

# **2022 MONTANA'S STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL GOVERNOR'S REPORT**

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

**SRC Mission Statement:** The State Rehabilitation Council advises VRBS to improve policies, programs, and delivery of services through a collaborative effort with other agencies.

## **SRC CHAIRPERSON'S STATEMENT**

To begin, a sincere thank you to my fellow council members for entrusting me with chairperson duties for the 2022 calendar year. It has been a wonderful year of learning about and working collaboratively to grow and improve Montana's Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS), and I am proud of our accomplishments. First and most importantly, the SRC has worked closely with VRBS leadership over the last few years regarding the order of selection (OOS) waiting list and I am pleased to announce that, with the blessing of the SRC, on August 10, 2022, Category 2 was officially opened, allowing those with significant disabilities direct access to VRBS services. This is a huge success for VRBS, and the SRC is so grateful for the hard work of all the VRBS field staff and leadership to achieve this huge milestone.

In addition to assisting with the opening of Category 2, the SRC had the opportunity to send Wes Feist, Director of the State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB) and fellow SRC council member, to attend the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) in San Antonio, TX in October 2022. During his time at the NCSRC, Wes collaborated and learned from colleagues across the US with the goal to enhance the employment opportunities of persons with disabilities through the public vocational rehabilitation system. Wes will utilize the knowledge gained to broaden workforce and economic development for people with disabilities and

organizations in need of quality employees through his work on the SWIB and SRC.

Other SRC highlights from 2022 include:

- Recruiting 11 new SRC members, nine of whom have been formally appointed by the Governor.
- Reviewing, editing, voting on, and passing revised SRC Bylaws with the expectation of annual review.
- Updating and revising the SRC Manual and displaying the manual on the SRC website.
- Updating council positions and creating descriptions of duties for each.
- Hosting Cheryl Bates Harris from the National Disability Rights Network to present on the role and function of the Rehabilitation Councils as well as Section 511 of the Rehabilitation Act.
- Collaborating with the State Independent Living Council (SILC) to form a work group regarding Section 511.
- Engaging in and partnering with Economic Development Corporations in Great Falls, Choteau, and Havre to understand community growth and identify potential partnership opportunities.
- Reviewing 46 VRBS case story submissions and selecting four to be included in this report.
- Virtually joining the Independent Living Symposium in August 2022 for their meeting with Governor Gianforte in Great Falls.

VRBS continues to serve thousands of Montanans with disabilities statewide providing unwavering support to individuals preparing for, obtaining, maintaining, and advancing in employment. This year was a year of growth and continuous collaboration between the SRC, VRBS staff, providers, and local businesses.

We look forward to another successful year in 2023!

Emma Rooney

Chair of Montana's State Rehabilitation Council

## **MONTANA'S STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL**

- 3476 Individuals served by Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS)
- 3355 Individuals served by Independent Living Services
- 302 Individuals served by Older Blind Services
- 267 Individuals served by Extended Employment Services
- 2220 Individuals served by Pre-Employment Transitions Services

### **VRBS SUCCESSFUL JOB PLACEMENTS**

- 2022: 297
- 2021: 145
- 2020: 162

## **STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL**

**Members:** Celina Cline, Wes Feist, John Gorton, Kathy Hampton, Chanda Hermanson, Kendra Joyce, Lacey Keller, Mike Manhardt, Tom Manthey, Denise May, Doug McElroy, Corinne Moore, Carlos Ramalho, Marcy Roberts, Emma Rooney, Jean Schroeder, and Brian Tocher (pending members: Joleen Weatherwax and Gabrielle Broere)

### **VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES SUCCESS STORY**

**Disability Type:** Traumatic Brain Injury and Spinal Cord Injury/Paraplegia

**Community Partners Involved:** Living Independently for Today and Tomorrow (LIFTT), AgrAbility, MonTECH, Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA) Project

**Employment Goal Achieved:** Farmer

**Services Provided:** Vocational counseling and guidance, information and referral, Social Security benefits counseling, rehabilitation technology - lift and track chair

**Length of time in Program:** 2.5 years

When Curtis came to the VR office in May 2019 at the age of 34, he had no hope and felt that his life was over. He had been a farmer since he was 15 years old, working with his father on their land. His life turned upside down as the result of a motorcycle accident in March 2018 that left him with a traumatic brain injury and paraplegia. He never thought he would work again and depended on his family for everything. He had been in and out of hospitals for a year and felt convinced that he had no purpose to his life. VR began providing services to Curtis in the fall of 2020 and he allowed himself to dream about being a farmer again. VR provided a number of community partners that helped the client gain Social Security benefits through the WIPA Program as well as provided additional information and referrals, so he was connected to needed supports. Curtis was even able to attend the AgrAbility Conference with his VR Counselor in Billings in August 2021. The client didn't want to believe that VR could really assist with the needed rehabilitation technology that would allow him to be lifted into farm equipment or maneuver difficult terrain with a Track wheelchair. It wasn't until June 2021 when his VR counselor began to show him the purchase approvals for this equipment that he truly allowed himself to believe that he would have purpose and meaning in his life again and be able to work the land as before. In June, VR purchased a lift for the client's vehicle that would raise him safely into any piece of farm equipment as well as bring him back to the ground into his wheelchair. The lift is remote controlled giving the client much desired work independence. In July, VR purchased the client a Track Wheelchair that would allow him to stand up for the first time in four years and go through mud and snow to check gates and fencing. When his case closed in November 2021, the only thing he could say was, "It is truly unbelievable how my life has changed. I have purpose and meaning again. I am a farmer and I look forward to it every day."

## **TRIBAL VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SUCCESS STORY**

**Disability Type:** Diabetes and Hearing Loss

**Community Partners Involved:** Blackfeet Tribe & Blackfeet Community College

**Employment Goal Achieved:** Security Guard

**Services Provided:** Vocational counseling and guidance, information and referral, on-the-job training, maintenance - work clothing, rehabilitation technology - hearing aids

**Length of Time in Program:** 6 years

Robert entered the VR Program in 2016 and was initially interested in obtaining VR assistance with hearing aids. VR purchased hearing aids for Robert, and shortly thereafter he began looking for a new, permanent, part-time job. He eventually expressed a strong interest in becoming a security guard to his VR Counselor. Counseling and guidance and information and referral were provided to Robert by his VR Counselor. He was great at staying in contact with his counselor and also stayed very active in his community. He previously worked for the Tribal Council as a security guard and had a major impact on his community by organizing security for the entire annual "Native American Indian Days" event. In 2021, he found a temporary job as a security guard at the Blackfeet Community College that turned into a permanent position through his hard work and dedication to his job. VR assisted him with completing a C.P.R. class to further increase his skills and purchased him additional work clothes. Robert is very compassionate when it comes to providing security for the Blackfeet Community College and surrounding area on the Blackfeet Tribal lands. He has a passion for the community and keeping it safe.

## **HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION SUCCESS STORY**

**Disability Type:** Specific Learning Disabilities in Reading and Written Expression

**Community Partners Involved:** Montana Youth Leadership Forum (MYLF), Big Sky High School, Rec MT, Missoula Chapter of Montana Association for Rehabilitation (MAR), Movin' On in Montana - University of Montana

**Services Provided:** Job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on post-secondary programs, workplace readiness training, instruction in self-advocacy

Candy first met with her Pre-Employment Transitions Services (Pre-ETS) Specialist during her freshman year of high school. During that meeting, she applied for the VRBS program & began receiving Pre-ETS. Through Pre-ETS, she learned how to write a resume & completed interest inventories to explore jobs matching her skills and interests. Additionally, she participated in the following specialized Pre-ETS offerings: Movin' On in Montana, Montana Youth Leadership Forum (MYLF) Step 1 as a delegate and as staff, & MYLF Step 2 as a delegate. Movin' On, held on the UM-Missoula campus, taught her about support services offered on campus for students with disabilities, provided her an experience as to what college life is like, and allowed her to make new friends through the experience. At MYLF, Ms. Cohen learned about various jobs, developed self-advocacy skills, acquired resources and supports, met new people, & learned about others' experiences with adapting and coping with challenges in their lives. As a delegate in MYLF Step 1, she was voted onto the leadership team by her peers to represent Montana at the APRIL Conference which required her to learn and practice new skills, like public speaking, to become a better leader. At the APRIL Conference, Ms. Cohen learned about various programs that are available to help others and gained experience in educating others about community programs and resources. Additionally, she participated in a 40-hour work-based learning experience where she tried out a job and learned new work skills. She relayed the work

experience was a great way to learn more about herself and her preferred learning style. She attended Pre-ETS summer camps hosted by Missoula County Public Schools for the first two weeks of summer following her 9th and 10th grade years. Here, she participated in various employment activities including soft skills training, job tours in the community, informational and mock interviews, as well as traveled on Mountain Line public transportation and worked on her resume. Through VRBS and Pre-ETS, she gained many life-changing experiences and learned valuable employment skills, preparing her for her life after high school.

## **OLDER BLIND PROGRAM (OBP) SUCCESS STORY**

**Disability Type:** Optic Nerve Atrophy

**Community Partners Involved:** MonTECH, Veteran's Administration, Leading Edge Vision

**Services Provided:** Telephone management, mobility, adaptive cooking, money management, transportation, computer training

Voss came to the Older Blind Program (OBP) with Optic Nerve Atrophy which significantly affected his vision and daily life to the point where he was contemplating giving up many things, including playing trombone in a local jazz band. He received a low vision evaluation and assessment from the Vision Rehabilitation Therapist (VRT) after which he worked with his VRT to create goals for regaining independence and resuming life tasks. He received technology training regarding the use of his Samsung phone and computer training for Windows Magnifier from his VRT, as well as training on Zoomtext from the Veteran's Administration (VA). A CCTV machine was provided to him from the VA and he was trained to use it for handwriting and completing forms, helping him to independently connect with family and friends and complete essential reading and paperwork. He also received orientation and mobility training for traveling within his home and around the neighborhood and was provided information on local transportation resources. He was referred to MonTECH to explore assistive technology options to keep him performing in the jazz band due his difficulty reading the sheet music. He was able to demo various options and ended up finding

the Jordy, a battery-operated, full-color portable system that can be worn like a pair of glasses, to be the most useful to him for continuing to read music. The VA purchased the Jordy and he has continued participating in the jazz band. Upon exit from OBP, he reported improved confidence in completing tasks he once thought he would have to give up doing and expressed the resources that have been provided have allowed him to fully participate in his life once again.

## **STATISTICS FROM THE MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF LABOR & INDUSTRY**

The Montana Department of Labor & Industry has provided a brief summary of Montana's population with disabilities as it relates to the workforce. This includes information such as labor force participation, employment, and earnings. All data included covers 2021 and Montana's population 18-64 years old, using the American Community Survey 2021 one-year estimates, unless otherwise noted. The age groups included are those that are available in the detailed table estimates produced by Census.

In 2021, there were 72,758 Montanans with disabilities ages 18-64 in Montana. This population was split among 36,623 Montanans with disabilities not in the labor force, 32,444 in the labor force and working, and 3,691 in the labor force but unemployed. As shown in Figure 1, labor force participation rates are significantly lower among Montanans with disabilities. At 44.6%, labor force participation rates are about 30% lower than the overall statewide rate. Additionally, the unemployment rate of 10.2% for Montanans with disabilities is over three times higher than that of the Montanans without disabilities. Compared to the U.S., labor force participation rates are lower in Montana for people with disabilities, by about 3%. However, unemployment rates are lower in Montana compared to nationally, also by about 3%.

Montanans with disabilities tend to work full-time, year-round, less than Montanans without. About 50% of Montana's workers with disabilities worked all year and full time. This compares to about 63% for Montanans without disabilities. This difference can explain some of the difference in



income levels experienced by Montanans with disabilities. For individuals with earnings in the past 12-months in Montana, the median earnings for all workers are shown below in Figure 2. This statistic includes all workers ages 16 and up who had earnings. For Montanans with disabilities, median earnings were \$22,400 while for those with no disability had median earnings of \$35,844.

Shown in Figure 3, in 2021, 22.5% of Montanans with disabilities (16,251 people) had income in the past 12-months that was at or below the poverty level, compared to 10.8% for Montanans without disabilities. This represents nearly double the rate of poverty for Montanans with disabilities. As such, the population with disabilities makes up about 21% people at or below poverty levels, despite representing 11% of the population 18 to 64.

### **WHAT IS COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT (CIE)?**

Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE) is defined as work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is:

- Compensated at or above minimum wage and comparable to the customary rate paid by the employer to employees without disabilities performing similar duties and with similar training and experience;
- Receiving the same level of benefits provided to other employees without disabilities in similar positions;
- At a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities; and
- Presented opportunities for advancement similar to other employees without disabilities in similar positions.

### **STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Improve the quality of VRBS services by decreasing caseload sizes and recruiting and retaining quality VR staff to provide the services.
- Invest in current staff by providing ongoing training and opportunities for advancement as well as actively engage in succession planning.
- Evaluate current expectations of staff and modify as needed to decrease burnout and maintain quality staff.

- Increase recruitment and improve retention by reviewing requirements for professional staff and updating job descriptions as necessary.
- Implement strategies and monitor processes to improve efficiencies for rapidly engaging individuals into services.
- Continue to increase the percentage of clients meeting and exceeding Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) performance indicators.
- Maintain fiscal stability following completion of Maintenance of Effort penalty years.
- Continue to increase participation of students (14-21) with disabilities engaged in high quality Pre-Employment Transition Services.
- Continue to increase support for youth in foster placements through partnerships with Child and Family Services Division.
- Increase engagement with schools and community partners to improve services for youth in foster care, attending alternative schools, and in the justice system, as well as homeless and at-risk youth.
- Continue to move individuals out of subminimum wage/sheltered workshops into Competitive Integrated Employment.
- Continue to contract with Centers for Independent Living to provide Career Counseling and Information and Referral services and ensure effective monitoring of 14c certificate holders.
- Continue and improve collaboration with American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Programs.
- Engage with local employers to increase apprenticeship opportunities for VRBS clients.

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