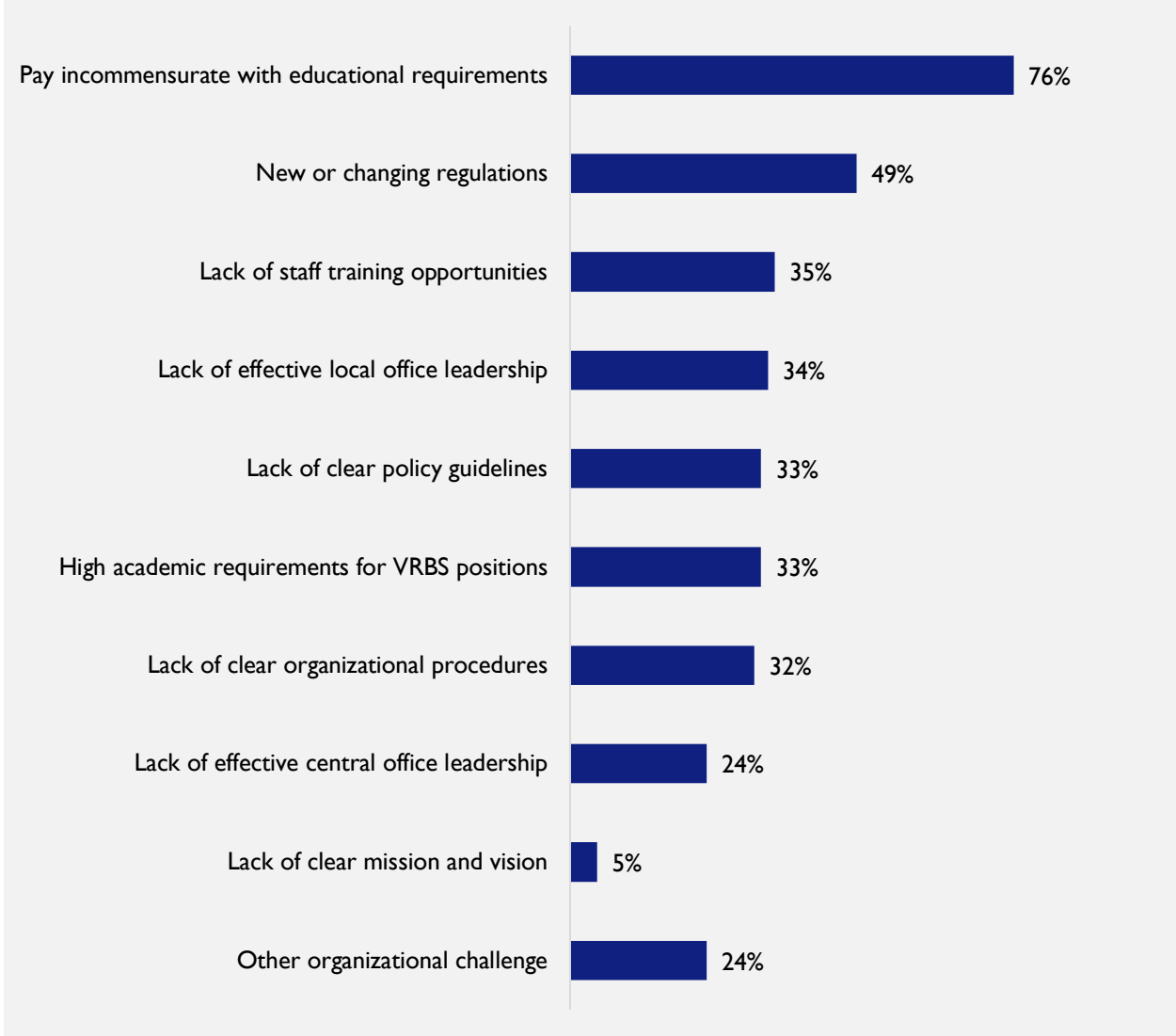
STAFF REPORTED ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Three-quarters of staff respondents (76%) identified pay incommensurate with educational requirements as an organizational challenge when providing services. Nearly half (49%) cited new or changing regulations as a barrier. Open-ended comments also provided staff feedback on VRBS administration and management, including lack of leadership support for front line staff mental health and work/life balance, insufficient communication with supervisors, inconsistent expectations between offices, and lack of upward mobility or living wage positions. Multiple respondents also advocated for less rigorous academic requirements to open jobs up to more interested individuals.

More than one-third of staff respondents (35%) identified the lack of training opportunities as an organizational challenge to serving clients. In open-ended comments, staff identified a need for more systematic training and onboarding of new staff, in-house training for tasks that are currently contracted, and the opportunity for organized peer mentorship to share learnings and supplement counselor supervision.

76% OF STAFF IDENTIFY PAY INCOMMENSURATE WITH EDUCATIONAL REQUIREMENTS AS A CHALLENGE

Figure 66. Percent of VRBS staff respondents identifying organizational challenges to providing vocational rehabilitation services, by challenge



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

Turnover and staff vacancy issues are related to many of the organizational challenges from the figure above. Pay, education requirements, and organizational understanding and reputation are three important organizational issues.

PAY: Stakeholders universally agreed that the pay for VRBS staff is not enough. Many staff members said their salaries do not reflect their high education requirements. Prospective staff can earn more than with VRBS in other markets, including the VA and school districts. There is also a private market for vocational services with higher pay.

“We have other agencies working for DPHHS that don’t have the same requirements for education that pay more than us. We are required to have a master’s degree. People in Adult Protective Services are not required to have master’s degrees, but they get paid more. Over in OPA (Office of Public Assistance), they also don’t require master’s degree, but they get paid more than we do. There is inequality within the state. We would have more highly trained counselors who would stay longer if the pay were a little better. And it’s not just counselors; it’s support staff, too. The last two raises given out – one to counselors, one to supervisors – didn’t go to everyone. The support staff didn’t get raises. Within VRBS there is inequity, let alone against other agencies.” – staff focus group

REGULATIONS: Staff discussed the wide range of clients they serve, who range from very low intensity needs to high-touch/high-needs, and how VRBS requirements to see clients every quarter make it harder for them to create time and space to right-size their client interaction and support.

“I think counselors should have the ability to schedule the number of appointments that they want. When there is a set amount, it makes it really difficult. Counselors know what they need to do.” – staff focus group

EDUCATION: VRBS counselors are specialized positions requiring advanced degrees and certifications. Counselors have master’s degrees either in rehabilitation counseling or a related field. New hires with a related master’s degree obtain a Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) certification to provide additional education aligned with the job requirements. Individuals can be hired without a master’s degree or with an unrelated master’s, and VRBS will pay for a person’s education to obtain a rehabilitation counseling master’s, allowing the person to be eligible to sit for the CRC certificate. Staff are expected to complete additional education outside of work hours, which was cited as a challenge.

RSA lifted the CRC requirement, and other states have modified certification requirements, allowing for tiered counselor competencies. Montana has retained the holistic CRC certification requirement to maintain the high level of standards for VRBS counselors.

“Education is important. I’m not saying we don’t need our master’s degrees; we just need to be paid more.” – staff focus group

“You also have to go to school, get masters, sit for CRC exam on top of what you do... I don’t know where you get enough hours in the day to study and work.” – staff focus group

“It says in our application you must have a master’s. This isn’t correct. You just have to be willing to get a master’s. This hurts recruitment. The application doesn’t tell

applicants about the RSA scholarship that can help pay for schooling.” – staff focus group

TRAINING: Once staff are hired, they must complete a training program, which requires trainees to receive supervision and monitoring while they provide services to clients. Many staff shared that they did not feel sufficiently trained to do their jobs well or that they lack the capacity to appropriately onboard new colleagues.

“Usually we hire O&M (orientation and mobility) and VRT (vision rehabilitation therapist) without degrees. It takes three to four years to grow an O&M or VRT, get them to be able to work on their own. We have to work alongside them. They can’t be instructing by themselves, so it is a lot of work on us, when we have the pay rate we have.” – staff focus group

“We used to have standards to keep up, but we don’t have time. Some of the core training is what’s lacking. We hire people because we need them – they have heart, but not the background, training, or knowledge – so we try to train, but there are gaps. And maybe it’s time: we don’t have time to fully onboard to understand the complexity of what we do.” – staff focus group

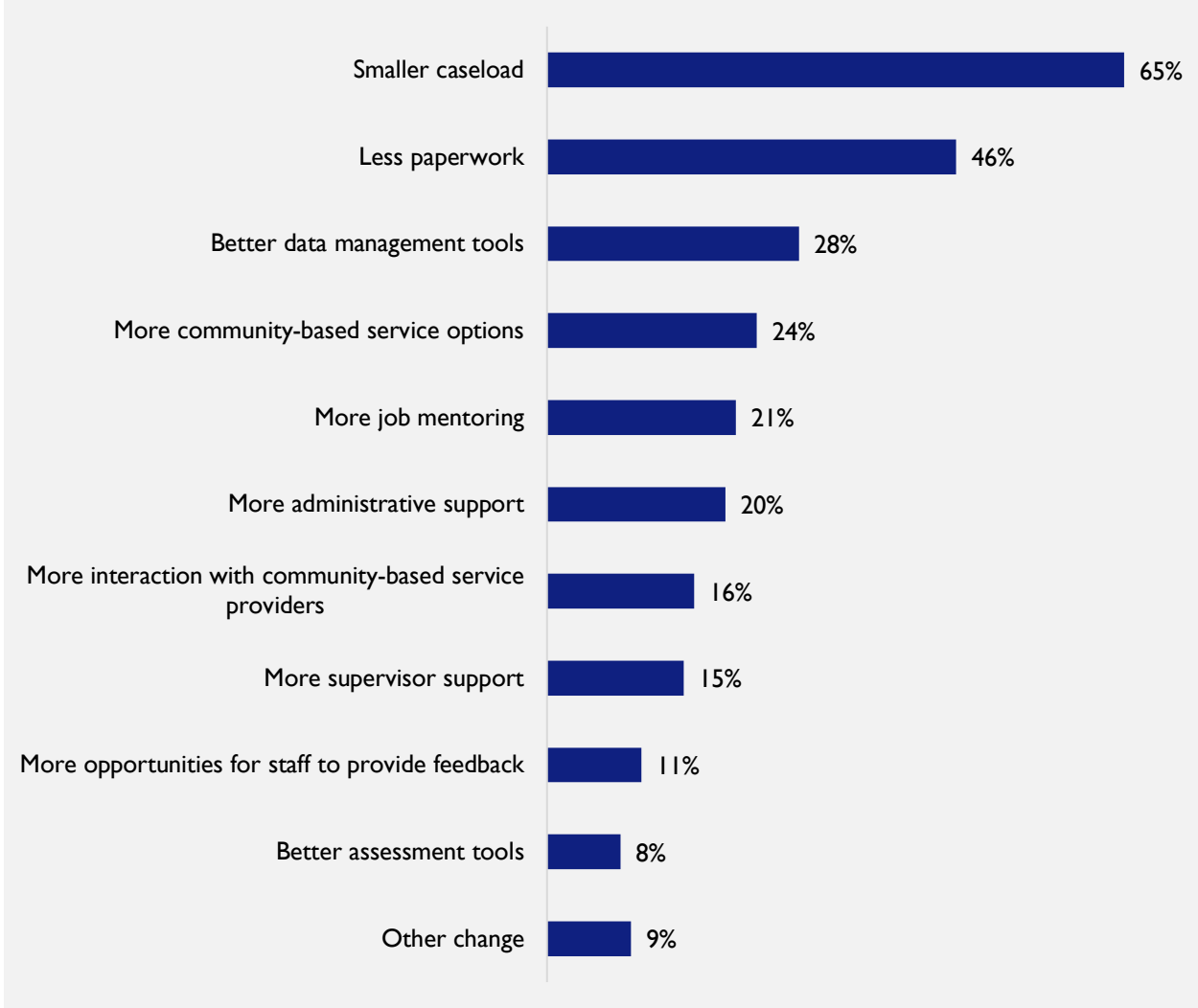
“We just hired someone new. I hope she can catch on herself because we don’t really have anyone to train her. It’s rough. It’s intimidating to come into this office.” – staff focus group

STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE SERVICE DELIVERY

When asked for the top three changes that would enable VRBS staff to better support vocational rehabilitation clients, smaller caseloads (65%) and less paperwork (46%) were identified by the greatest share of respondents. Between one-fifth and a quarter of respondents also selected better data management tools (28%), more community-based service options (24%), more job mentoring (21%), and more administrative support (20%).

STAFF REPORT THEY COULD BETTER SUPPORT CLIENTS IF THEY HAD SMALLER CASELOADS AND LESS PAPERWORK

Figure 67. Percent of VRBS staff respondents identifying top three changes that would enable VRBS staff to better support VRBS clients



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

Focus group and interview participants agreed with many of these recommendations. Below are staff and VRBS organizational recommendations, pulling from multiple sources.

CULTURE: Staff discussed a desire for a stronger sense of belonging.

“People always do their job better if they feel connected and in a community.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Continue to work to develop a sense of community across VRBS.

RECRUITING: VRBS has the opportunity to enhance its pipeline development through enhanced recruiting approaches.

Recommendation: Enhance relationships with universities that have counseling programs, particularly those offering rehabilitation counseling degrees. Ensure that schools have an awareness of VRBS and its career opportunities and accurate information about education requirements.

Recommendation: Be clear in recruiting materials that VRBS will help pay people to go to school to meet the education requirements; new hires do not need to have a rehabilitation counseling master’s degree to be hired.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING: VRBS can consider approaches to improving support for staff to obtain education and training aligned with the position requirements and the pay.

Recommendation: Allow staff to complete education and training requirements within or as a part of the work day.

Recommendation: Analyze the option of developing or enhancing a career ladder with multiple levels of counselors based on education and training. Tiers could be based on obtaining a master’s degree, a rehabilitation counseling master’s degree, a CRC certification, and completing other professional development, with increased pay associated with obtaining higher tiers.

Recommendation: Refine the training system to increase investment in staff. As a part of this, consider implementing a mentoring program for new staff to share learnings and supplement supervision capacity.

COMPENSATION: Pay needs to continue to increase to be competitive with other jobs.

Recommendation: Continue to increase compensation across VRBS staffing positions to align with other markets and 2022 rate studies.

CASELOADS: Hiring and retaining staff are important steps to reduce caseloads.

Recommendation: Analyze caseload balancing approaches, including balancing the priority level/intensity needs of clients and the scope of work required for counselors based on the availability of contracted, technician, and specialized resources.

SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES: Staff and partners are looking for opportunities to make processes and data systems more efficient.

Recommendation: Continue to improve policies and procedures to help staff effectively and efficiently do their work, with a focus on streamlining and removing policies and procedures as much as possible. VRBS may want to consider business process redesign or value stream improvement process to identify opportunities for improvement.

Recommendation: Review Madison system functionality and requirements to see where Montana has added anything to federal RSA requirements. Ease or remove state-imposed requirements.

Recommendation: Allow for increased access to case notes so VRBS staff can make corrections without needing a supervisor to provide access.

Recommendation: Continue to improve the authorization process, looking for ways to reduce paperwork, including combining Pre-ETS and VRBS authorizations for shared clients.

Recommendation: Work with partners to enhance Madison system to support shared service delivery and coordination through Madison, including centralized/consolidated case notes, authorized hours, utilization of authorized hours, and invoicing.

Recommendation: Analyze opportunities for online service options for clients.

COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDERS (CRPS)

CRPS: SUMMARY FINDINGS

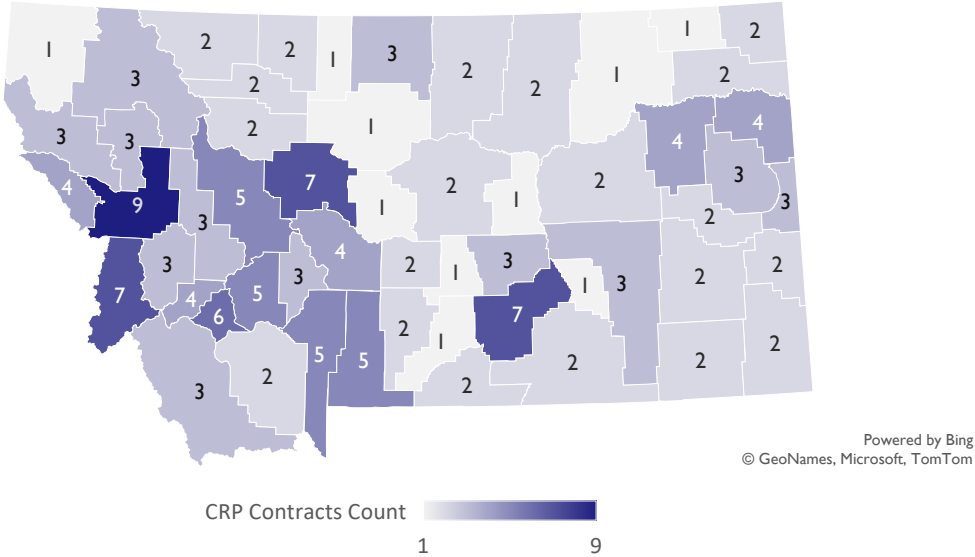
- **All counties have at least one CRP serving clients in that county.** Missoula County has nine CRP contracts serving the county, the highest number among counties. Over one in three counties have two contracts (36%), and about one in five have three contracts (21%) or one contract (18%).
- **Staff and CRP respondents consider CRPs successful in helping individuals get and keep jobs.** The vast majority of VRBS staff and CRP respondents agreed or strongly agreed that CRPs help people get and keep jobs, and that CRPs are knowledgeable about providing appropriate services for VRBS clients. Most respondents in both groups also noted that there are an inadequate number of CRPs to meet the needs of people with disabilities seeking employment, and that CRP agencies have inconsistent staff and struggle with staff turnover.
- **CRPs face similar caseload challenges.** Like VRBS staff respondents, the majority of CRP respondents identified high caseloads as a challenge to providing vocational rehabilitation services. Establishing additional CRP providers would support improved client access and outcomes.
- **VRBS clients report positive experiences with job coaches.** Clients considered job coaches to be knowledgeable, able to see them quickly, and respectful of their culture and background.

CRP CONTRACTS

As of September 20, 2023, Montana VRBS had 37 active CRP contracts with providers across the state serving all 56 counties. The counties with the highest counts of CRP contracts providing service in the county were Missoula (9 contracts), Cascade (7), Ravalli (7), and Yellowstone (7). As shown in Figure 69, very few staff and CRPs feel that there are enough CRPs to meet client needs.

MISSOULA COUNTY HAS HIGHEST COUNT OF CRP CONTRACTS

Figure 68. Count of CRP contracts serving each county in Montana



County	Count	County	Count	County	Count	County	Count
Beaverhead	3	Flathead	3	Madison	2	Roosevelt	2
Big Horn	2	Gallatin	5	Meagher	4	Rosebud	3
Blaine	2	Garfield	2	Mineral	4	Sanders	3
Broadwater	3	Glacier	2	Missoula	9	Sheridan	2
Carbon	2	Golden Valley	1	Musselshell	3	Silver Bow	6
Carter	2	Granite	3	Park	5	Stillwater	1
Cascade	7	Hill	3	Petroleum	1	Sweet Grass	2
Chouteau	1	Jefferson	5	Phillips	2	Teton	2
Custer	2	Judith Basin	1	Pondera	2	Toole	2
Daniels	1	Lake	3	Powder River	2	Treasure	1
Dawson	3	Lewis and Clark	5	Powell	3	Valley	1
Deer Lodge	4	Liberty	1	Prairie	2	Wheatland	2
Fallon	2	Lincoln	1	Ravalli	7	Wibaux	3
Fergus	2	McCone	4	Richland	4	Yellowstone	7

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services staff compilation and analysis of CRP contract data as of September 20, 2023

CRP AND VRBS STAFF INPUT

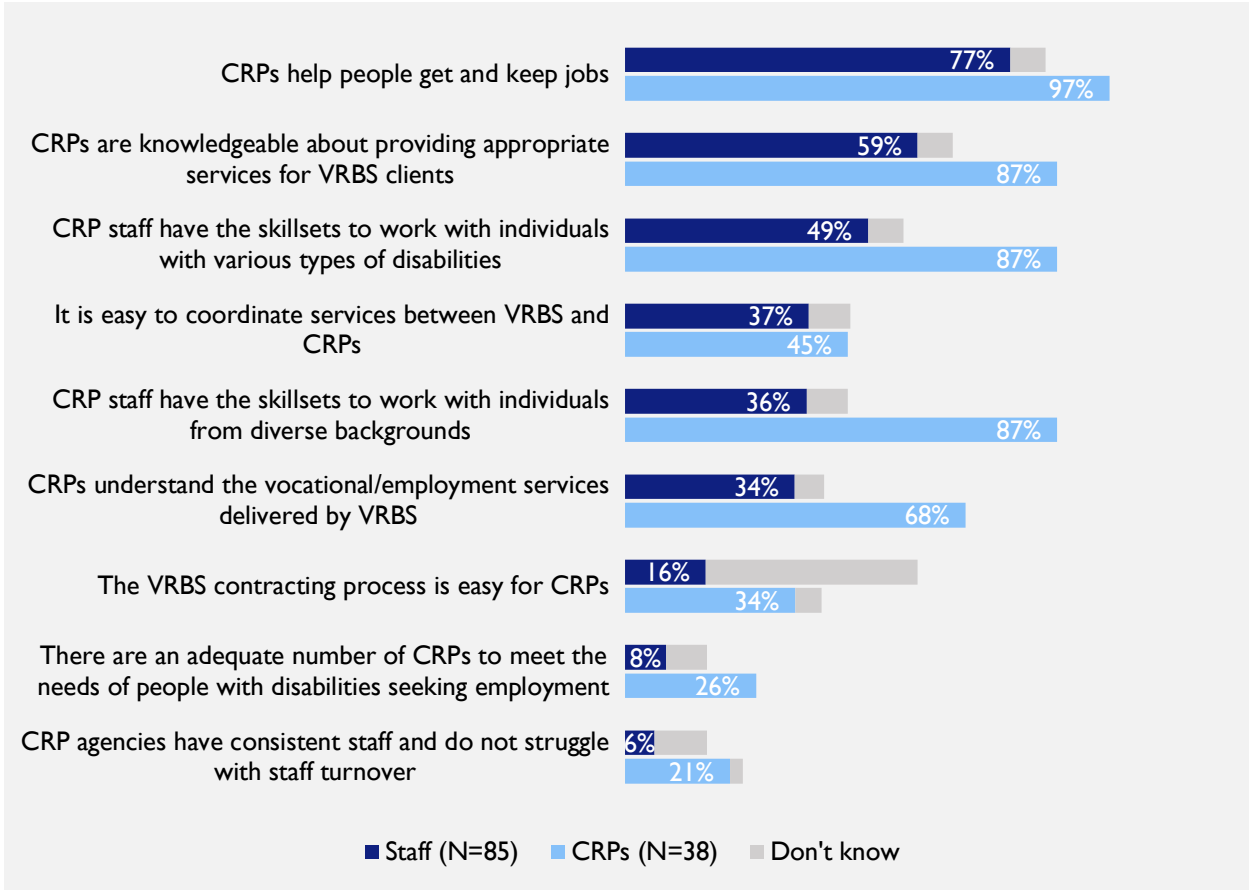
CRPs were asked to provide input on their experience as a CRP and VRBS staff were asked to share their experience working with CRPs. The vast majority of VRBS staff and CRP respondents agreed or strongly agreed that CRPs help people get and keep jobs, and that CRPs are knowledgeable about providing appropriate services for VRBS clients. Most respondents in both groups noted that there are an inadequate number of CRPs to meet the needs of people with disabilities seeking employment, and that CRP agencies have inconsistent staff and struggle

with staff turnover. As shown above in Figure 68, 75 percent of counties have three or fewer CRP contracts serving VRBS clients in those counties. Both staff and CRPs also disagreed that it is easy to coordinate services between VRBS and CRPs and disagreed that the VRBS contracting process is easy for CRPs.

Perspectives between staff and CRP respondents varied somewhat on other measures. Almost half (49%) of staff respondents felt that CRP staff have the skillsets to work with individuals with various types of disabilities, compared to 87 percent of CRP respondents. Thirty-six percent of staff agreed or strongly agreed that CRP staff have the skillsets to work with individuals from diverse backgrounds, compared to 87 percent of CRP respondents, and one-third (34%) of staff agreed or strongly agreed that CRPs understand the vocational services delivered by VRBS, compared to two-thirds (68%) of CRP respondents.

STAFF AND CRP RESPONDENTS AGREE THAT CRPS HELP PEOPLE GET AND KEEP JOBS

Figure 69. Percent of VRBS staff and CRP respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements regarding working with or as a CRP



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP Survey, 2023

CRP CAPACITY: Focus group attendees and interviewees consistently discussed the lack of CRPs as problematic for client service delivery. Opening up the order of selection increased the number of VRBS clients and the caseloads of CRPs and staff supporting them. When there are not enough CRPs to serve clients or cover a region, VRBS counselors fill this role. This creates an inconsistent delegation of responsibilities for VRBS staff across the state, and even within one regional office.

“We don’t have enough human beings – nowhere near enough human beings. In the Butte office, we only have one CRP, which only covers part of their area. Counselors are filling in the gap. This is frustrating for the clients; they are delayed in getting job coaches or other services.” – VRBS staff focus group

Recommendation: Establish additional CRP providers to enhance service-delivery capacity.

Recommendation: Consider developing a self-direction services option to increase capacity of CRPs. This could be modeled after self-direction in other Montana Medicaid waiver and state plan services.

Some CRPs are also contracted to provide services to students participating in Pre-ETS services. Many of these Pre-ETS CRPs are less likely to take youth referrals because of the lower rate paid for serving this population (\$15/hour less than paid for VRBS services) and because of the inconsistencies associated with young people (e.g., high no-show rate), making it hard to estimate the workload.

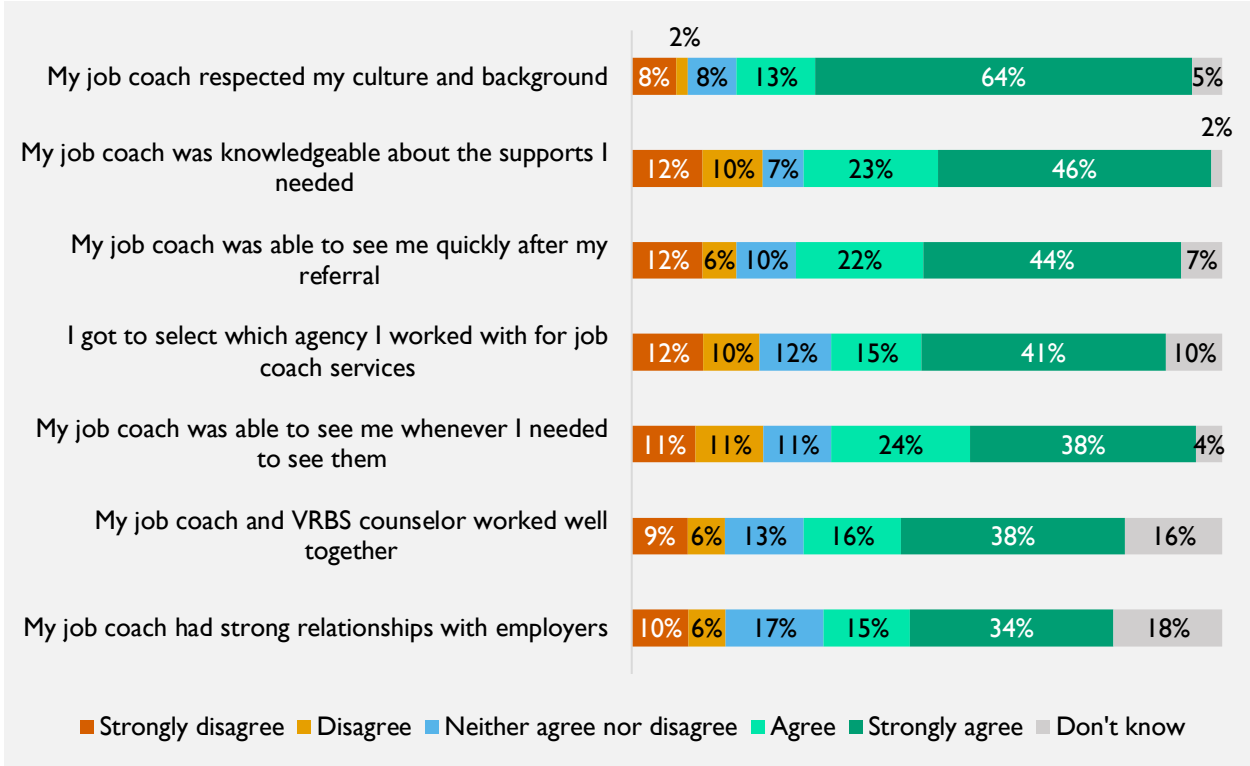
Recommendation: Reconsider the contracting approach for Pre-ETS services outside of schools. This may include a focus on contracting with youth-focused agencies and/or considering a deliverable-based payment approach versus using an hourly reimbursement.

CLIENT INPUT ON WORKING WITH JOB COACHES

VRBS clients report positive experiences with job coaches. Roughly one-third (32%) of clients reported using services from a job coach. Among those clients, 59 percent said that their job coach helped them to get or keep a job (not shown in figure). Clients were generally satisfied with their services from job coaches, with 77 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that their job coach respected their culture and background, 69 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that their job coach was knowledgeable about the supports they needed, and 66 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing that their job coach was able to see them quickly after their referral. Clients in focus groups who were able to use CRP services agreed with this positive feedback.

VRBS CLIENTS REPORT POSITIVE EXPERIENCES WITH JOB COACHES

Figure 70. Percent of VRBS clients by agreement with statement about job coach services (N=158)



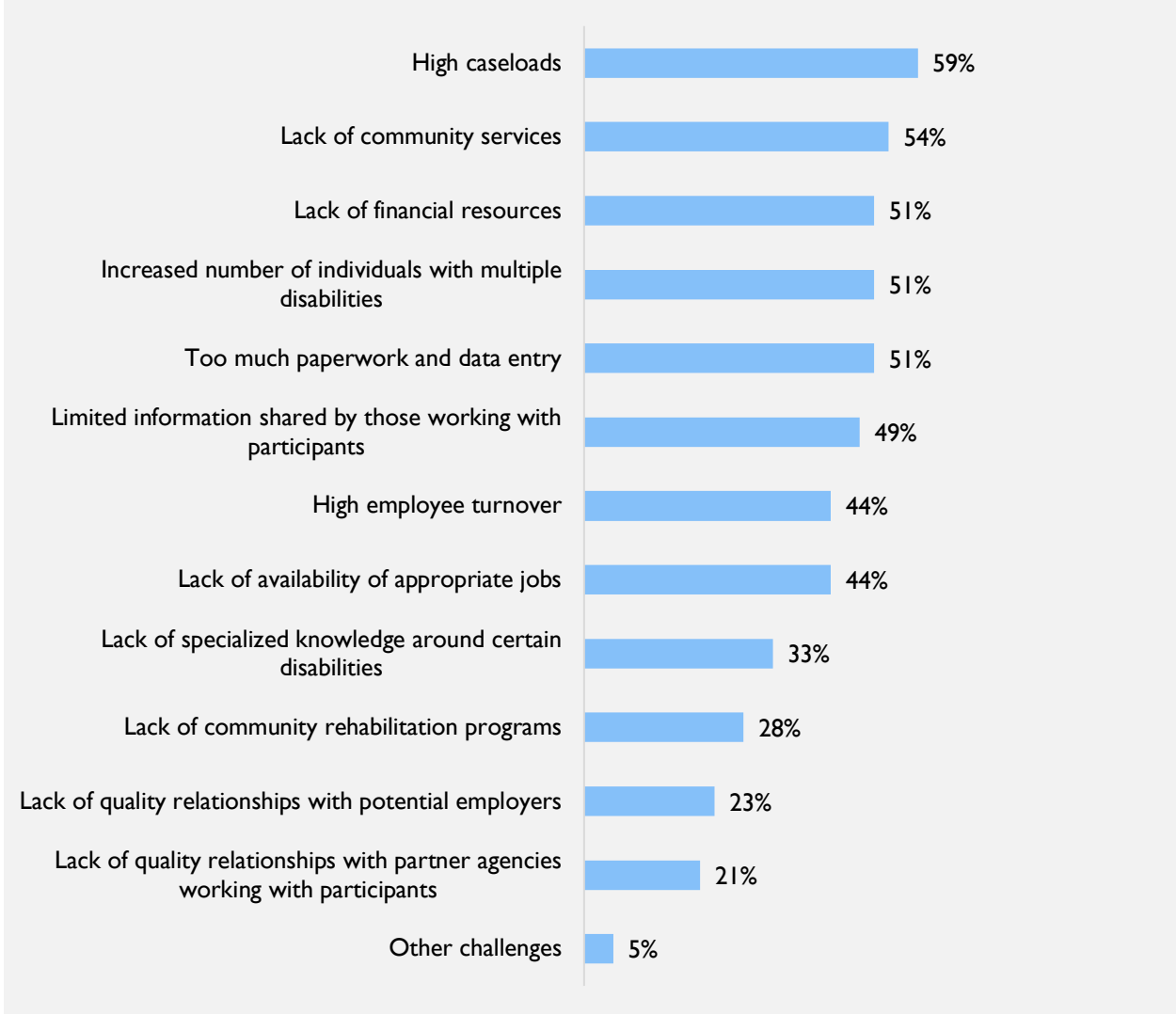
Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

CRP INPUT ON CHALLENGES

Like VRBS staff respondents, CRP respondents reported high caseloads as the most commonly endorsed challenge (59%) to providing vocational rehabilitation services. More than half of CRP respondents also identified lack of community services (54%), lack of financial resources, the increased number of individuals with multiple disabilities, and too much paperwork and data entry as challenges to service provision (51% each).

CRP RESPONDENTS CITE HIGH CASELOAD AS A CHALLENGE TO VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES

Figure 71. Percent of CRP respondents who identified challenges to providing vocational rehabilitation services (N=39)



Source: Montana VRBS CRP Survey, 2023

COLLABORATION: CRP respondents were asked how collaboration between CRPs and VRBS could be improved. Some said they would like to increase the sense of shared ownership for cases and their success with VRBS staff. Some requested more regular meetings (e.g., monthly) between VRBS counselors and CRP staff, with CRPs reimbursed for meeting participation. Others wanted improved frequency and quality of communication from VRBS counselors to CRPs with clarity around service requests, appropriate referrals, and needed information. Joint trainings with CRPs and VRBS counselors were also suggested as a way to increase collaboration.

Recommendation: Analyze opportunities to improve communication and collaboration with CRPs, including regular case review meetings, improved referral processes, data sharing through Madison, and joint trainings.

COMPENSATION: As the cost of living has rapidly increased throughout Montana, rates struggle to keep up. CRPs and VRBS staff both felt that CRP rates needed to increase to retain and ideally expand CRP capacity.

Recommendation: Continue to increase CRP rates.

DATA SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES: Many of the issues and recommendations included in the VRBS staff section above apply to and would benefit CRPs, specifically regarding authorizations, case notes, and invoicing. CRPs would also like streamlined billing requirements.

Recommendation: Work with partners to enhance Madison system to support shared service delivery and coordination through Madison, including centralized/consolidated case notes, authorized hours, utilization of authorized hours, and invoicing.

PRE-ETS

PRE-ETS: SUMMARY FINDINGS

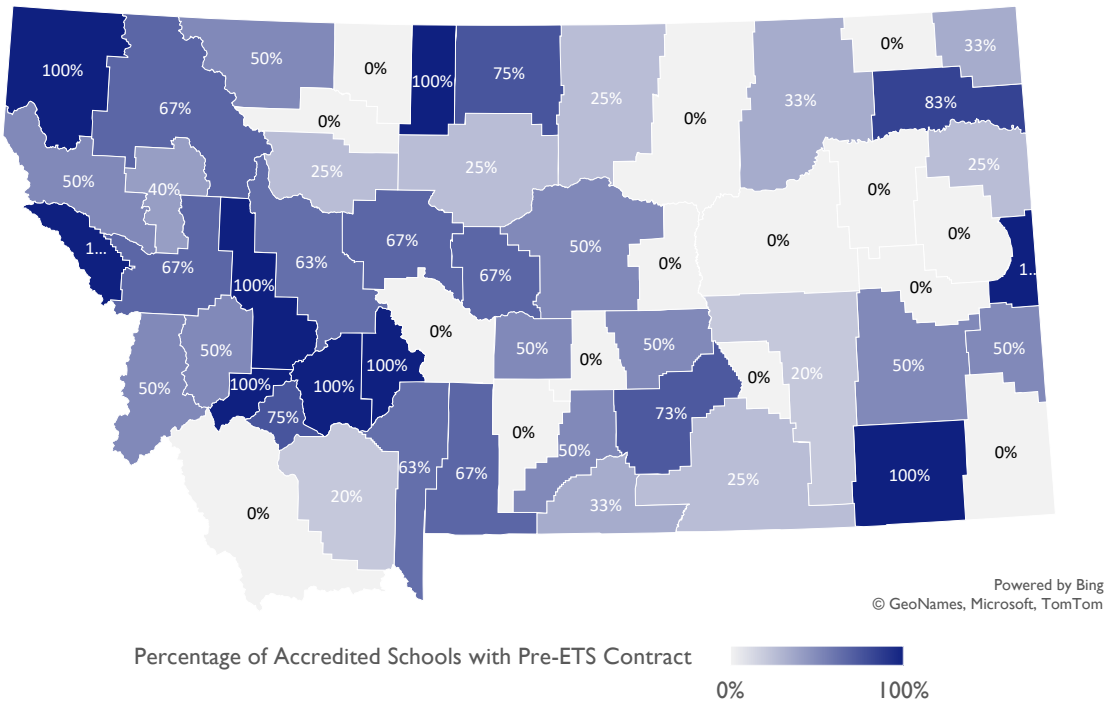
- **Nearly half (49%) of Montana’s accredited high schools have a Pre-ETS contract.** VRBS has a total of 76 Pre-ETS school contracts in 73 percent of counties and 17 Pre-ETS provider contracts. In the context of locally controlled school districts, high school engagement is based on relationships with school administrators and special education teachers.
- **Students with disabilities have inconsistent access to vocational services** because of this limited, but growing number of school contracts, and inconsistencies across school’s capacity to implement Pre-ETS services.
- **Students with disabilities are less served in the summer and after school.** Pre-ETS services are primarily provided by schools, with limited contractor engagement to supplement special education capacity. Students with disabilities often don’t receive vocational services in the summer or after school unless they are enrolled in VRBS.

SCHOOLS WITH PRE-ETS CONTRACTS

In the period between October 1, 2022 and September 30, 2023, VRBS had 17 active Pre-ETS provider contracts and 76 active Pre-ETS school contracts. These 93 contracts reach approximately half (49%) of Montana’s 191 accredited high schools. The map in Figure 72 provides the distribution of these schools across the state. About three-quarters (73%) of Montana counties have at least one school with a Pre-ETS contract.

73% OF COUNTIES HAVE A SCHOOL WITH A PRE-ETS CONTRACT

Figure 72. Percentage of accredited Montana high schools in each county with Pre-ETS contract



County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent	County	Percent
Beaverhead	0%	Flathead	67%	Madison	20%	Roosevelt	83%
Big Horn	25%	Gallatin	63%	Meagher	0%	Rosebud	20%
Blaine	25%	Garfield	0%	Mineral	100%	Sanders	50%
Broadwater	100%	Glacier	50%	Missoula	67%	Sheridan	33%
Carbon	33%	Golden Valley	0%	Musselshell	50%	Silver Bow	75%
Carter	0%	Granite	50%	Park	67%	Stillwater	50%
Cascade	67%	Hill	75%	Petroleum	0%	Sweet Grass	0%
Chouteau	25%	Jefferson	100%	Phillips	0%	Teton	25%
Custer	50%	Judith Basin	67%	Pondera	0%	Toole	0%
Daniels	0%	Lake	40%	Powder River	100%	Treasure	0%
Dawson	0%	Lewis and Clark	63%	Powell	100%	Valley	33%
Deer Lodge	100%	Liberty	100%	Prairie	0%	Wheatland	50%
Fallon	50%	Lincoln	100%	Ravalli	50%	Wibaux	100%
Fergus	50%	McCone	0%	Richland	25%	Yellowstone	73%

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services staff compilation and analysis of Pre-ETS contract data, October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023

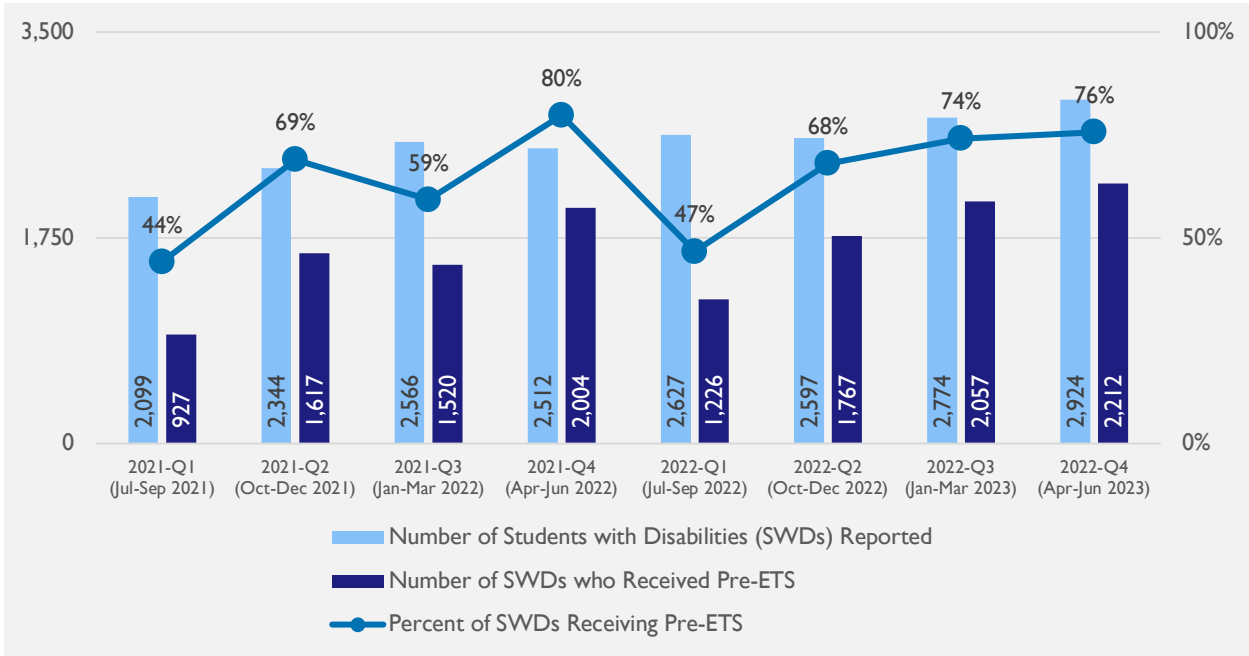
PRE-ETS STUDENTS

In the two-year period between July 2021 and June 2023, the number of students with disabilities reported and the number and percentage receiving pre-ETS has increased. An analysis of fourth quarter data in 2022 (which captures April through June, when students are

graduating) shows an increase of 16 percent in the number of students with disabilities reported between quarter four of 2021 and quarter four of 2022, and an increase of 10 percent in the number of students with disabilities who received pre-ETS. The percent of students with disabilities receiving pre-ETS fell slightly from 80 percent in quarter four of 2021 to 76 percent in quarter four of 2022 (Figure 73).

GROWING NUMBER OF STUDENTS RECEIVING PRE-ETS

Figure 73. Students with disabilities (SWD) reported and the number and percent of SWD receiving Pre-ETS, program year 2021 quarter 1 (July-September 2021) – program year 2022 quarter 4 (April-June 2023)



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

PRE-ETS SPECIALISTS: There are eight Pre-ETS specialists, as shown in Figure 60, who cover the entire state, with most traveling across large geographic areas to develop and maintain relationships with contracted high schools. Most staff also maintain a caseload for students who receive VRBS services in addition to Pre-ETS, with a cap of 50 clients. Pre-ETS specialists, like VRBS staff in general, express a sense of being overwhelmed and unable to complete their responsibilities successfully.

“I cover eight counties and over 30 schools. I am not able to get all of my duties done in my large geographic area of coverage. I don’t have a designated support staff or clerical person – I share with VR – so notes and uploads fall to the wayside. I have 35-40 cases; I don’t have consistent meetings, I catch them at school. It’s such a push to

work with the school staff and faculty to build their contracts with them.” – staff focus group

Like VRBS staff, many Pre-ETS focus group participants cited the large amount of paperwork at the expense of client-facing work.

“Everyone is so busy doing paperwork, so there is less pre-employment work done that would actually assist.” – staff focus group

“The paperwork takes too much time for all of us.” – staff focus group

HIGH SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND CAPACITY: Schools with Pre-ETS contracts generally integrate Pre-ETS services with special education programming. Figure 72 shows the percentage of schools in each county with Pre-ETS contracts. There is no apparent pattern in terms of urban or rural coverage or alignment with Pre-ETS specialist office locations. Pre-ETS specialists reflected on the variable capacity of schools to serve students with disabilities in general and to take on Pre-ETS programming on top of special education responsibilities.

“Schools are understaffed. Teachers aren’t seeing the funding – it’s just increasing their caseloads. Adding positions is a big job for schools – are they tenure or not, and then what if we cut contracts. The best way for schools to run Pre-ETS is to hire someone to manage it. If they don’t, it’s up to the teachers to run Pre-ETS – teachers are already understaffed and overwhelmed. It’s more forms, more reporting, more work.” – staff focus group

“We’re so rural, it’s hard to get teachers want to do anything extra – it’s hit or miss. I have one SPED teacher who is amazing; she created her own summer program. Another one I can’t even get to sign up students for the services. I’ve gone and engaged, and she refuses to do anything.” – staff focus group

Pre-ETS specialists talked a lot about the importance of relationships with school administrators and special education teachers, teacher willingness to engage in work outside of the classroom, and the importance of understanding how Pre-ETS services can benefit schools and their students. However, turnover with school staff and Pre-ETS specialists makes consistent relationships and teacher/school understanding of Pre-ETS services harder.

“Staff buy-in is essential. If they don’t know where the money is going, they’re not going to buy-in. I wasn’t getting any referrals from one school because the [new] case manager did not know about Pre-ETS or those that have been around don’t have buy-in because there is too much on their plates. I presented it as, ‘this is how I get you a new teacher – with more referrals I can get you more money, which can be one more case manager or seven more paras.’ I started getting more referrals at that point, but it’s plateaued again. – staff focus group

Staff discussed the important role finance personnel can have in the implementation of Pre-ETS programming, noting that poor communication between finance personnel (who are removed from the school setting) and teachers who are in the schools providing services) can reduce buy in.

“I like that they have freedom to spend – but schools don’t know where it is going. A school district I work with has four schools in it, and all the funds go through one person who is not on site at any of the campuses, and she doesn’t get it. In our newer process, we don’t ask for budgets. Communication is a barrier – she’s not seeing the benefits. I can’t make the schools tell her how they are spending the money. And I don’t have a budget anymore. I can’t force teachers to talk to the finance person. I am limited in what I can do to facilitate the relationship.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Continue to build relationships with statewide and local education entities to increase awareness and understanding of Pre-ETS services and how they benefit schools and students with disabilities. Consider creating tools to help schools understand the program, developing detailed instructions for how to use funds, and sharing data with schools and teachers to understand the impact of Pre-ETS funding.

STUDENT RECORDS: Stakeholders cited two records issues – social security numbers (SSNs) and disability codes. Schools no longer need students’ social security numbers. Pre-ETS specialists said rural schools don’t want to share SSNs, so they must ask teachers for this information. Special education teachers said they had to talk to parents individually to understand why their child’s SSNs had to be shared and how they would keep this information secure, which can be a barrier for some students to participate.

Special education and RSA disability codes do not align. Special education can use a general category of health impairment, which is not an RSA category. Pre-ETS specialists need to go back to teachers to get a specific disability listed.

Recommendation: Analyze options for more efficient, automated Pre-ETS application and enrollment with built-in business rules and error coding.

PRE-ETS FUNDING: Pre-ETS has a tiered reimbursement rate based on school classification. AA school districts receive a lower reimbursement than class A, B, or C districts. In addition, the previous CRP section of the report reflected on contracting challenges for Pre-ETS services because of, at least in part, lower reimbursement rates for Pre-ETS compared to VRBS.

“When we look at a kid in an AA district, it’s a different reimbursement than for a kid in a B or C school – it’s a big difference. We’re having to push more paper to get the same amount of money.” – high school administrator focus group

Lower reimbursement rates may be less of an issue for larger schools; however, additional funding flexibility and external supports could improve service delivery. With 17 provider contracts statewide, the Pre-ETS program structure relies heavily on schools to provide Pre-ETS services, which they may already be required to provide through a student's IEP. Some school administrators wish for more flexible funding that would rely less on them to provide the services, as well as the flexibility to fund ongoing community support services beyond the life of the IEP.

“Pre-ETS is supporting things we’re already doing for self-advocacy, vocational training, and job coaching in community. In a larger district, we see less of a tie to the classroom activities. That’s on us to manage that in a way that feels like there is greater impact. We’re already hiring teachers, paras, doing fieldtrips. We would do these things regardless. [...] When talking to parents about an IEP, it would be nice if we could make a linkage to support that’s not us. I wish there were more opportunity for Pre-ETS funds to support services in community that could live on after we’re done. We see this more where the local VR office has contracts with local agencies to provide services. It would be nice if VR could use those funds to provide direct services to kids instead of contracting with us to offer families full services they are entitled to through IEP.” – high school administrator focus group

Some mid-sized and smaller schools developed new services or programs because of Pre-ETS contracts.

“All services are provided by special education; some are paid for by Pre-ETS. Pre-ETS has allowed so many additional services to be available for students in special education – the funding is a significant accelerator for our work.” – special education teacher interview

“Pre-ETS allows me to run my life skills classroom. I bought a square machine, do field trips – I love it. These services are not paid for in other, smaller schools. I’m always trying to get class C schools to get involved. This funding makes a bigger difference in these smaller, less economically advantaged schools.” – high school administrator focus group

Because schools, special education teachers, and counselors are the primary implementers of Pre-ETS services, students with disabilities may not receive vocational services during the summer or after school, unless they are also enrolled in VRBS services.

“Special ed teachers are almost like job developers – they help students find work experiences where they need and want. During the summertime and after school hours they are not working, so these services stop for students.” – staff focus group

“In Bozeman, paras provide job coaching. We don’t have any Pre-ETS job coaches in Gallatin, Madison, Park, or Sweet Grass. We only have VR job coaches; students have to be in VR to provide after-school and summer jobs. This is a big issue – many kids don’t want to work.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Analyze Pre-ETS costs and outcomes by school district classification to evaluate the effectiveness of tiered reimbursement rates.

Recommendation: Consider contracting mechanisms to engage special education teachers and school staff in summertime and after-school Pre-ETS service provision as part of the broader re-evaluation of Pre-ETS contracting approaches.

OVERLAP WITH VRBS: Some students with disabilities apply for and receive VRBS services to obtain services that are only reimbursed through VRBS for individuals with IPEs. Pre-ETS specialists shared varied approaches to communicating with schools, teachers, and students about why and when students should be referred to VRBS. Staff expressed that increased Pre-ETS contractor capacity may lessen the demand for VRBS services by high school students.

“There are some benefits to IPEs. You need an IPE to pay for driver’s ed, work clothes, job coaching, maintenance, summer training program (like computer classes). These are extras VR can pay for and Pre-ETS can’t. But most kids’ needs are met by Pre-ETS. We, as counselors, should help navigate the referrals to make sure we are connecting the right people to the right service. Sometimes we intercept the VRBS referrals for Pre-ETS students.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Determine if there are more efficient and effective approaches to layering VRBS and Pre-ETS funding to provide services to broadly needed by Pre-ETS participants, like driver’s education and summer training.

Recommendation: Support consistent staff understanding of and communication about VRBS referrals for Pre-ETS participants.

COLLABORATION WITH PROGRAM PARTNERS

COLLABORATION WITH PROGRAM PARTNERS: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **VRBS is part of a rich tapestry of vocational, education, health, and human services programs** serving clients with diverse characteristics and wide-ranging needs.
- **Collaboration challenges include understanding partner programs and how they overlap/intersect, communication and data sharing, and limited staff capacity.** These problems are exacerbated in rural areas and on reservations, where VRBS staff and partner capacity is generally lower.
- **Clients are satisfied with how well their VRBS counselors connected them with other or community organizations to help them get the services they need.** VRBS staff identified strong relationships with Jobs Services, post-secondary schools, Independent Living, Montana Developmental Disabilities Program, and Adult Education, with opportunities for growth in relationships with youth foster care programs, housing service providers, and Best Beginnings Scholarships.
- **Staff felt VRBS relationships were strongest with Job Services, post-secondary schools, independent living, DDP, and Adult Education,** and weakest with youth foster care, housing service providers, and Best Beginnings Scholarships/child care subsidies.
- **VRBS partners want more communication and collaboration** to better serve shared clients and better use program resources.
- **Data sharing limitations make collaboration harder.** The lack of data system interconnectedness means staff manually refer clients to partner agencies and communicate about shared clients outside of shared case notes or service authorizations. Staff are developing workarounds in some regions.

VRBS COLLABORATION

VRBS serves a broad array of clients – youth and adults with a wide range of disabilities – and intersects with many other service systems and partner agencies that provide complementary services concurrently or sequentially with VRBS. For instance, VRBS overlaps with:

- Other employment-focused agencies: Job Services, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and Adult Education
- Health and human services agencies: Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities programs including Developmental Disabilities Program (DDP); the Severe and Disabling Mental Illness (SDMI) Home and Community Based (HCBS) waiver program; Treatment Bureau programs; Senior and Long Term Care Division programs including the Big Sky Waiver (BSW) and Community First Choice (CFC); the Child and Family

Services Division; the Early Childhood and Family Support Division (Best Beginnings Child Care Scholarship Program); and the Human and Community Services Division (Office of Public Assistance)

- Secondary and post-secondary education programs

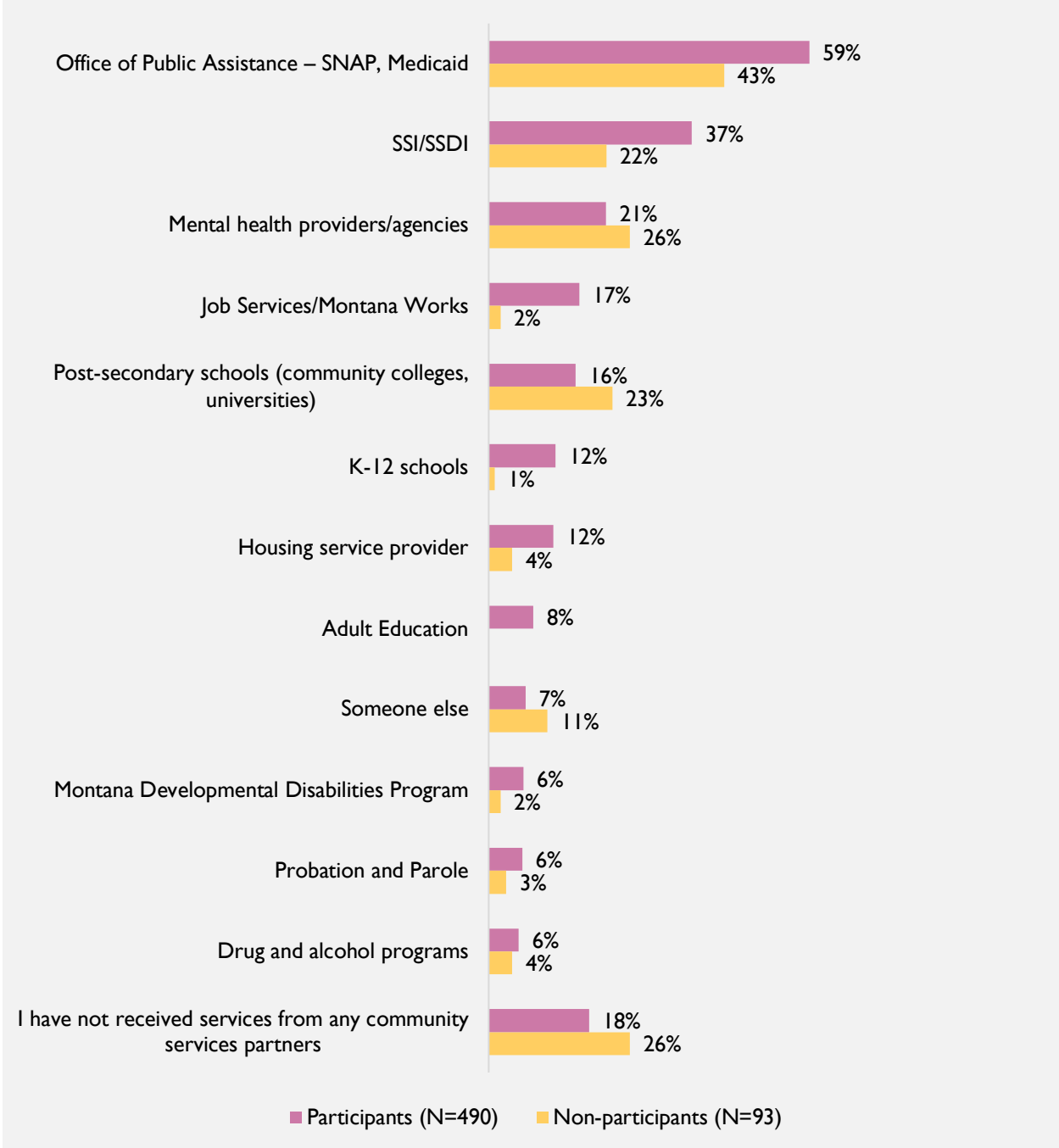
Other prominent partners include tribes, advocacy organizations, community-based service providers (often shared with overlapping partner agencies), parent organizations, and governing councils.

Montana is a large state with a small population – two fixed characteristics that contribute to the state being hard to serve. Partner agencies face similar service delivery challenges, prompting broad-based consideration about opportunities to collaborate to better serve shared clients.

When asked to identify from which VRBS partners they have received services, clients and non-participants are most likely to report service receipt from the Office of Public Assistance, followed by SSI/SSDI, and mental health providers. Eighteen percent of clients and 26 percent of non-participants indicated that they had not received services from any community partners.

SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF CLIENT AND NON-PARTICIPANTS REPORT SERVICE RECEIPT FROM THE OFFICE OF PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

Figure 74. Percent of clients and non-participants identifying VRBS partners from whom they had received services

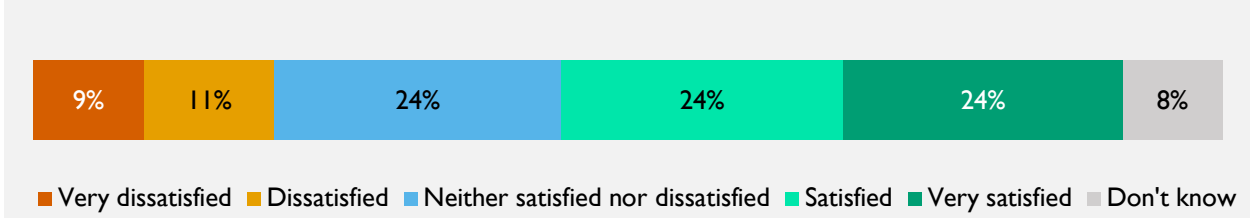


Source: Montana VRBS Participant and Non-Participant Surveys, 2023

VRBS clients were generally satisfied with how well their VRBS counselors connected them to other community organizations to help them get the services they need. Forty-eight percent (48%) were satisfied or very satisfied with how well their VRBS counselor connected them to community services, while 20 percent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. About one in four (24%) were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied.

VRBS CLIENTS GENERALLY SATISFIED WITH CONNECTION TO COMMUNITY SERVICES

Figure 75. Percent of VRBS clients by their satisfaction with how well their counselor connected them to community services



Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

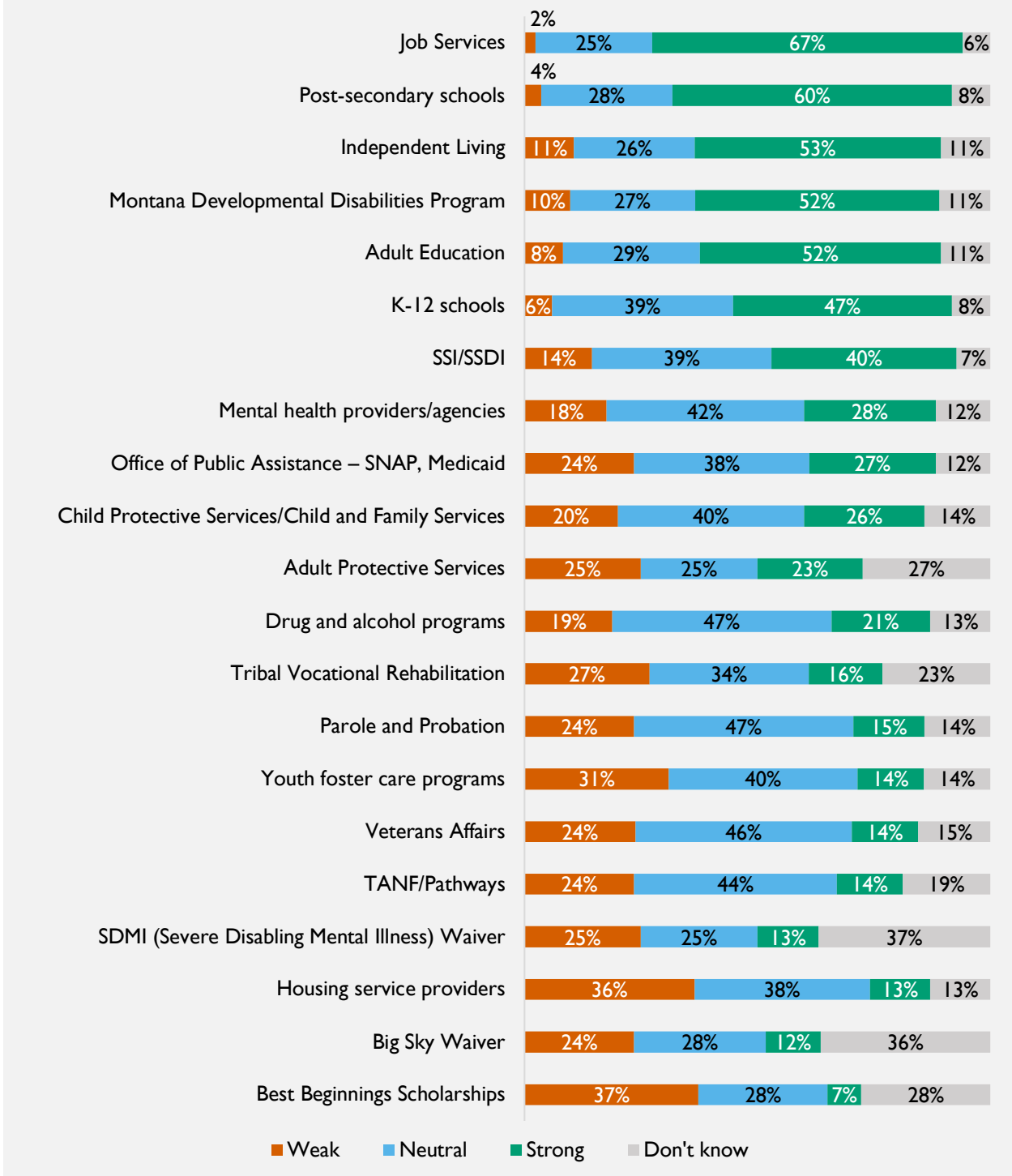
VRBS staff were asked to assess the strength of their partnership with community agencies. More than 50 percent of staff characterized their relationship with the following agencies as “strong”:

- Job Services (67%)
- Post-secondary schools (60%)
- Independent Living (53%)
- Montana Developmental Disabilities Program (52%)
- Adult Education (52%)

Roughly one-third of staff respondents considered the VRBS relationship with youth foster care programs (31%), housing service providers (36%), and Best Beginnings Scholarships (37%) to be weak. These findings may reflect that they are rarely or less likely to be relevant for clients, or they may suggest suggesting opportunities for greater outreach and collaboration.

STAFF REPORT STRONG RELATIONSHIP WITH JOB SERVICES AND POST-SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Figure 76. Percent of staff by their assessment of the strength of the partnership between VRBS and community agencies



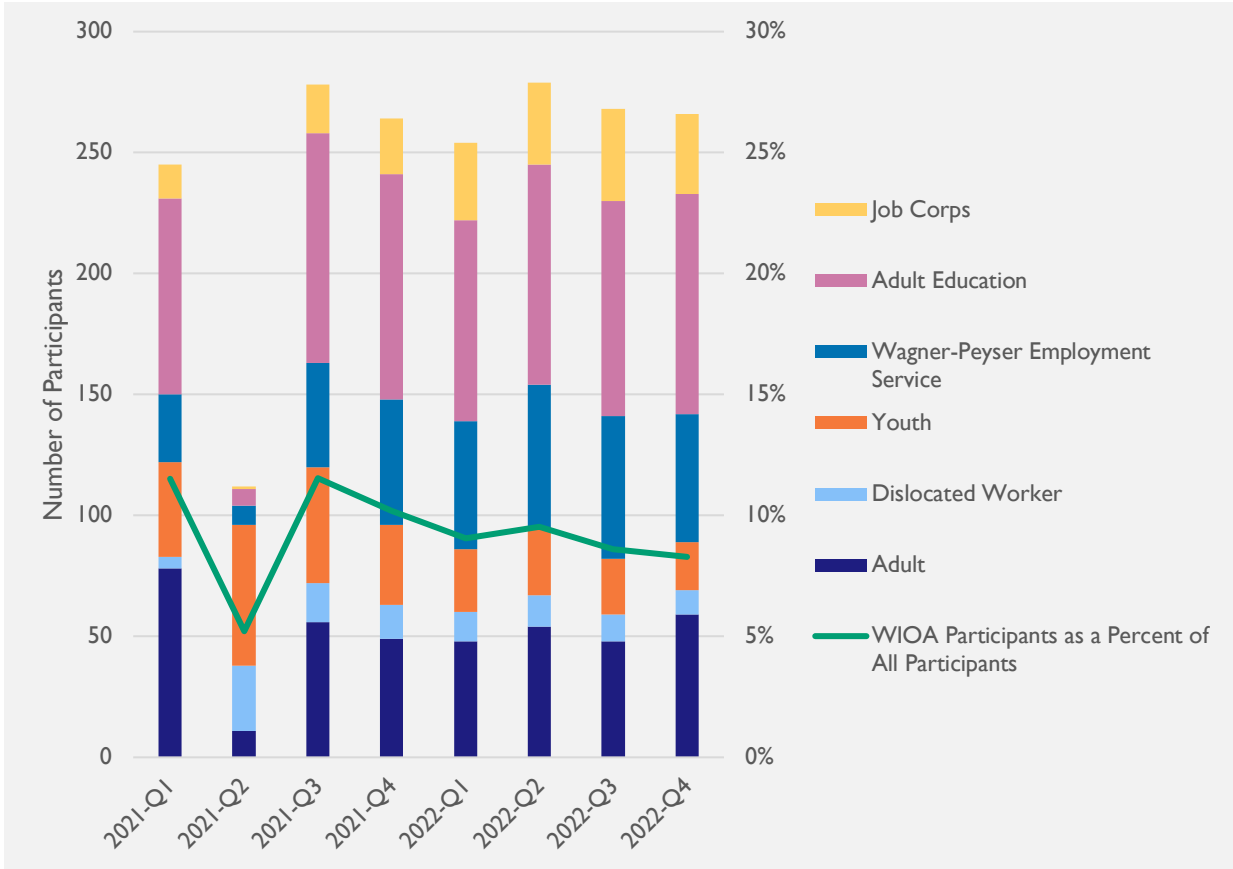
Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

WIOA PROGRAM INVOLVEMENT

In the two-year period beginning in the first quarter of 2021 (July 2021) and ending in the fourth quarter of 2022 (June 2022), WIOA program participation has generally declined as a proportion of overall vocational rehabilitation participation, from 12 percent to 8 percent. However, participation for most programs has increased in absolute terms, growing by 9 percent across all programs and as high as 136 percent growth in Job Corps. The Dislocated Worker and Wagner-Peyser Employment programs also saw robust growth (100% and 89% growth, respectively). Adult Education grew 12 percent. In contrast, Youth program involvement fell 49 percent and Adult program involvement fell 24 percent.

9% GROWTH IN WIOA PROGRAM PARTICIPATION SINCE JULY 2021

Figure 77. Number and percent of WIOA program participants by program type, quarterly 2021-2022



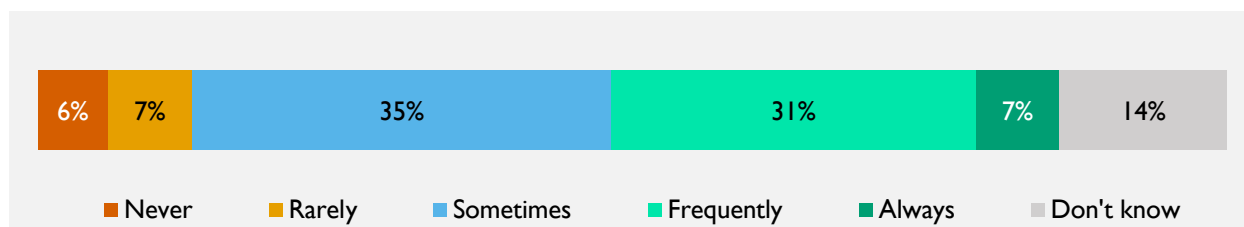
Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

JOB SERVICES

Roughly one-third of staff respondents sometimes (35%) or frequently (31%) refer clients to Job Services for employment-related services.

NEARLY 40% OF STAFF FREQUENTLY OR ALWAYS REFER CLIENTS TO JOB SERVICES

Figure 78. Percent of VRBS staff by how often they refer clients to Job Services for employment-related services



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

Roughly three-quarters of VRBS staff respondents referred clients to Job Services for job search or referral activities (79%) and résumé writing and interview preparation (71%). Stakeholders talked about how staff turnover in both agencies has meant less awareness of the services Job Services and VRBS provide.

“We experience an ebb and flow with referrals from VRBS. Sometimes it’s high and the case manager is really good at working with them, sending a lot of referrals. But they have so much turnover, VRBS staff don’t know about the services they (Job Services) provide, so they don’t know to refer people. This all contributes to a lack of awareness of services that can be provided.” – WIOA partners focus group

Recommendation: Continue or reinvigorate WIOA training and awareness activities.

Recommendation: Institute or reinvigorate process to give and receive updates across WIOA programs.

Stakeholders reflected on the challenges associated with the current data sharing and referral processes, including not using the designated Job Services point of contact for referrals and the manual process for referring clients.

“The one thing that is working for them (Job Services) is having one point of contact at Job Services for VR to do referrals to, but all new VR staff may not understand that.” – WIOA partner focus group

“We need some kind of system to close the loop for referrals so that they know what the end story is. Did they get the referral? How did it work? Right now it’s a black hole.” – WIOA partner focus group

WIOA partners in Kalispell set up Teams so they can submit referrals and have instant communication through messages as needed. This avoids data-sharing issues with email. This is a workaround being used in one region to compensate for limited interconnectedness between programs intended to collaboratively serve shared clients.

Recommendation: Evaluate opportunities to more effectively share information across disparate data systems, including leveraging functionality developed as part of the MPATH (Montana’s Program for Automating and Transforming Healthcare) project and the common client and provider indices.

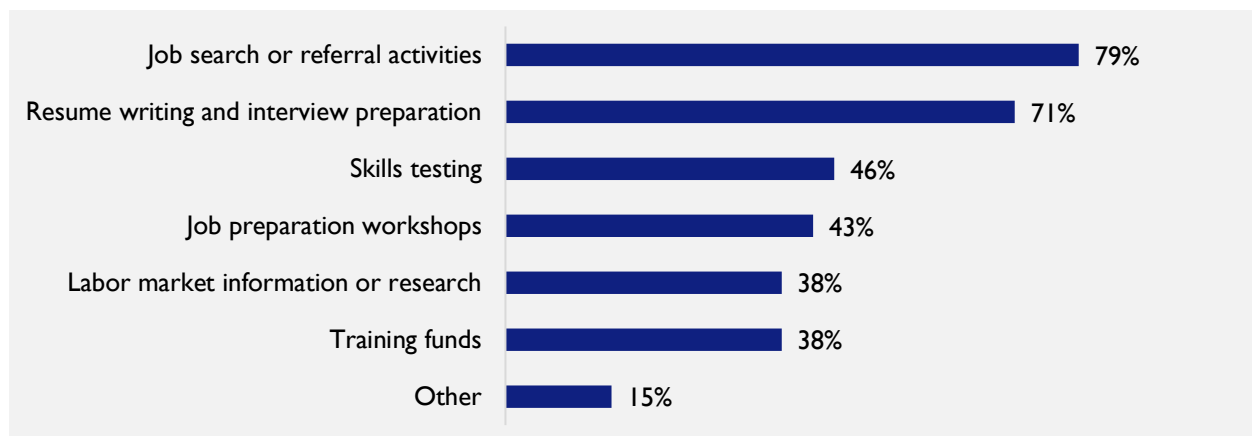
Billings VRBS and Job Services stakeholders talked about their effective working relationship, which is bolstered by co-location. WIOA partners discussed how used program dollars to co-enroll clients.

“We are co-located with Job Services, so we do have a good relationship with them. Sometimes the counselor will walk them over to Job Services to introduce them. They send us a listing of all the jobs they have every week, so we can send that out to clients. I would say in Billings we have a good relationship with Job Services.” – staff focus group

Recommendation: Analyze opportunities to support a shared or universal application across WIOA programs, as well as potentially other health and human services partner agencies.

JOB SEARCH, RESUME WRITING FREQUENT JOB SERVICE REFERRALS

Figure 79. Percent of VRBS staff referring clients to Job Services offerings



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

SHARED SERVICE DELIVERY: WIOA stakeholders, as well as other partner stakeholders, reflected on the challenges of effectively serving dispersed, rural communities. An interviewee talked about how cross-training staff in VRBS and Job Services could improve services to clients.

“We could have WIOA counselors in rural areas, versus Job Services and VRBS separately employing two people. That would help us function better because it’s so difficult to find people in rural areas and we can’t always have someone perform dual functions in WIOA, instead of one VR and one Job Services consultant in a rural area, if instead we could have both cross-trained, we would be much better served because they can each serve both sets of clients without having to wait for VR counselor to get back. It would be one door for all resources. One of the weaknesses we see is that people are not cross-trained. I wish there was more availability for that, even if they could be 20 hours with VR and 20 hours with Job Services. Currently would be part-time with both, instead of full-time combined.” – DLI interview

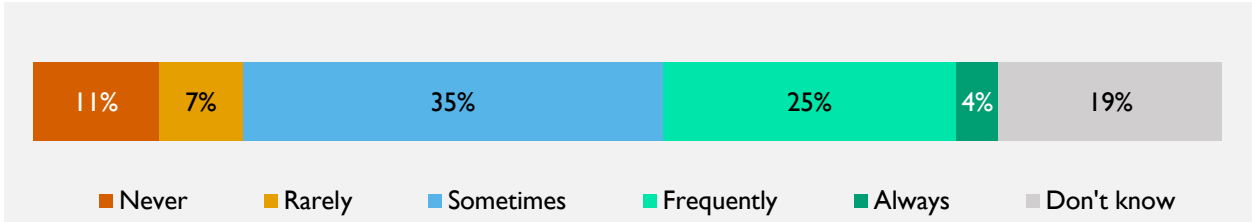
Recommendation: Explore the possibility of developing shared WIOA counselor positions to address service delivery challenges in rural areas.

ADULT EDUCATION

One third of staff respondents sometimes referred clients to Adult Education for employment-related services (35%), nearly one-third frequently or always did (29%), and nearly one-fifth (18%) never or rarely did.

VRBS STAFF REPORTED SOMETIMES OR FREQUENTLY REFERRING CLIENTS TO ADULT EDUCATION

Figure 80. Percent of VRBS staff by how often they refer clients to Adult Education for employment-related services



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

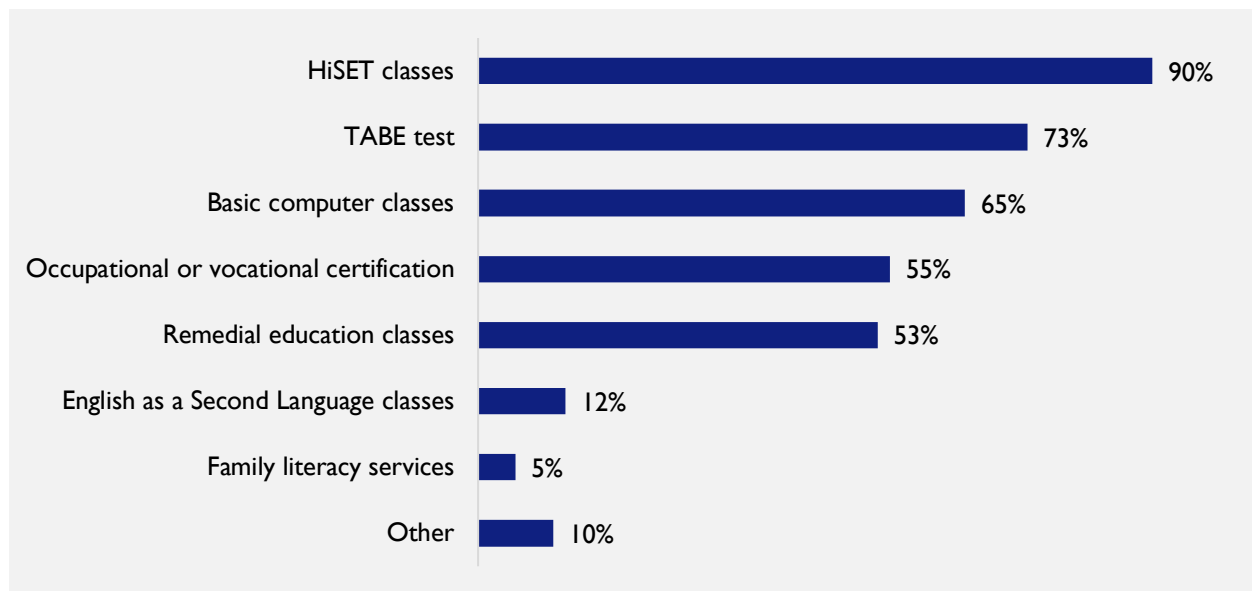
Most VRBS staff respondents (90%) indicated referring clients to Adult Education for HiSET classes. Other common Adult Education referral purposes included:

- TABE test (73%)

- Basic computer classes (65%)
- Occupational or vocational certification (55%)
- Remedial education classes (53%)

HI-SET CLASSES MOST COMMONLY IDENTIFIED ADULT ED REFERRAL

Figure 81. Percent of VRBS staff referring clients to Adult Education offerings



Source: Montana VRBS Staff Survey, 2023

Adult education partners, like Job Services, expressed a desire for more communication and coordination.

“As core partners, it would be nice to cooperate a bit more. I would like to see as a whole state how collaboration and communication improve.” – Adult Education interviewee

TANF

WIOA partners and TANF leadership discussed how TANF refers a lot of clients to VRBS. TANF’s Pathways program recently put an enhancement in their eligibility system, CHIMES, for their new program for clients on an SSI track. TANF SSI track clients are required to enroll in VRBS for support applying for social security. TANF leadership shared that they have relied on local coordination of TANF and VRBS, and it’s not working.

“I want to reach out to VR and figure out how to co-enroll to support these clients. We need a process of supporting these shared clients we’re serving. How can TANF better support them while they are in VR? If we partner on shared clients, then we could use

WEX site as countable hours. It would be good to have open communication with shared clients, because TANF can help with transportation, clothing, adaptive equipment – we can take the burden off their program for their (VRBS) caseworkers to do everything.” – TANF interview

The TANF program has also discussed how supported employment would benefit some TANF clients. TANF is looking at their data to understand how many people may qualify for this service and how to move forward with implementing this policy.

Recommendation: Work with TANF to determine how to better collaborate on service delivery for shared clients. Determine approaches to maximize use of TANF supportive services and TANF Pathways’ client advocates. Determine if there are options for cross-training as also recommended for Job Services.

OTHER PARTNERS

Focus group and interview participants reflected on gaps and opportunities to enhance collaboration with other partners to better serve people with disabilities. Many of these partners, gaps, and opportunities are discussed previously in the barriers and under/unserved sections of the report. Generally, stakeholders expressed a desire for more communication and more collaboration, and said how the reliance on individual relationships to make collaboration work is hindered by high VRBS and partner staff turnover.

Recommendation: Work to improve communication across all partners, with a focus on partner service agencies and community service providers working with shared clients and/or serving people with disabilities VRBS is underserving.

Recommendation: Focus on developing relationships with partners that staff assessed as having weaker relationships with VRBS, including Best Beginnings Scholarships, the Big Sky Waiver, and youth foster care programs.

DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES PROGRAM. DDP and VRBS have many shared clients and refer individuals to each other’s services. Stakeholders almost universally said the collaborative relationship is strong. Opportunities for improvement include reducing the DD waiver waiting list to provide individuals with developmental disabilities the full spectrum of needed services earlier (this recommendation is included earlier in the report) and DDP-VRBS alignment over the definition of competitive, integrated employment, the role of day services, and whether and how to pursue becoming an Employment First state (this is covered in the subsequent outcomes section focusing on informed decision-making and client choice). Stakeholders also shared limited awareness of VRBS services by DD clients and families of

individuals with DD. CRP contractors working with shared DDP-VRBS clients expressed a desire for higher VRBS reimbursement rates, better aligned payment processes, and the ability to bill for more services. These recommendations are included in the CRP section above.

HIGH SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES. In addition to feedback in other sections, staff and partners provided input about colleges requiring new evaluations for students with disabilities. Montana State University reportedly requires an evaluation from within the last three years. When IDEA was reauthorized in 2004, high schools were able to waive the requirement for schools to reevaluate students every three years. High schools often waive the requirement if they don't see a need to reevaluate a student. However, when a student needs documentation for a DD waiver application or for a collage application, they often look to high schools to complete it. High schools don't necessarily have the funding or capacity to complete these reevaluations.

Recommendation: Work with colleges to lessen documentation requirements for student disability evaluations at application.

CENTERS FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING (CILS). CIL Directors, similar to WIOA partners, expressed a desire for more collaboration with VRBS, clearer eligibility and service delivery pathways, and more data sharing. The previous recommendation about a shared/universal application and cross-training could potentially apply to CILs as well and other community service agencies.

“We could do things in common – share costs, do joint intake, and offer services – because we share purposes and vision.” – SILC focus group

Recommendation: Explore collaboration opportunities with CILs to improve service accessibility and client outcomes.

TRIBES AND TRIBAL PROGRAMS. American Indian clients can be dually eligible for State and Tribal VR programs. This is unique; most other programs require people to choose whether to receive Tribal or State services within a specific program – e.g., State or Tribal TANF. Tribal and State VR can work together to collaboratively pay for services.

“Let’s say the Tribal funding is lower – it usually is. The Tribe looks at money and says we can help you buy books for your degree, however, there’s also funding through state VR. We have our threshold for \$3,200 (I think it’s this). It’s still two separate plans – we are not using the same system to log all the information. I will write in the state system, ‘books are paid for, and we are going to assist with tuition and fees’”. – Tribal VR interview

“We tell them they can be dually eligible when you apply and it’s also in the brochure. We want them to be dually eligible. But, we’re not really seeing the benefits for the one person who is dually eligible.” – Tribal VR focus group

State and Tribal VR stakeholders discussed ways to increase State VRBS presence on reservations.

“It would be nice to have State VR here on site and hire Tribal members to run the programs. We have this with Food Stamps here. We used to have a Tribal VR staff member in the satellite office at the community support building. People were more inclined to go in and apply for OPA programs. When they got rid of that position, people stopped applying.” – Tribal VR focus group

Recommendation: Continue to focus on building relationships with Tribes and Tribal programs and increasing awareness of State VRBS and how it can benefit individuals and Tribal VR programs. Analyze options of cross-training Tribal-State VR counselors and providing services on reservations with Tribal staff.

WORKING WITH BUSINESSES

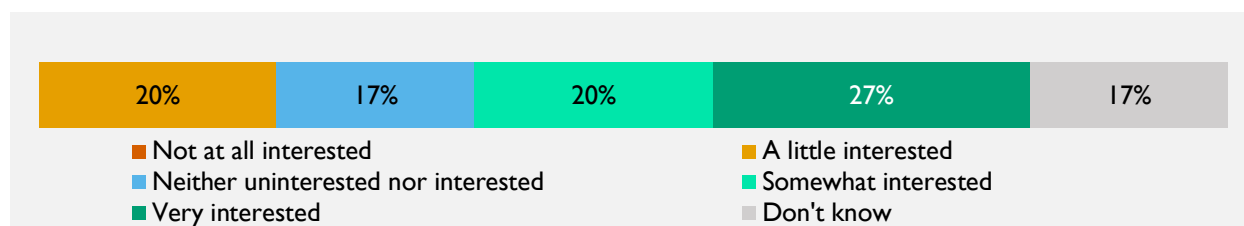
WORKING WITH BUSINESSES: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **Nearly half of business respondents express interest in working with people with disabilities.** Thirty business representatives responded to the VRBS survey. Among those, 47 percent were somewhat or very interested in accessing the talent pool of people with disabilities.
- **The current economic climate presents a double-edged sword in hiring people with disabilities.** Businesses may be more open to hiring people with disabilities given broad hiring challenges; however, staffing shortages within business and disability organizations reduce their capacity to support individuals with disabilities as they transition to the workplace.
- **Business respondents are comfortable training and supporting people with disabilities.** Based on their current capacity and experience, business respondents also expressed relative comfort in training and supporting someone with disabilities; 57 percent indicated that they are somewhat or very comfortable training and supporting someone with disabilities at their business.
- **Businesses are interested in prescreening services.** Although prescreening of candidates was identified as a service of interest by three-quarters of business respondents, just 11 percent of those that had worked with a disability organization had received such service, suggesting an opportunity for greater outreach and implementation of this VRBS offering.

BUSINESS RESPONDENT INPUT

BUSINESS RESPONDENTS EXPRESS INTEREST IN ACCESSING THE TALENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Figure 82. Percent of business respondents by interest in accessing the talent pool of people with disabilities (N=30)



Source: Montana VRBS Business Survey, 2023

Key informant and focus group respondents suggest that businesses may be more open to working with diverse employees, including people with disabilities, amidst the pervasive hiring shortage in the current economic climate. Respondents cite possible opportunities to leverage the economic context to increase business engagement and hiring. At the same time, respondents suggest that the staffing shortage in the current environment means that businesses do not have as much internal capacity to support a person with a disability as they transition to the workplace, leading employers to rely more on disability organizations to provide these services. However, these organizations also suffer from staffing shortages, resulting in reduced capacity to pursue business engagement in general, and transition support specifically.

“This is the perfect economic client for people with disabilities. It needs to be marketed well. They have good skills that should be marketed.” – VRBS staff interview

Despite a perceived increase in openness to hiring people with disabilities due to the current economic climate, many key informants described two ongoing barriers to people with disabilities participation in the workforce. First, continued stigma around people with disabilities limits job openings. Respondents note that employers often assume that if an individual cannot complete one aspect of a job, they will not be able to perform well for any part of the job. Respondents also note a continued deficit-based mentality around people with disabilities in the workforce, instead of a focus on their skillsets and assets.

“I participated in a panel with prospective employers, and the stigma around disabilities is still so huge. They say they don’t want to babysit the employee. It seemed like employers don’t have the time or energy to look in to alternative employment populations.” – VRBS staff focus group

Second, limited awareness of employment supports and accommodations for people with disabilities prevents employers from engaging with vocational rehabilitation or other organizations to access the skills of people with disabilities. This limits the ability of providers to share available services, describe accommodations, and convey the effectiveness of today’s technology in supporting the workplace productivity of employees with disabilities.

Despite noted challenges, key informants described increased access to the governor’s office around these issues and a unique moment to coordinate messaging to employers among vocational rehabilitation and workforce development providers. Respondents also noted interest in determining how VRBS and partner organizations can lead a cultural shift toward more inclusive, responsive workplaces.

Recommendation: Increase employer awareness about the quality of the workforce among people with disabilities. Communicate examples of how hiring people with disabilities can fill

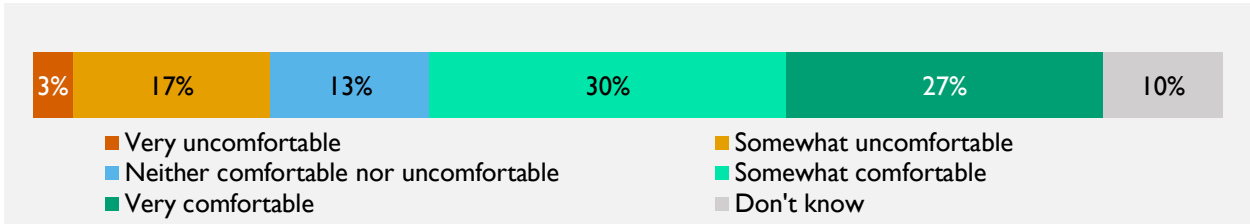
needed skill gaps and increase retention, and leverage employers who have successfully hired people with disabilities to share their stories with other employers.

Recommendation: Increase employer and employee awareness about universal design to promote workplace accessibility and facilitate greater knowledge of and receptiveness to needed individual accommodations.

Business respondents are comfortable training and supporting people with disabilities. Based on their current capacity and experience, business respondents expressed relative comfort in training and supporting someone with disabilities; 57 percent indicated that they are somewhat or very comfortable training and supporting someone with disabilities at their business.

BUSINESS RESPONDENTS ARE COMFORTABLE TRAINING AND SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Figure 83. Percent of business respondents by comfort in training and supporting someone with disabilities at their business (N=30)



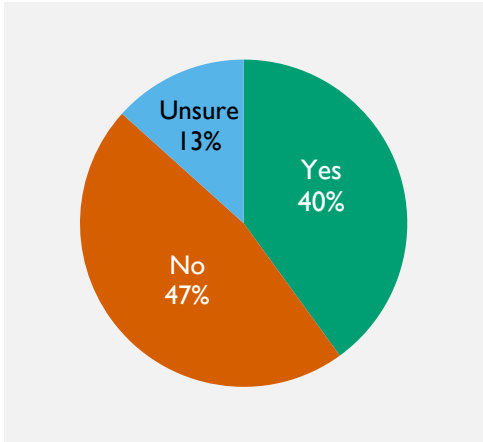
Source: Montana VRBS Business Survey, 2023

VRBS directly provides numerous services to deliver onsite training and support to people with disabilities as they transition to the workplace. Several workforce development key informants suggested opportunities for Job Services to learn more about VRBS employer liaison services to try to integrate some of these supports into their own service offerings, potentially expanding resources available to employers as they train and support their employees with disabilities.

Business respondents were split on whether or not they had worked with a disability organizations. Over the last five years, 47 percent of business respondents had not worked with any organization that helps employers hire or work with people with disabilities, while 40 percent of respondents had worked with such an organization.

ABOUT HALF OF BUSINESSES DON'T WORK WITH DISABILITY ORGS

Figure 84. Percent of business respondents by their experience working with organizations that help employers hire or work with people with disabilities (N=30)

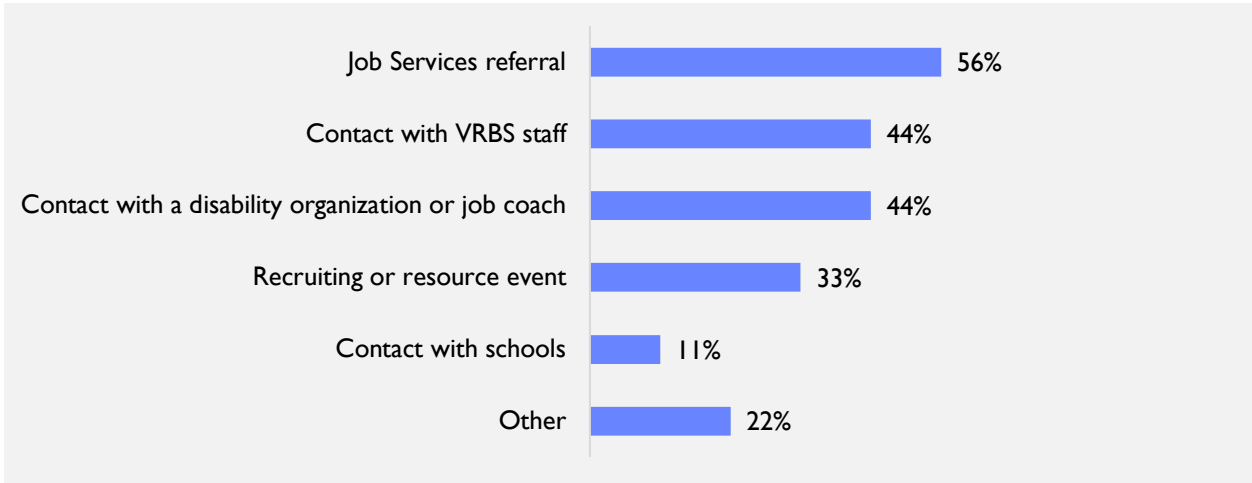


Source: Montana VRBS Business Survey, 2023

Among respondents that had work with disability organizations, most had learned about the disability organization through a Job Services referral.

JOB SERVICES AND VRBS ARE PRIMARY INITIAL CONTACTS

Figure 85. Percent of business respondents by how they learned about the disability organization with which they worked (N=9)



Source: Montana VRBS Business Survey, 2023

Fifty-six percent of business respondents who had worked with a disability organization indicated that they had received information on community resources. Additionally, one-third (33%) each of business respondents reported that the organization had provided the following services:

- Assisted adult job seekers with disabilities to participate in career exploration opportunities.
- Provided resources to promote understanding about disabilities.
- Provided resources for other disability related training.
- Facilitated business engagement with young adults or students with disabilities to gain work experience.
- Helped access VRBS incentives.

Business respondents who provided open-ended feedback on additional support that disability organizations could provide suggested a resource/referral guide, more information on accommodations, help matching individuals with appropriate skills with their job opportunities, and more proactive outreach to maintain employer awareness about VRBS as a recruitment source.

Business respondents who had not worked with a disability organization were asked what services they would be interested in receiving from a disability organization. More than half of respondents identified the following service interests:

- Pre-screening of candidates based on job specifications (75%).
- Hand-selection of qualified applicants from the talent pool (58%).
- Formal work-based learning opportunities for adults with disabilities (50%).
- Help accessing VRBS incentives (58%).

Although prescreening of candidates was identified as a service of interest by three-quarters of business respondents, just 11 percent of those that had worked with a disability organization had received that service, suggesting an opportunity for greater outreach and implementation of this VRBS offering. Similarly, more than half of respondents were interested in hand-selecting qualified applicants from the talent pool, but just 22 percent of respondents working with a disability organization indicated that they had received this service.

Key informant respondents described ongoing organizational efforts to improve business engagement. Several noted capacity challenges in delivering employer services; many business services team members may also hold caseloads or supervisory duties that limit their ability to focus more on employer services. One respondent also noted challenges in coordination between VRBS staff and CRP staff, including some discrepancy over who is responsible for cultivating job relationships, and some concern that CRPs and counselors may be focusing primarily on existing relationships with employers for placement rather than pursuing new, innovative opportunities that may be a better match for client interests.

Recommendation: Work with WIOA partners to explore opportunities for collaborative business engagement aligned with spectrum of client vocational needs and program requirements.

COSTS AND OUTCOMES

COSTS AND OUTCOMES: SUMMARY FINDINGS

- **Average quarterly wages in the four quarters following exit varied by race/ethnicity**, with White participants earning the most (\$3,042), followed by participants of unknown race (\$2,507), and Native American participants (\$2,489).
- **Hourly wages among exited participants shifted slightly higher between program year 2021 and 2022.**
- **VRBS clients are satisfied with services overall.** VRBS clients provided positive feedback overall on counselor quality, the amount of face-to-face time they have with their counselor, and access to VRBS services.
- **The long wait time for services was among the most frequently cited challenges for non-participants**, with 44 percent indicating they had not started services yet and 39 percent indicating the process took too long. About half of staff and CRPs reported that participants are served in a timely manner.
- **Stakeholders expressed a lack of philosophical alignment across the state's DD ecosystem.** Stakeholders grappled with whether and how to align with Employment First principles while retaining a range of competitively paid options for people with diverse needs and wants.

COSTS PER PARTICIPANT BY RACE/ETHNICITY

A preliminary analysis of VRBS caseload data suggests there may be race and ethnic disparities in the costs per participant, with higher expenditures on White participants and less on people of color. More research is required to determine if this is, in fact, the case. Factors such as length of time in services, as well as small counts for some racial groups, may impact findings.

PARTICIPANT EXIT OUTCOMES

VRBS participant exit outcomes are measured in two ways for this analysis. First, RSA data provides participants' Measurable Skill Gain (MSG) in each quarter in program year 2021 and 2022. Second, Montana VRBS administrative data was analyzed to assess client income after exit by race/ethnicity.

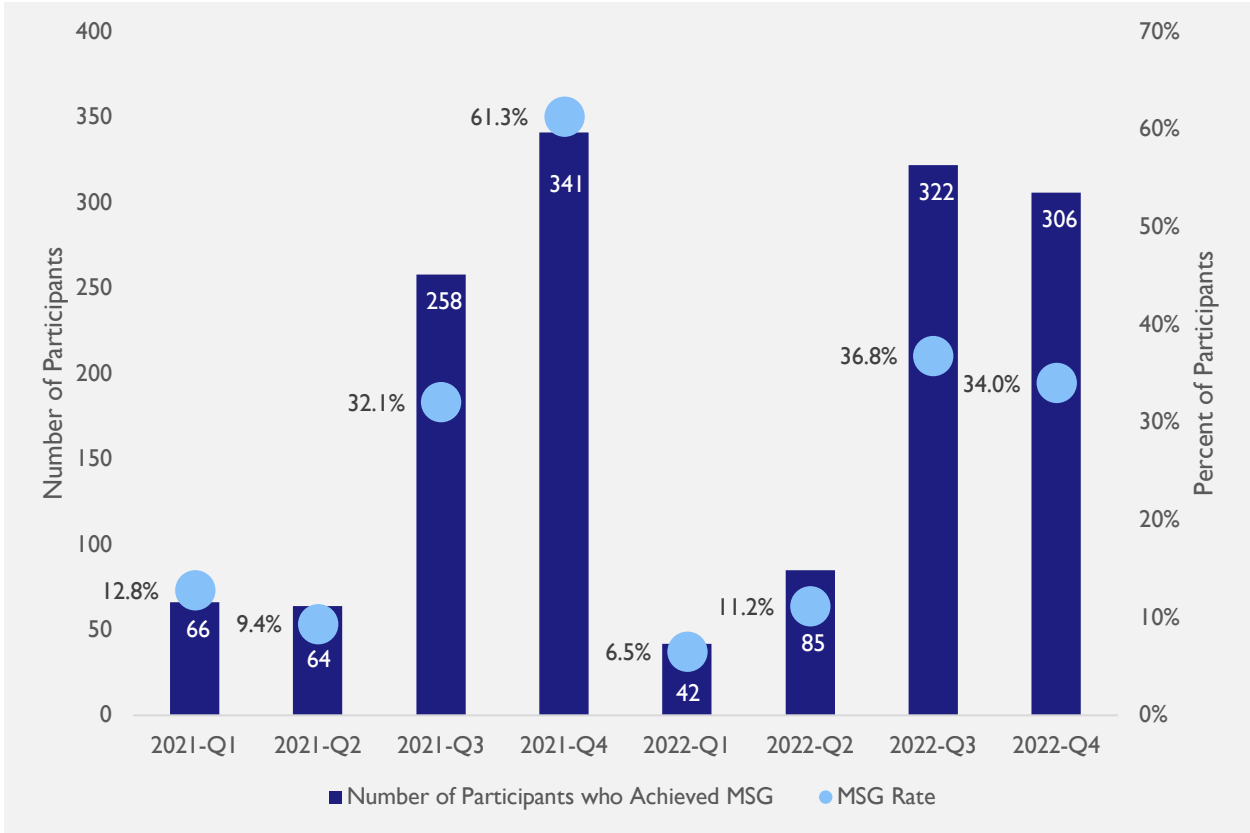
MEASURABLE SKILL GAIN (MSG)

In 2021 and 2022, Montana VRBS participants achieved the highest count and percent of measurable skill gain in the fourth quarter of program year 2021 (ending June 2022), with 341 participants achieving MSG. Over three in five participants who were eligible for MSG achieved

MSG (61.3%). As shown in Figure 87, “secondary or postsecondary transcript/report card” is the most common MSG, which likely drives the higher MSG achievement rates in the fourth quarters of a given year, given that academic years typically end sometime in the fourth quarter (April through June).

MSG ACHIEVEMENT RATE OF 61% EARNED IN Q4 2021

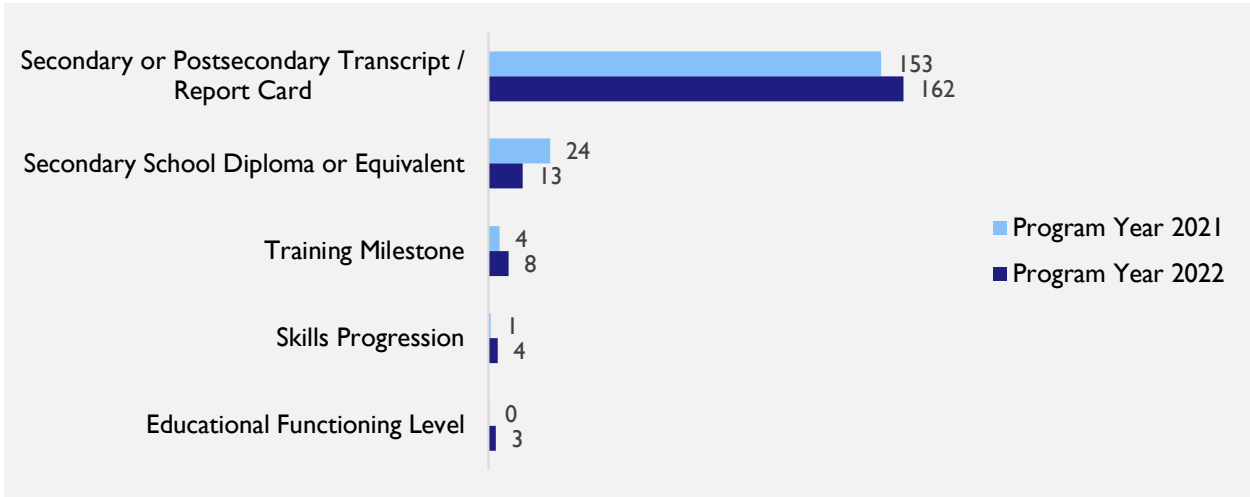
Figure 86. Quarterly measurable skill gains, PY 2021-2022



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

TRANSCRIPT/REPORT CARD MOST COMMON MSG

Figure 87. Average quarterly measurable skill gain by type, program years 2021 and 2022



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

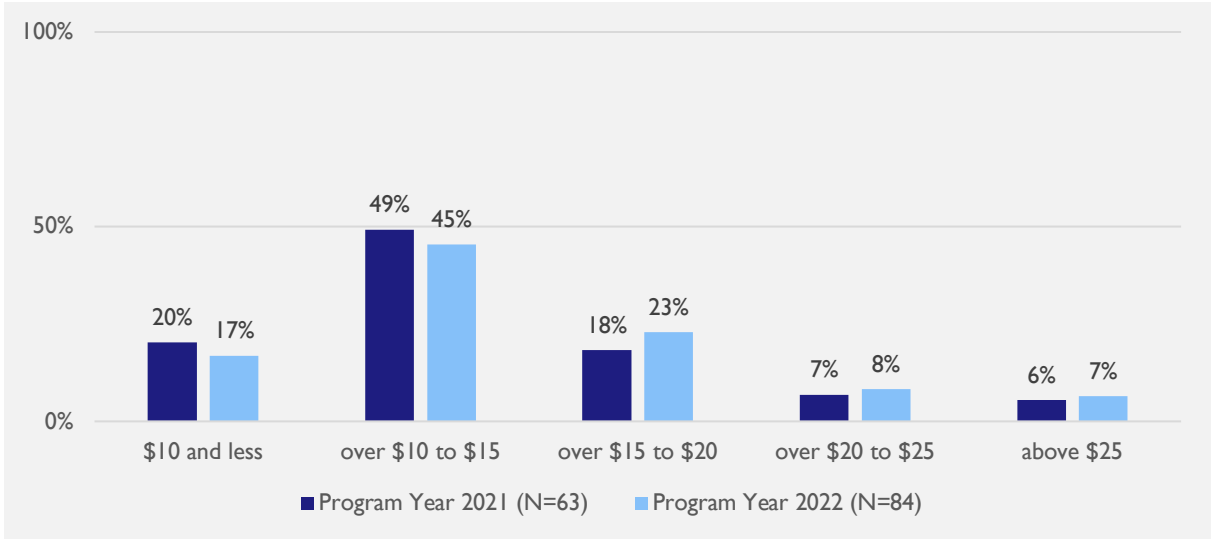
COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

AVERAGE HOURLY WAGES

Among exiting participants in program years 2021 and 2022 (four quarters of data averaged per year), most earned wages between \$10 to \$15. Between program years 2021 and 2022, there was a slight movement towards increased wages, with a lesser percentage receiving wages of \$15 and under (69% in 2021 compared to 62% in 2022) and a greater percentage receiving wages of \$15 and over (31% in 2021 compared to 38% in 2022).

HOURLY WAGES SHIFTED SLIGHTLY HIGHER BETWEEN 2021 & 2022

Figure 88. Average quarterly distribution of hourly wages at exit, program years 2021 and 2022



Source: U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration, Case Service Report (RSA-911) Quarterly Data Dashboards

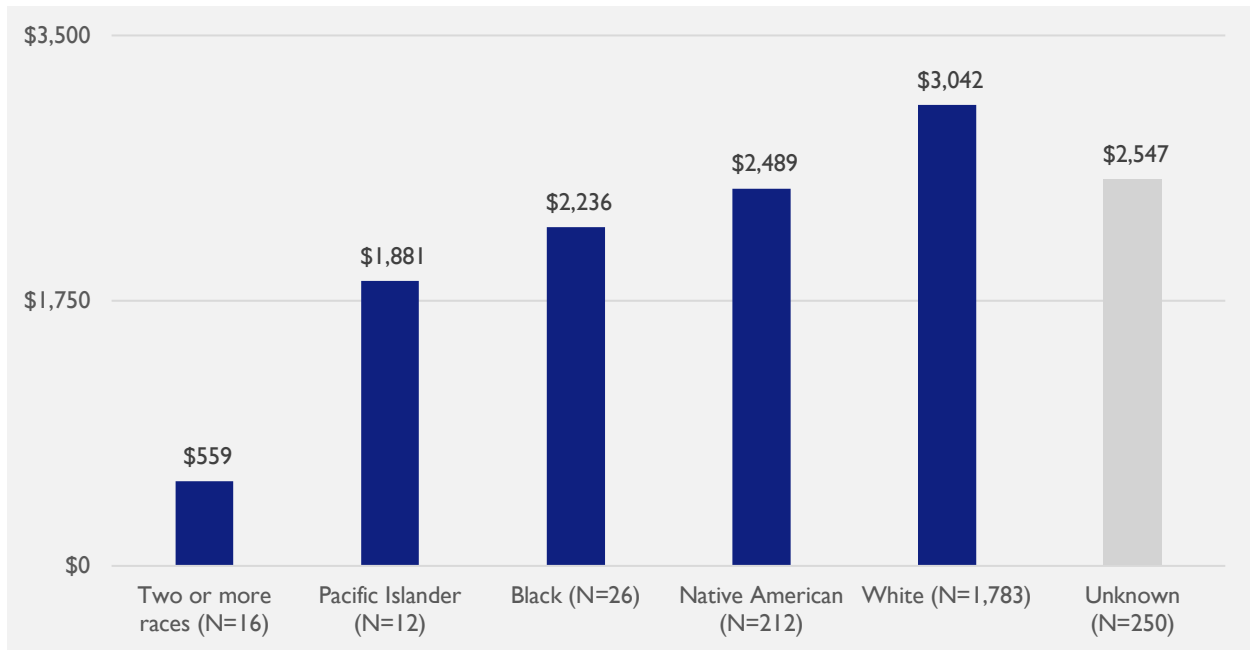
AVERAGE EARNINGS AT EXIT BY RACE/ETHNICITY

The average post-exit earnings of exited VRBS clients in the Madison system through March 31, 2023 were analyzed by race and ethnicity. Among the six exited clients in the period studied who identified as Asian, the average post-exit wage was \$8,887 (the highest among races compared). Among the 1,783 clients who identified as White, they had an average post-exit quarterly earnings of \$3,042, followed by an average quarterly wage and \$2,489 among the 212 Native American exited clients. Clients who identify as Hispanic or Latino have a somewhat lower post-exit average quarterly wage (\$2,170) than those whose ethnicity is Non-Hispanic or unknown (\$2,961).

Figure 91 displays the range in average post-exit quarterly wages per participant by race and ethnicity. All racial and ethnic groups had at least one participant whose post-exit quarterly wage was \$0. A White exited participant who was of Non-Hispanic or unknown ethnicity had the highest average quarterly wage (\$27,319).

ON AVERAGE, ASIAN EXITS EARNED MORE THAN ALL OTHER RACES

Figure 89. Average quarterly earnings in the four quarters after participant exit by race, Q2 2021 – Q1 2023

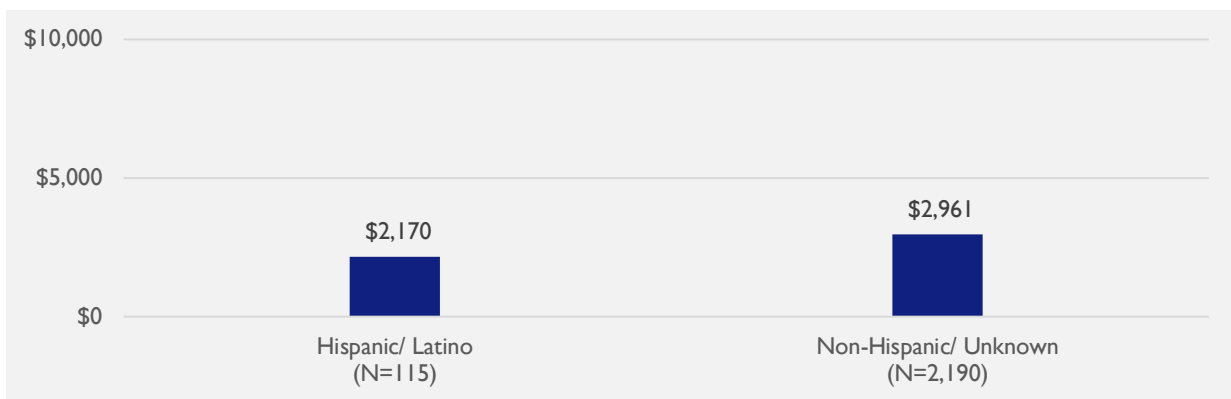


Note: Due to small counts, results for Asian participants are suppressed to maintain confidentiality.

Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services analysis of Madison administrative data, Q2 2021 through Q1 2023, and Bureau of Labor and Industry wage data

HISPANIC/LATINO EXITS EARN LESS ON AVERAGE COMPARED TO NON-HISPANIC/LATINO

Figure 90. Average quarterly earnings in the four quarters after participant exit by ethnicity, Q2 2021 – Q1 2023



Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services analysis of Madison administrative data, Q2 2021 through Q1 2023, and Bureau of Labor and Industry wage data

POST-EXIT QUARTERLY WAGES RANGE FROM \$0 TO \$27,000

Figure 91. High, low, and average quarterly wages earned in the four quarters after participant exit by race/ethnicity, Q2 2021 – Q1 2023

	High	Average	Low
Two or more races (N=16)	\$4,590	\$559	\$0
Pacific Islander (N=12)	\$9,064	\$1,881	\$0
Black (N=26)	\$13,422	\$2,236	\$0
Native American (N=212)	\$24,000	\$2,489	\$0
White (N=1,783)	\$27,319	\$3,042	\$0
Asian (N=6)	\$21,197	\$8,887	\$0
Unknown (N=250)	\$25,165	\$2,547	\$0
Hispanic/Latino (N=115)	\$17,298	\$2,170	\$0
Non-Hispanic or Unknown (N=2,190)	\$27,319	\$2,961	\$0

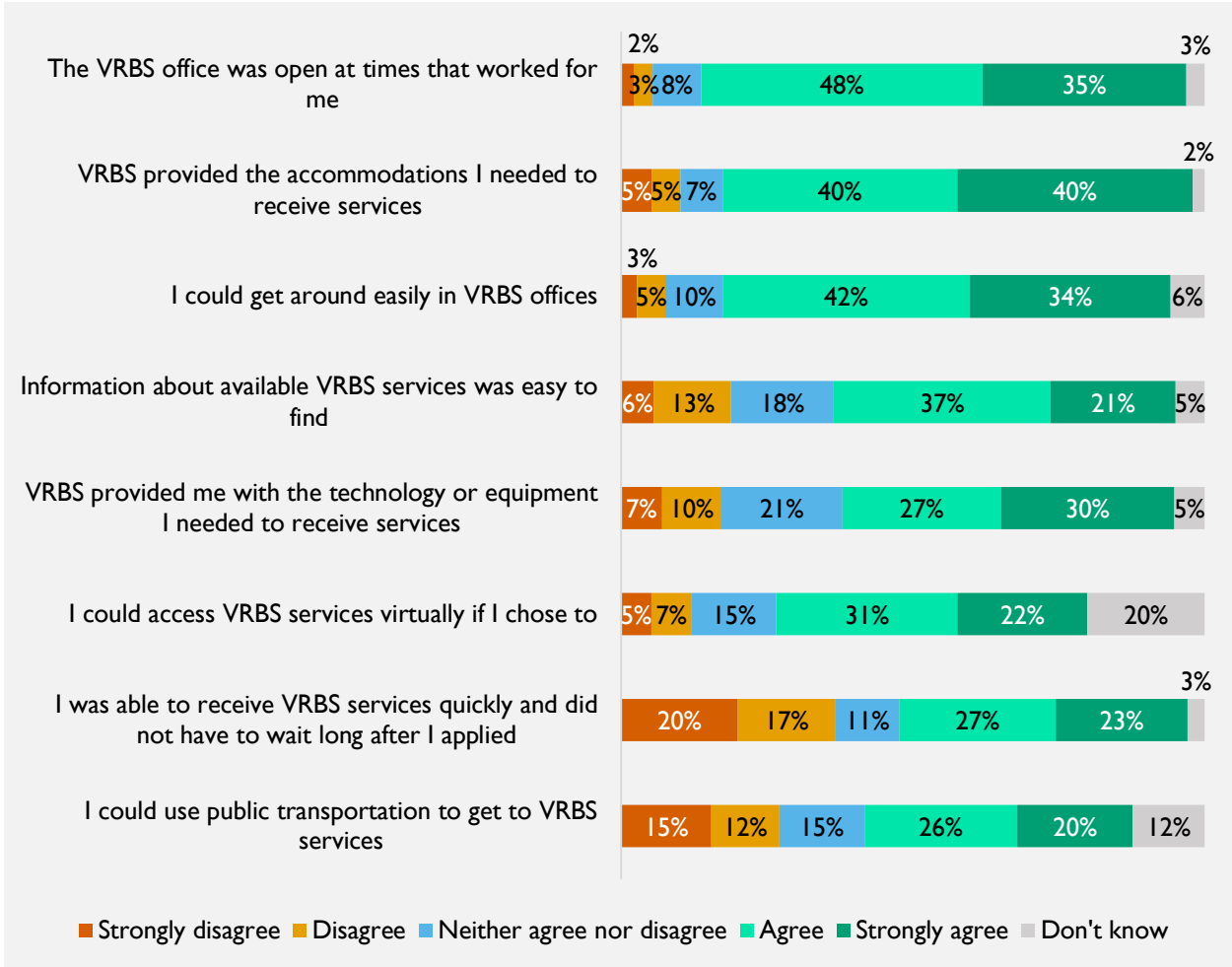
Source: Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services analysis of Madison administrative data, Q2 2021 through Q1 2023, and Bureau of Labor and Industry wage data

ACCESSIBILITY OF VRBS SERVICES

Clients consider VRBS services to be accessible. More than three-quarters of VRBS clients agreed or strongly agreed that the VRBS office was open at times that work for them (83%), VRBS provided the accommodations they needed to receive services (80%), and they could get around easily in VRBS offices (76%). Clients were more likely to strongly disagree or disagree that they were able to receive services quickly and did not have to wait long after they applied (37%) and that they could use public transportation to get to VRBS services (27%).

VRBS HOURS AND ACCOMMODATIONS ARE ACCESSIBLE

Figure 92. Percent of clients who agree or disagree with VRBS service accessibility statements (N=401 to 546)

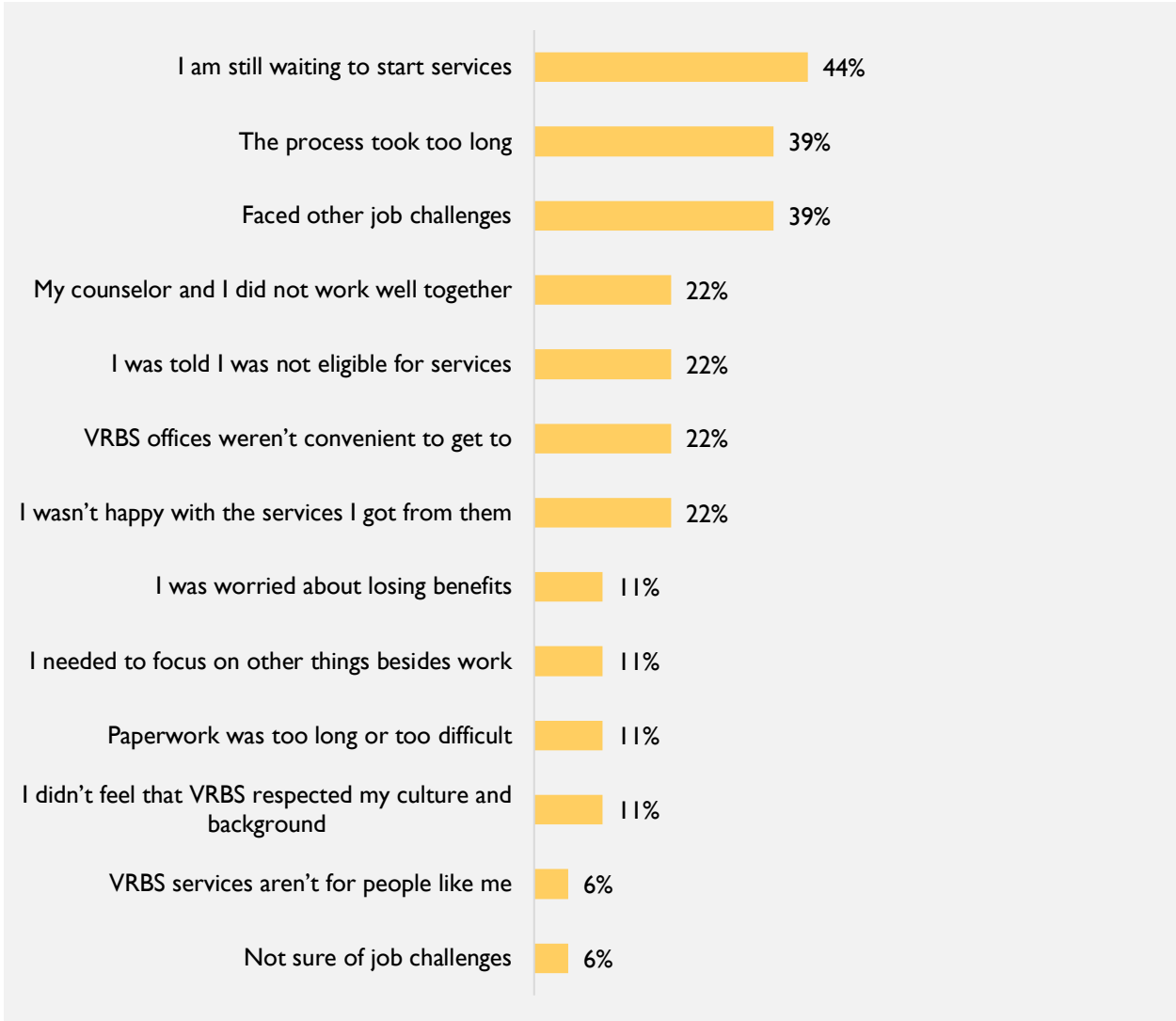


Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

Among 101 non-participant survey respondents, 45 (45%) said they had tried to access VRBS services. Of those 45, 18 (40%) said they had experienced challenges working with VRBS. These individuals were asked to provide input on the challenges they faced; 44 percent were still waiting to start services, over one-third indicated that the process took too long (39%), and that they faced other job challenges (39%).

NON-PARTICIPANTS REPORT A LONG WAIT TIME FOR SERVICES

Figure 93. Percent of VRBS non-participants reporting challenges experienced when trying to get services from VRBS (N=18)



Source: Montana VRBS Non-Participant Survey, 2023

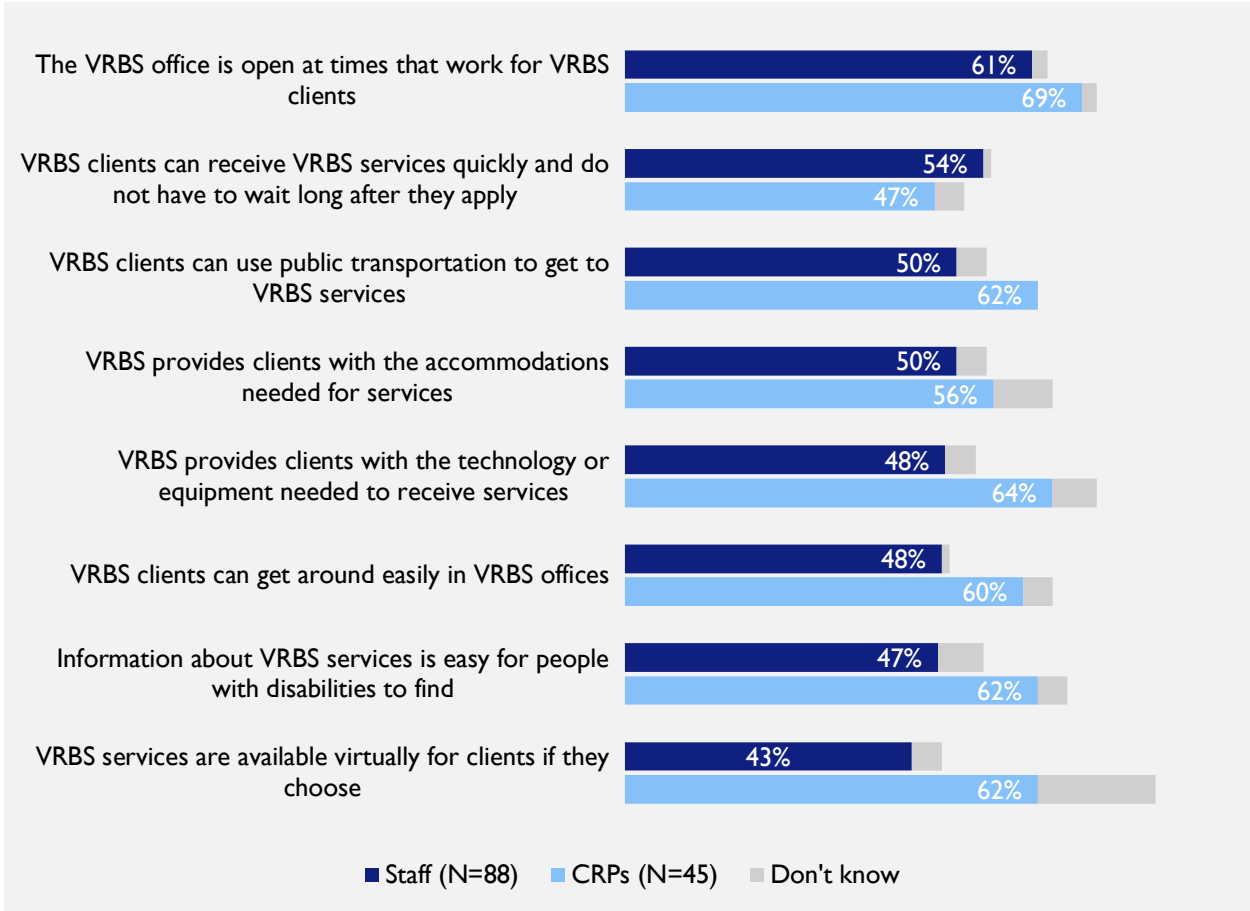
VRBS staff and CRP survey respondents were asked to provide their perspective on the accessibility of services for VRBS clients. Roughly two-thirds of both staff (61%) and CRP respondents (69%) agreed or strongly agreed that VRBS offices are open at times that work for VRBS clients, and roughly half of both groups agree that VRBS clients can receive VRBS services quickly and do not have to wait long after they apply (54% of staff and 47% of CRPs).

Approximately half of staff respondents strongly disagreed that certain services were accessible. Specifically, half (50%) of staff respondents strongly disagreed that VRBS services are available virtually for clients if they choose, 48 percent strongly disagreed that VRBS clients can get

around easily in VRBS offices, 44 percent strongly disagreed that VRBS provides clients with the technology or equipment they need, and 41 percent strongly disagreed that VRBS provides the accommodations clients need for services. These staff perspectives differ from those of clients; more than half of client respondents agreed or strongly agreed that these services were accessible.

STAFF AND CRP RESPONDENTS FIND HOURS AND WAIT TIMES ACCESSIBLE FOR CLIENTS

Figure 94. Percent of VRBS staff and CRP respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements regarding service access



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP Survey, 2023

Despite survey feedback from clients indicating that information about available VRBS services was easy to find, many client focus group respondents were not aware of VRBS services or had heard of them only through limited outreach from their primary care doctor or a personal connection. Stakeholders noted that information about VRBS services can be hard to find, and they described a lack of widespread outreach to increase awareness within the community. Individuals living in tribal communities in particular noted a lack of information about vocational

rehabilitation. Similarly, VRBS staff focus group respondents noted the importance of increasing awareness of resources and providing foundational help to assist prospective clients to recognize their disability and seek responsive services.

Recommendation: Increase public outreach to build greater awareness of, and access to, VRBS services.

Clients who expressed familiarity with VRBS services also noted opportunities to increase information access among program clients; they suggested that more clarity on client expectations, program options, and mentoring would improve success. In addition, clients expressed an interest in increased opportunities to expand the use of virtual service delivery to provide greater access to and navigation of VRBS services.

Recommendation: Increase virtual service delivery to expand service access and support service navigation.

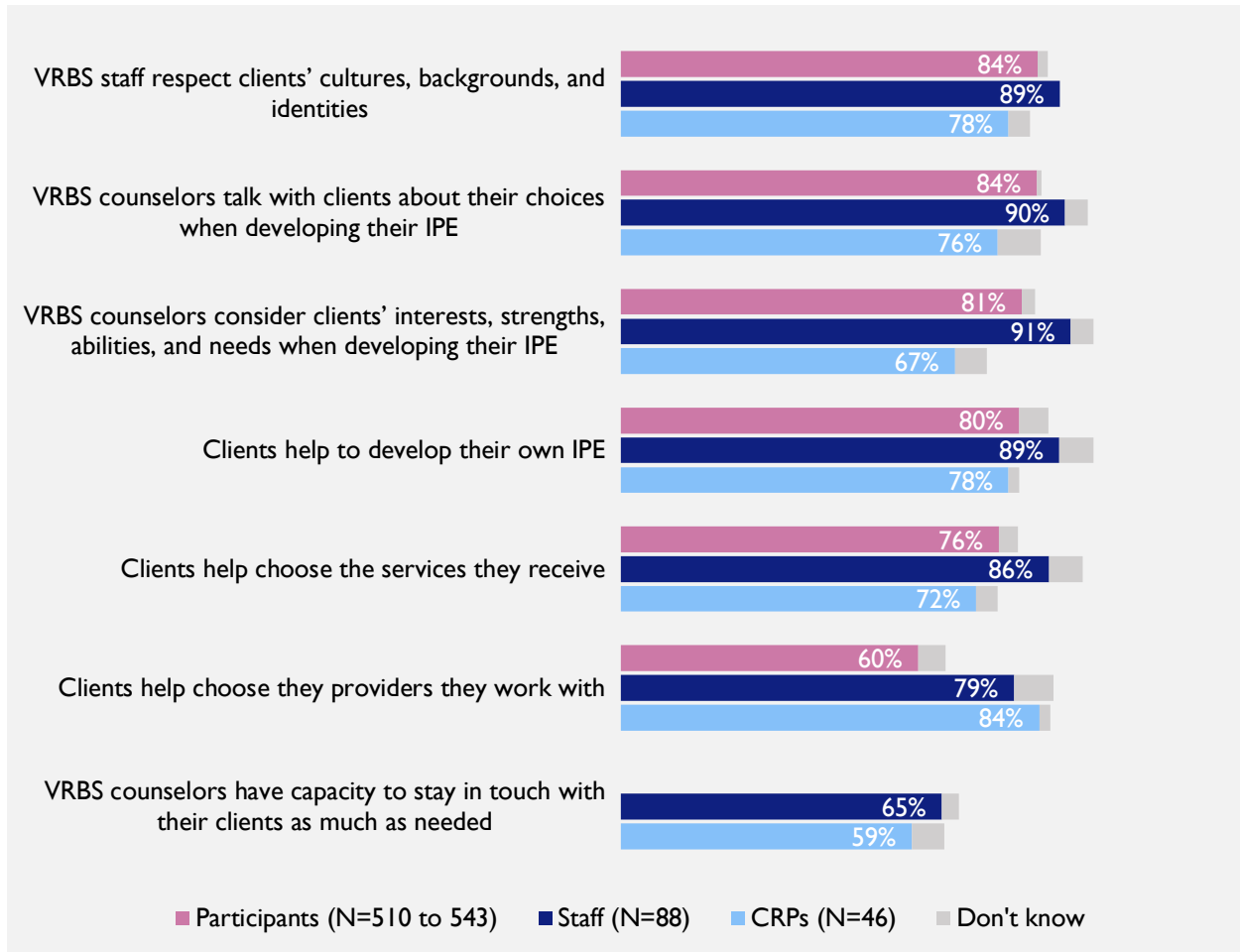
Among client focus group participants receiving VRBS services, most described prompt service delivery, including entry through Blind and Low Vision and transitioning from high school to VRBS. Partners noted that service delivery became more expedient after VRBS shifted from tiered services to an open waiting list. VRBS staff reflected how ending order of selection caused wait times for intake and job placement services to increase considerably. Several client respondents experienced delays in getting the accommodations they needed, and staff respondents remain concerned that clients will get so frustrated with the pace of service delivery that they drop out of services.

INFORMED DECISION-MAKING SERVICES

Respondents identified widespread informed decision-making implementation. VRBS clients, staff, and CRPs provided feedback on informed decision-making. Responses were fairly aligned across respondent groups, with most respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with all the statement options. This positive input suggests a culture grounded in informed decision-making principles and implementation.

RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCE WIDESPREAD INFORMED DECISION-MAKING IMPLEMENTATION

Figure 95. Percent of VRBS clients, staff, and CRP respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements about informed decision-making



Source: Montana VRBS Staff, CRP, Participant Surveys, 2023

Despite strong survey responses regarding informed decision-making, staff focus group feedback was tepid. Multiple respondents described an environment of rapid engagement that leaves minimal time for truly understanding client interests and readiness. Respondents suggest that this is, in part, due to limited case management time to meet with clients to build connections and relationships. Additionally, some partner agency respondents questioned whether VRBS staff have sufficient time to fully inform the client of all available service options, pursue client-driven goal setting, and connect clients with available resources. One staff noted that this dynamic can lead to clients pursuing services that they are not ready for (such as starting school), which can result in poor outcomes that ultimately discourage clients.

COMPETITIVE, INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT

EMPLOYMENT FOR ADULTS WITH IDD

Input on employment for adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities (IDD) from CRPs, partners, and staff centered around themes of choice and a lack of philosophical alignment across the state's DD ecosystem. Many stakeholders expressed support for integrated employment and Employment First ideals which "push the system," such as not automatically assuming that people with IDD can't successfully obtain integrated employment or assuming that a person with IDD prefers sheltered work, when in reality they and their families have not been provided information about their options. Many stakeholders admitted that the system can and should do better in this regard. However, stakeholders also cited several unintended consequences of the state's move toward competitive, integrated employment, including reduced choice and potentially lower pay.

REDUCED CHOICE: Stakeholders report that congregate day programs have folded, reducing options for employment settings among people with IDD looking for work and pressing current employees out of an environment that they enjoyed.

LOWER PAY, NO BENEFITS: Often jobs in the community – which qualify as successful integrated employment – offer lower wages and no benefits compared to work crews, which earn above a living wage and include benefits, but are not considered successful integrated employment.

"I think we as a state need to adopt an Employment First statement, policy, whatever we are going to call it. We need to work away from sheltered employment, because that is the direction our federal government wants us to go. I feel we are many steps behind other states on this. We can't get rid of day programs altogether, but we need to do better. Along with an Employment First policy adoption, the other thing would be training for parents and case managers because people are coming into services and not knowing that there are other options out there." – DDP interview

"Day programs are a barrier. We tend to shove people into day programs and not really encourage them to get jobs. Montana is not the Employment First state that we should be. That is a big barrier. That goes deep down into VR and DD not doing a good job training our providers and the parents that that is what we should be doing first, not day programs." – DDP interview

"Only 19% of people from sheltered workshops were able to work after closing them in Oregon and Washington. I wish we could work more with them because there are some clients for whom this is a good idea. But it shouldn't be an all or nothing thing. In Bozeman and Livingston, the sheltered workshops do a great job getting their clients

working in the community in addition to the sheltered work center. It may just be an hour a week, but this is their socialization. And some clients would have no income without the sheltered workshop setting.” – Staff focus group

“We have a 14(c) certificate; we pay sub minimum wage. For years we have had discussions about getting rid of our 14(c), and this year we’ve done it. As of July 1, we no longer have been providing sub-minimum wages. There was social pressure to do that. It is a no-win situation because the parents and many of the clients relying on that service are very upset with us for doing away with that and asking us what their other options are. A higher level of support is still needed. I’m not saying that facility-based employment is right for everyone, but there should be a choice. We always talk about choice, but then the state and the feds said, ‘no choice.’ I don’t know if that is truly choice. That is the situation we are in now. After getting rid of 14(c), we are now looking for meaningful community integration for them each day.” – DD contractor focus group

“We have a 14(c), too, but we have not used it for over four years because of heat from the federal and state government to make those changes and get away from that. We do have federal employment contracts with extended employment services, and we are always getting audited or scrutinized for those. Again, it goes back to choice. A lot of our clients, when we ask, ‘Do you want to look for another job in the community?’ they don’t, they love their jobs.” – DD contractor focus group

“When a person is referred to us, we could find them a job for \$12 with no benefits in the community and that is counted as successful, integrated employment. But on our work crews, they are not wanting to count that successful employment. I think that needs to be addressed.” – DD contractor focus group

“One thing we’d like to see with VR: we are very involved in federal contracts with Source America and Ability One. What we are hearing is that they consider working on the crews to be integrated employment, but in Montana for the most part they fight that. It can’t be a federal regulation that is stopping them from doing that, it has to be a state interpretation, because what I am hearing is that there are multiple other states – I can’t say if it’s 20 or 30 – where their VR programs accept placement on crews as an integrated, successful work environment.” – DD contractor focus group

Recommendation: Work with DDP to define and pursue a statewide Employment First policy while considering how to increase or sustain choice and options for people with IDD.

Recommendation: Develop criteria for when work crew placements can be considered integrated employment. Criteria could include meeting a threshold wage, whether the job

includes benefits, and whether client has been informed of the options available to them prior to selecting work crew employment.

Recommendation: Ensure VRBS staff and its contractors provide comprehensive information to clients with IDD and their families on the options available to them.

YOUTH WITH IDD

High school administrators shared several challenges with respect to supporting youth with IDD in obtaining competitive, integrated employment. The first has to do with the MONA – [Montana Resource Allocation Protocol](#) – which determines service levels necessary for a student to function independently. As currently structured, a student can receive more service hours if they are in a sheltered workshop than in a community-based competitive employment. This can lead some parents to request sheltered workshop placement, despite the student’s portfolio indicating that they can be successful in community-based employment.

“It’s a math problem. The MONA needs adjustment. The portfolio [of skills, abilities, and supports needed to be independent in community-based employment] is just there in case the world ever changes.” – high school administrator focus group

Recommendation: Work with DDP to analyze how the Montana Resource Allocation Protocol can be modified to align with a shared Employment First philosophy and policy.

VRBS AGENCY PERFORMANCE

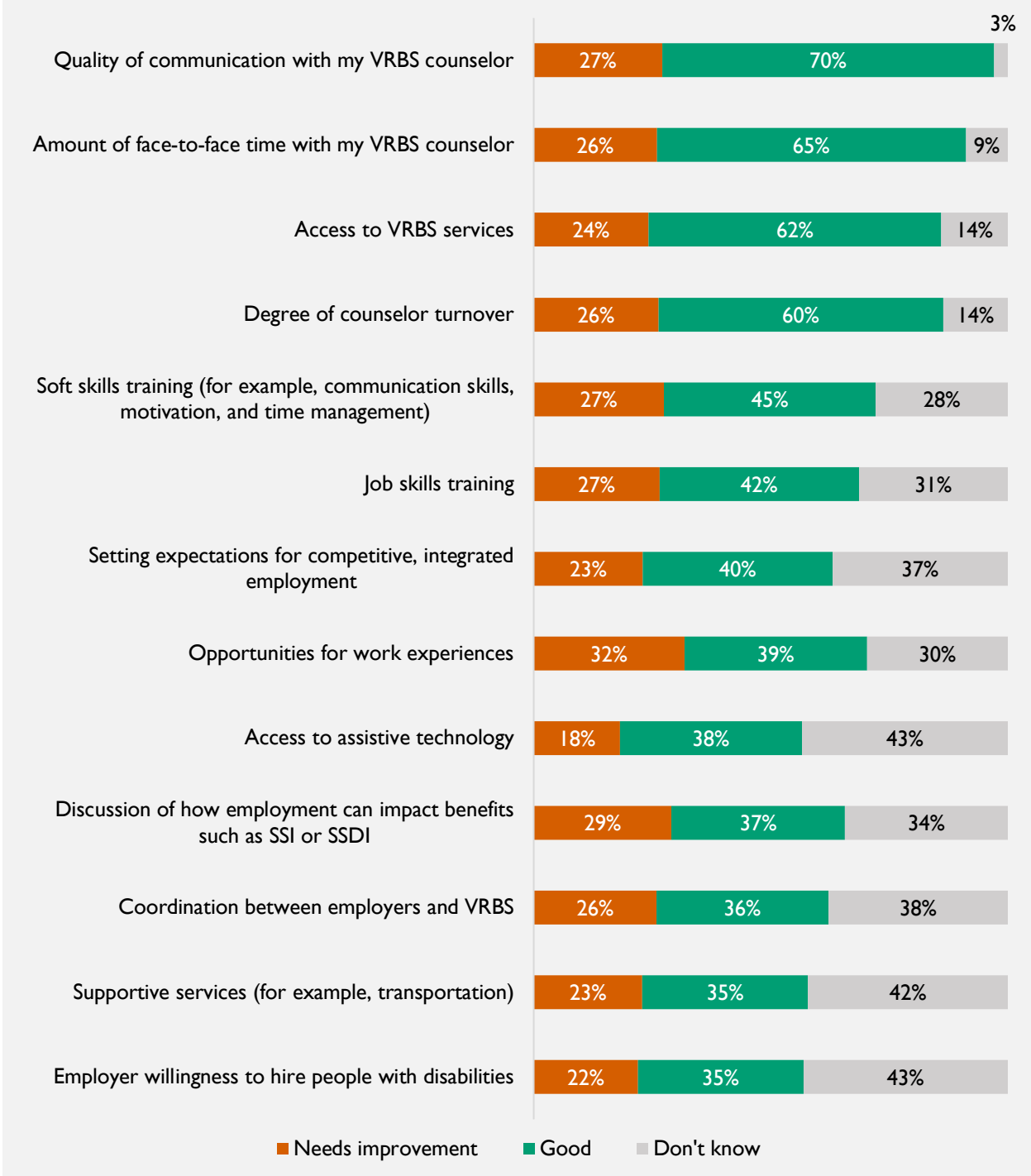
VRBS clients provided positive feedback overall on counselor quality, the amount of face-to-face time they have with their counselor, and access to VRBS services. More than half of client respondents assessed the following services as “good”:

- Quality of community with VRBS counselor (70%)
- Amount of face-to-face time with VRBS counselor (65%)
- Access to VRBS services (62%)
- Degree of counselor turnover (60%)

Roughly one-quarter of respondents assessed a service as “Needs improvement” across all service categories. As the percent of respondents who selected “don’t know” grew, the percent identifying the service as “Good” decreased, suggesting that clients had insufficient information to assess the service.

VRBS CLIENTS PROVIDED POSITIVE FEEDBACK ON COUNSELOR QUALITY, AMOUNT OF FACE-TO-FACE TIME, AND ACCESSIBILITY

Figure 96. Percent of VRBS client respondents by their assessment of VRBS services

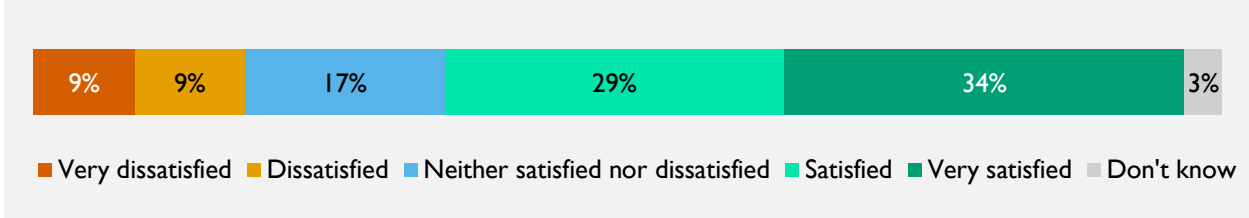


Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

Most VRBS clients are satisfied with services. Overall, nearly two-thirds (63%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the VRBS services they received. Eighteen percent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

MOST VRBS CLIENTS WERE SATISFIED WITH SERVICES

Figure 97. Percent of VRBS clients by level of satisfaction with services

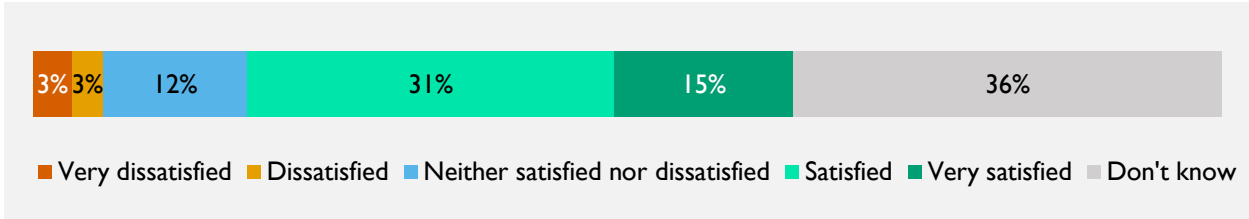


Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

Forty-six percent of Pre-ETS clients were satisfied or very satisfied with their services, and 6% who were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Nearly one-third of respondents selected “don’t know” regarding their level of satisfaction.

STUDENTS WERE SATISFIED WITH PRE-ETS SERVICES

Figure 98. Percent of Pre-ETS clients by level of satisfaction with services



Source: Montana VRBS Pre-ETS Participant Survey, 2023

VARIATION IN SERVICE ASSESSMENT AMONG SUBGROUPS

Assessment of VRBS services varied by subgroups. Figure 99 illustrates whether the percent of survey respondents in any given subgroup that assessed a service as “good” or “needing improvement” was significantly different than the percentage of individuals not in that subgroup (e.g., rural vs. non-rural).

CLIENT ASSESSMENT OF VRBS SERVICES VARIED BY SUBGROUP

Figure 99. Participant VRBS service assessment by key subgroups

Key:

○	No significant difference between target population and comparison group
●	Target population provided better assessment for at least one VRBS service category
◐	Target population reported worse assessment for up to half of VRBS service categories
◑	Target population reported worse assessment for more than half of VRBS service categories

How to read this chart: This chart displays variation in how different client subgroups (target survey respondents) assessed VRBS services, compared to people not in that subgroup (comparison survey respondents). It is not comparing subgroups to each other. For example, survey respondents who were veterans were more likely to report worse service assessment (e.g., needs improvement) for up to half of VRBS service categories compared to non-veteran respondents.

Target Survey Respondents	VRBS Service Assessment	Comparison Survey Respondents
Behavioral health disability	●	(No behavioral health disability)
IDD	●	(No IDD)
Substance use disorder	●	(No substance use disorder)
Deafness or hearing impairment	○	(No deafness or hearing impairment)
English language learner	○	(Not an English language learner)
Rural	○	(Non-rural)
American Indian	◐	(Not American Indian)
Blind or vision impairment	◐	(No blindness or vision impairment)
Brain injury disability	◐	(No brain injury)
Homeless	◐	(Not experiencing homelessness)
Low income	◐	(Not low income)
Mobility disorder	◐	(No mobility disorder)
More than one disability	◐	(One disability)
Neurodiverse	◐	(No neurodiversity)
Veteran	◐	(Not a veteran)

Source: Montana VRBS Participant Survey, 2023

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The VRBS Comprehensive Needs Assessment provides a comprehensive review of current service delivery status, successes, and opportunities for refinement. Several key themes emerged across data sources and analyses that provide context for evaluating possible recommendations and agency next steps.

VRBS is serving more people. VRBS is serving a growing number of clients, with the client count more than doubling since March 2020. This growth in overall number of clients is coupled with a growth in the diversity of client needs as VRBS serves all three tiers of priority categories.

VRBS operates in a multi-system environment. VRBS straddles multiple service delivery systems, including WIOA, health and human services, and education, which presents complexities in terms of collaboration and data sharing but also opens doors for innovative solutions. Aligning philosophical approaches across different partners, such as the Employment First philosophy and consensus around benefits counseling, may assist in developing a more unified system. Moreover, CSNA findings suggest that many people are not fully aware of or do not fully understand VRBS, which may be attributed to its intersection with various service systems. Here, too, collaboration across systems to develop a more coordinated outreach, seamless referral across agency partners, and “no wrong door” entry may increase resident awareness of and engagement with VRBS.

VRBS clients are reflective of the state population, but opportunities for reaching underserved populations remain. The demographic composition of VRBS clients is generally representative of the broader population of people with disabilities in the state, including by race/ethnicity and age. While VRBS is generally succeeding in serving its target population—people with disabilities in the labor market without jobs—disparities exist. There are variations in investments and outcomes related to race and ethnicity, indicating structural inequities that need to be addressed. These disparities are particularly pronounced for Latino/a communities and people living on reservations.

Additionally, the needs assessment indicated that certain subpopulations—including people with behavioral health disabilities, people experiencing homelessness, those living in rural areas, and individuals with significant or multiple disabilities—are underserved by VRBS. Subpopulations considered unserved or underserved often experience compounding barriers; therefore, collaboration with agency partners is critical to improving service delivery and outcomes for these populations.

Montana’s sprawling geography impacts service delivery. Effective service delivery in a large state with a relatively small population is logistically challenging. Cross-partner

collaboration may help address this issue, offering opportunities to rethink funding models and break out of traditional silos.

Transportation barriers are common. Transportation emerges as the most prominent client barrier, affecting both adults and youth, and hindering their participation in services and vocational goal achievement. Developing or updating an Olmstead plan with a focus on employment and transportation could be a valuable step towards reducing transportation barriers.

Workforce capacity and development require attention. Workforce capacity and development are significant concerns within VRBS. Increasing staff pay, revisiting education and certification requirements, and exploring tiered systems and career ladder options may be effective steps to addressing high turnover rates. Capacity building, specialization, and the establishment of Individual Placement and Support (IPS) as a new service can also contribute to a stronger workforce. Additionally, the tension between in-house staff and contracting reflects capacity issues on both sides and suggests opportunities for alternative approaches. These include establishing additional CRPs, creating self-direction in CRP contracting, improving collaboration with CRPs, and enhancing Pre-ETS contracting that better supports participants and schools.

Stronger cross-system collaboration can help address identified challenges.

Collaboration with partners, including integrated data systems, cross-training, shared jobs in rural areas, collaborative job development, and the provision of supportive services, is critical in developing a more effective vocational rehabilitation system. Additionally, potential eligibility process enhancements (such as presumptive and universal application) could be explored to enhance access to services.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING

VRBS's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan is organized into five goals, as follows:

- **Access and quality:** Montanans with disabilities can access high-quality competitive, integrated employment.
- **Youth engagement:** Montana youth with disabilities are effectively engaged in vocational exploration and work readiness training.
- **Equity:** All people with disabilities are engaged and valued for their abilities and contributions to our workforce, with extra emphasis on reaching underserved and unserved populations.
- **Coordination:** Montana's workforce system is coordinated to effectively support people with disabilities and their employers.
- **Organizational sustainability:** VRBS is a stable, sustainable organization.

The following table organizes recommendations identified through this CSNA according to the five corresponding VRBS goals to help build cohesion between needs assessment findings and strategic next steps.

CSNA PROVIDES RECOMMENDATIONS TO REACH FIVE GOALS OF VRBS STRATEGIC PLAN

Figure 100. Recommendations based on CSNA for each of VRBS’ five goals

Access and Quality	
Focus	Recommendation
Awareness and understanding	Increase awareness and understanding of VRBS and enhance relationships with partners, tribes, businesses, people with disabilities, and families.
	Increase public outreach to build greater awareness of, and access to, VRBS services.
Transportation services	Explore innovative, collaborative transportation options across agencies, including DPHHS (Medicaid, Big Sky Waiver, BHDD, DDP, TANF), Department of Labor, Veterans Affairs, Tribal agencies, Department of Transportation, and transportation providers with a focus on shared service delivery and layered funding. Consider moving the transportation coordinator position outside of DETD to encourage and enhance cross-department collaboration in addressing transportation challenges.
	Include transportation needs and services in Montana’s 2024 Olmstead plan.
Self-employment	Consider developing a specialized focus on business plan writing for VRBS clients/people with disabilities collaboratively with WIOA partners.
	Clarify the self-employment service scope and work with VRBS counselors and CRPs to ensure understanding and consistent implementation.
	Analyze the impact of the newly implemented alternative to self-employment for VRBS clients who work as contractors for other businesses.
Customized employment	Analyze outcomes associated with the new customized employment approach and adjust as needed through a continuous improvement process.
Work-based learning	Clarify the work-based learning service scope and work with CRPs and VRBS counselors to ensure understanding.
	Determine whether broader WIOA collaboration could benefit implementation of work-based learning.
Soft skills	Improve the definition of soft skills services to support the full scope of work skill and soft skills needs.
	Consider developing soft skills services collaboratively with WIOA partners and businesses to address broader workforce soft skill deficits.
Adaptive equipment / assistive technology	Enhance referrals and handoffs to MonTECH to support improved client access to assistive technology services.
Interpreter services	Work with partners to understand post-secondary interpreter rate constraints and support efforts to address constraints.
Benefits counseling	Increase the reach of benefits counseling services to clients, including to people who are not yet employed.
	Work with WIOA and other partners, including mental health centers and Medicaid, to increase alignment in benefits counseling services and philosophy.

Higher education	Analyze the approach to enhancing counseling for clients and Pre-ETS participants considering higher education options.
Financial literacy	Clarify the scope of financial literacy services to increase consistency of services. Work with WIOA partners to ensure that a full continuum of financial literacy courses is available to meet diverse needs.
IPS	Establish and implement IPS services to better serve individuals with behavioral health disabilities.
Supportive services	Increase advocacy for and provide more supportive services.
Virtual services	Increase virtual service delivery to expand service access and support service navigation.
Informed decision-making and choice around competitive, integrated employment	Work with DDP to define and pursue a statewide Employment First policy while considering how to increase or sustain choice and options for people with IDD.
	Develop criteria for when work crew placements can be considered integrated employment. Criteria could include meeting a threshold wage, whether the job includes benefits, and whether client has been informed of the options available to them prior to selecting work crew employment.
	Ensure VRBS staff and its contractors provide comprehensive information to clients with IDD and their families on the options available to them.
Youth Engagement	
Focus	Recommendation
Awareness and understanding	Continue to build relationships with statewide and local education entities to increase awareness and understanding of Pre-ETS services and how they benefit schools and students with disabilities. Consider creating tools to help schools understand the program, developing detailed instructions for how to use funds, and sharing data with schools and teachers to understand the impact of Pre-ETS funding.
	Support consistent staff understanding of and communication about VRBS referrals for Pre-ETS participants.
Eligibility	Analyze options for more efficient, automated Pre-ETS application and enrollment with built-in business rules and error coding.
Services for youth	Explore opportunities to develop career or innovation centers.
	Analyze the approach to enhancing counseling for clients and Pre-ETS participants considering higher education options.
	Consider ways to support clients and Pre-ETS participants in applying for post-secondary institutions earlier to ensure sufficient time to prepare housing, financial aid, and class schedule options for incoming students.
	Work with DDP to analyze how the Montana Resource Allocation Protocol can be modified to align with a shared Employment First philosophy and policy.
	Partner with driver's education programs in schools and the Havre-based instructor program to increase awareness of obligations and opportunities to accommodate students with disabilities. Determine how to share information about students with IEPs and provide adaptive equipment to increase accessibility.
	Analyze opportunities to increase access to private driver's education instruction for students with disabilities and ensure sufficient reimbursement to sustain services.
	Determine if there are more efficient and effective approaches to layering VRBS and Pre-ETS funding to provide services to broadly needed by Pre-ETS participants, like driver's education and summer training.

Relationships and contracting with high schools	Analyze Pre-ETS costs and outcomes by school district classification to evaluate the effectiveness of tiered reimbursement rates.
	Consider contracting mechanisms to engage special education teachers and school staff in summertime and after-school Pre-ETS service provision as part of the broader re-evaluation of Pre-ETS contracting approaches.
Equity	
Focus	Recommendation
Improving services for unserved and underserved people	Increase investment in cultural competency training for staff, consulting with partners about effective professional development options.
	Develop organizational performance measures focused on racial and cultural equity.
Individual with behavioral health disabilities	Establish and implement IPS services to better serve individuals with behavioral health disabilities.
	Collaborate with Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities to determine how to strengthen vocational services within the newly defined, less intensive Assertive Community Treatment service requirements. This could include VRBS training or centralized VRBS services for ACT teams.
	Participate in HB872/Behavioral Health System for Future Generations committee meetings to understand and influence behavioral health funding decisions.
Individuals with brain injury	Analyze approaches to better serving individuals with brain injury in collaboration with partner agencies. Consider need to develop brain injury waiver or other focused program to coordinate diverse service needs.
Individuals with intellectual or development disability	Support Developmental Disabilities Program efforts to reduce the 0208 DD Medicaid waiver waiting list, including processes to ensure Pre-ETS participants are on the waiting list.
Individual who are Native American/American Indian	Work with partners to consider innovative, collaborative models of shared service delivery for tribal areas. This may include cross-training, job sharing, or cross-agency service pathway development.
Rural residents	Work with partners to consider innovative, collaborative models of shared service delivery for rural regions. This may include cross-training, job sharing, or cross-agency service pathway development.
Individuals who are Latino/a	Analyze opportunities to better serve people with disabilities who identify as Hispanic/Latino, including hiring multi-lingual staff, having forms and online information in Spanish, and conducting increased outreach through partner organizations working with this population.
Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing	Work with partners to communicate with the legislature about the need to raise post-secondary interpreter rates.
Individuals with significant disabilities	Analyze outcomes associated with the new customized employment approach and adjust as needed through a continuous improvement process.
Youth in the foster system	Identify youth who are in or have exited the foster system and communicate this information to colleges.

Coordination	
Focus	Recommendation
Increase cross-agency collaboration	Work to improve communication across all partners, with a focus on partner service agencies and community service providers working with shared clients and/or serving people with disabilities VRBS is underserving.
	Focus on developing relationships with partners that staff assessed as having weaker relationships with VRBS, including Best Beginnings Scholarships, the Big Sky Waiver, and youth foster care programs.
	Explore innovative, collaborative transportation options across agencies, including DPHHS (Medicaid, Big Sky Waiver, BHDD, DDP, TANF), Department of Labor, Veterans Affairs, Tribal agencies, Department of Transportation, and transportation providers with a focus on shared service delivery and layered funding. Consider moving the transportation coordinator position outside of DETD to encourage and enhance cross-department collaboration in addressing transportation challenges.
	Continue or reinvigorate WIOA training and awareness activities.
	Institute or reinvigorate process to give and receive updates across WIOA programs.
	Explore the possibility of developing shared WIOA counselor positions to address service delivery challenges in rural areas.
	Work with TANF to determine how to better collaborate on service delivery for shared clients. Determine approaches to maximize use of TANF supportive services and TANF Pathways' client advocates. Determine if there are options for cross-training as also recommended for Job Services.
	Work with colleges to lessen documentation requirements for student disability evaluations at application.
	Explore collaboration opportunities with CILs to improve service accessibility and client outcomes.
	Continue to focus on building relationships with Tribes and Tribal programs and increasing awareness of State VRBS and how it can benefit individuals and Tribal VR programs. Analyze options of cross-training Tribal-State VR counselors and providing services on reservations with Tribal staff.
Employer engagement	Increase employer awareness about the quality of the workforce among people with disabilities. Communicate examples of how hiring people with disabilities can fill needed skill gaps and increase retention, and leverage employers who have successfully hired people with disabilities to share their stories with other employers.
	Increase employer and employee awareness about universal design to promote workplace accessibility and facilitate greater knowledge of and receptiveness to needed individual accommodations.
	Work with WIOA partners to explore opportunities for collaborative business engagement aligned with spectrum of client vocational needs and program requirements.
Organizational Sustainability	
Focus	Recommendation
Workforce stabilization	Build program capacity to serve the vocational needs of people with disabilities through increased staff and CRP hiring and retention.

Culture	Continue to work to develop a sense of community across VRBS.
Education and training	Allow staff to complete education and training requirements within or as a part of the work day.
	Analyze the option of developing or enhancing a career ladder with multiple levels of counselors based on education and training. Tiers could be based on obtaining a master's degree, a rehabilitation counseling master's degree, a CRC certification, and completing other professional development, with increased pay associated with obtaining higher tiers.
	Refine the training system to increase investment in staff. As a part of this, consider implementing a mentoring program for new staff to share learnings and supplement supervision capacity.
Higher education pipeline development	Enhance relationships with universities that have counseling programs, particularly those offering rehabilitation counseling degrees. Ensure that schools have an awareness of VRBS and its career opportunities and accurate information about education requirements.
	Be clear in recruiting materials that VRBS will help pay people to go to school to meet the education requirements; new hires do not need to have a rehabilitation counseling master's degree to be hired.
Compensation	Continue to increase compensation across VRBS staffing positions to align with other markets and 2022 rate studies.
Caseloads	Analyze caseload balancing approaches, including balancing the priority level/intensity needs of clients and the scope of work required for counselors based on the availability of contracted, technician, and specialized resources.
Paperwork reduction/ system improvement	Continue to improve policies and procedures to help staff effectively and efficiently do their work, with a focus on streamlining and removing policies and procedures as much as possible. VRBS may want to consider business process redesign or value stream improvement process to identify opportunities for improvement.
	Review Madison system functionality and requirements to see where Montana has added anything to federal RSA requirements. Ease or remove state-imposed requirements.
	Allow for increased access to case notes so VRBS staff can make corrections without needing a supervisor to provide access.
	Continue to improve the authorization process, looking for ways to reduce paperwork, including combining Pre-ETS and VRBS authorizations for shared clients.
	Work with partners to enhance Madison system to support shared service delivery and coordination through Madison, including centralized/consolidated case notes, authorized hours, utilization of authorized hours, and invoicing.
	Evaluate opportunities to more effectively share information across disparate data systems, including leveraging functionality developed as part of the MPATH (Montana's Program for Automating and Transforming Healthcare) project and the common client and provider indices.
	Analyze opportunities to support a shared or universal application across WIOA programs, as well as potentially other health and human services partner agencies.
	Analyze opportunity for online service options for clients.
	Establish additional CRP providers to enhance service-delivery capacity.

CRP capacity	Consider developing a self-direction services option to increase capacity of CRPs. This could be modeled after self-direction in other Montana Medicaid waiver and state plan services.
	Reconsider the contracting approach for Pre-ETS services outside of schools. This may include a focus on contracting with youth-focused agencies and/or considering a deliverable-based payment approach versus using an hourly reimbursement.
Improved CRP collaboration	Analyze opportunities to improve communication and collaboration with CRPs, including regular case review meetings, improved referral processes, data sharing through Madison, and joint trainings.
CRP compensation	Continue to increase CRP rates.