



STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL



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

The State Rehabilitation Council advises Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services to improve policies, programs, and delivery of services through a collaborative effort with other agencies.

MONTANA'S STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL



Corinne Moore
SRC Chair
Business, Industry, &
Labor Representative



Celina Cline
VRBS Counselor, Ex-
Officio



Tammie Hickey
State Workforce
Innovation Board
(SWIB) Representative



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SRC Co-Chair
Current Client



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Business, Industry, &
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Chanda Hermanson
VRBS Director, Ex-
Officio



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Rehabilitation
Program (CRP)
Representative



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Disability Advocacy
Representative



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Representative



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Section 121 Project
Representative



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Eva Belatski
Client Assistance
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Representative



Desiree Johnson
Office of Public
Instruction (OPI)
Representative



Aaron Schultz
Disability Advocacy
Representative

VRBS DATA & LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

7074

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED
BY VRBS

2562

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY PRE-
EMPLOYMENT
TRANSITIONS
SERVICES

211

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY
EXTENDED
EMPLOYMENT

2406

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY
INDEPENDENT
LIVING

594

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY
OLDER BLIND
PROGRAM

On behalf of the Montana State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), I am pleased to share this year's highlights and activities as part of the annual report on Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS). Our council has worked hard to strengthen advocacy, expand collaboration, and keep the voices of Montanans with disabilities at the center of our work.

A key step forward this year was the creation of a Legislative Committee. The committee has already offered trainings on how to connect with lawmakers and track disability-related bills, helping our members become stronger advocates in preparation for the upcoming legislative session.

We also invested in making the SRC more accessible and welcoming. A new orientation packet and informational flyer were finalized and printed, giving prospective and new members the tools they need to participate fully from the start. With new appointments in place, we are proud to have a full council for the first time in several years, and we continue to welcome additional disability advocates whose lived experience strengthens our work.

From VRBS, a significant update is the upcoming implementation of the Order of Selection, effective July 28. While services for new applicants in Categories 2 and 3 will be temporarily paused, Category 1—serving individuals with the most significant disabilities—will remain open. Applicants can still apply, join a waitlist, and receive limited supports while waiting for full services. This decision, though difficult, was necessary to manage both budget and caseloads. The council has also prioritized ongoing accountability. At each quarterly meeting, SRC members review VRBS's long-term goals and track progress made over the past year. This consistent attention helps ensure that goals remain active, relevant, and connected to the needs of Montanans with disabilities.

Beyond this work, the council dedicated time to hearing directly from the community. In May, members attended the Annual Disability Employment Summit in Missoula. During that same quarterly meeting, MonTECH introduced the council to the latest assistive technology resources, broadening our awareness of tools that increase independence and opportunity. In August, we held a joint meeting with the State Independent Living Council (SILC) in Havre, which included conversations with community and tribal stakeholders about regional strengths and challenges.

The SRC also moved forward with its Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment. A contractor has been selected to administer the survey, which is currently in testing, and the council anticipates receiving initial results by November 2025. This feedback will guide program improvements and strengthen accountability in the years ahead.

This year, the council reviewed 49 individual case stories that demonstrate how VRBS programs create opportunities and improve the quality of life for Montanans with disabilities. Of those, four success stories are highlighted in this report to give a firsthand look at the impact of our programs. It has been an honor to serve as chair of the SRC and to work alongside dedicated council members, VRBS staff, and partners across the state. Together, we are making steady progress toward a Montana where people with disabilities have every opportunity for inclusion, independence, and meaningful employment.

Respectfully,

Corinne Moore

2025 SRC Chair

VRBS
SUCCESSFULLY
PLACED

353

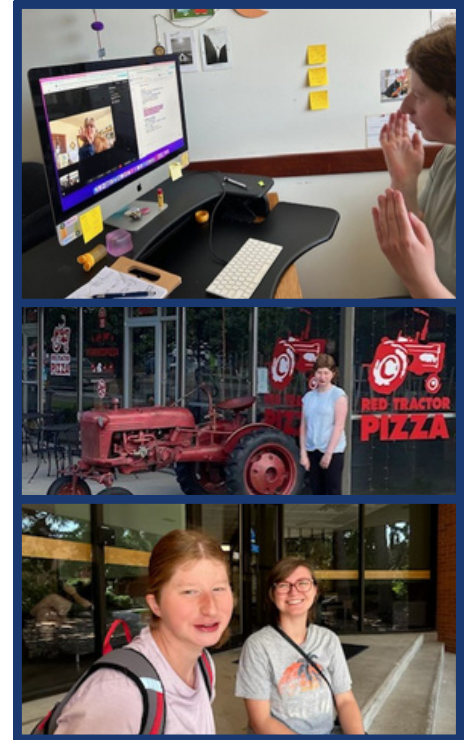
INDIVIDUALS
IN
JOBS

VRBS SUCCESS STORIES

Maddie, diagnosed with cognitive and speech impairments, first participated in Pre-Employment Transitions Services (Pre-ETS) during a Job Club facilitated by Vocational Rehabilitation staff in the summer of 2022. She was very shy and let others speak for her a lot of the time, but she persisted and continued to engage in Pre-ETS facilitated by Bozeman High School.

Through Pre-ETS, Maddie was able to participate in a Work-Based Learning Experience with Red Tractor Pizza, a local pizza parlor. She started by cleaning tables and doing the dishes but did such a good job that she was promoted to helping with food preparation. In the summer of 2023 Maddie attended the Montana Youth Leadership Forum and continued to learn self-advocacy skills. She carried those skills to her high school and then to her time at MYLF step 2 and Movin' On in the summer of 2024. She also participated in a second Job Club facilitated by a Pre-ETS vendor in Bozeman, Ace Ability, LLC. Maddie continued to grow and thrive with the information that she learned and was accepted into the Life Scholars Program at Montana State University (MSU) where she continues to speak up for herself.

Maddie has become increasingly independent and desires to work as a Hospitality Specialist following completion of MSU's Life Scholars program.



Lena, diagnosed with Autism and Depression, applied for Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services on May 27th, 2021. She was vocal about her passion for graphic design from her first appointment. She began the junior year of her bachelor's degree on December 2021 at MSUB. During her degree, VR purchased a Mac Book for her courses. She graduated with a Fine Arts degree on May 11, 2023.

Upon graduation, she worked diligently with Montana Employment Consultants, a local CRP, to seek employment. She was able to quickly find two work experiences. One in Roundup, which allowed her to update the business's social media account and the other remotely working to design menus and update social media information. Lena felt neither of these work experiences were something she saw herself doing long-term. She showed the VRC her portfolio and believed she had the potential to do much more. She decided to continue searching.

Lena talked about moving to the East Coast so she would have a better opportunity for a career in graphic design. Lena and VRC talked extensively about what moving across the country alone would look like and how it would be very different from where she grew up in Roundup. Lena was determined to live her dream on the east coast as a graphic designer. She soon found a job opportunity in Pittsburgh, PA. She continued with her persistence and found a rental close to her employment. VR assisted Lena with airfare and transportation to her rental in Pittsburgh. VR also

provided deposit and two months' worth of rent for her apartment.

Once relocated, VR purchased Lena an EBike for transportation. She was overjoyed and extremely thankful for the bike. VRC connected Lena to the PA VR office and she applied for their services. Having access to VR in PA put her mind at ease knowing she would have continued support. Lena continued to do very well at her job and said she loved both the people she worked with and her duties. She was vocal with how accepting her coworkers and employer were of her. Lena's job was a 40-hour a week position and had full benefits. She closed successfully from MT VR in July 2024.

VRBS SUCCESS STORIES

Camas was attending Salish-Kootenai College when he started working with VRC in 2016. He was studying to become an early childhood/elementary school teacher. He was accessing CSK VR for assistance as well. VR helped with school expenses, transportation, rental assistance, and provided extensive guidance and counseling especially when Camas was doing his student teaching. This involved helping him develop communication strategies with his teacher mentor as well as the college supervision team. He did not successfully complete his first student teaching assignment and thought he was in the wrong field.

VRC and Camas discussed his choice of jobs, his outside activities (learning the Salish language, coaching basketball with several area youth teams, and mentorships with area youth), and his passion for helping the youth of the reservation. He then participated in a second student teaching assignment in Polson which he finished successfully. As Camas looked for work, he hoped to find something local to remain close to family. He was unsuccessful and took a job in Browning teaching second grade. This lasted for half a school year as he was eventually offered a position at Cherry Hill Elementary School in Polson as their Native Culture Specialist. This was based on his exceptional performance during his second student teaching experience there. This position allows Camas to teach children and to keep his culture alive. He now has his own classroom and continues to coach basketball and mentor youth on the reservation. This job has also allowed him to move home to be closer to his family.

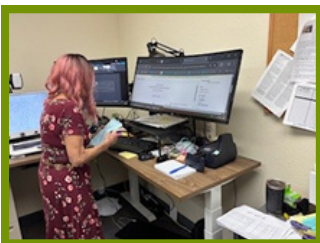


Deborah is a 68-year-old female with Retinopathy of Prematurity, a condition that has left her blind most of her life. Deborah's engagement with Vocational Rehabilitation began in 1992. She was sent to Good Will Industries for training and ended up with a part time job working for Staples as a janitor. She recalled "I don't think anyone expected much out of me until I showed up. They realized I could really work." It wasn't long before she was promoted to working with customers in the furniture area.

Deborah eventually wanted to continue advancing her employment opportunities. With the help of Vocational Rehabilitation in Missoula she completed her certification in medical coding in 2000. She got a job as a receptionist at Summit Independent Living Center. From 2002-2006 she tried her hand as a blind vendor, running a snack shop in the Missoula Federal building. Still not done with her career exploration, Deborah found employment working for the Forest Service as an Administrative Assistant. Finally, in 2015 she began working for the Bureau of Land Management as an Administrative State Assistant. She was promoted to Financial Admission in 2022.



Vocational Rehabilitation was able to guide Deborah through her journey by providing financial assistance for her post-secondary training, Orientation and Mobility training, and the purchase of rehabilitation technology such as an Explorer 5 and Iris vision, her most valued piece of equipment. The Billings and Great Falls BLV Counselors met with Deborah and her supervisor at the Bureau of Land Management to perform a worksite assessment to determine if her office space could be better utilized. A standing desk was recommended for her because she is unable to sit for long periods of time due to back issues. During the assessment, the Counselor Supervisors noted Deborah already had some much-needed accommodations in place, such as multiple very large monitors. They were also impressed by the amount of support Deborah received from her supervisor, who was genuinely interested in any accommodations.



Aside from meeting her employment goal, Deborah is a staunch advocate for individuals with visual disabilities, an active member of Montana Association for the Blind, and has spoken at local schools about disabilities. She also attends support group meetings hosted by the Billings BLV office. Deborah's journey has not been linear nor short, but the constants have always been her resilience and belief in herself.

The following provides a workforce summary of Montana’s population with disabilities, including labor force participation, employment, and earnings. Data is from the American Community Survey 1-year estimates, with the most recent year available being 2024. This memo focuses on the population aged 18-64 due to data availability.

In 2024, there were 79,555 Montanans with disabilities aged 18-64. Of this population, 40,603 were employed, 2,482 were unemployed, and the other 36,470 were not in the labor force. The share of Montanans participating in the labor force has declined over the last year, decreasing to 54% from 57% in 2023. This labor force participation rate is slightly higher than the U.S. average, at 52%. However, labor force participation for Montanans with disabilities remains lower than for Montanans without disabilities, at 84%. Figure 1 shows four years of labor force participation rates for Montanans with and without disabilities.

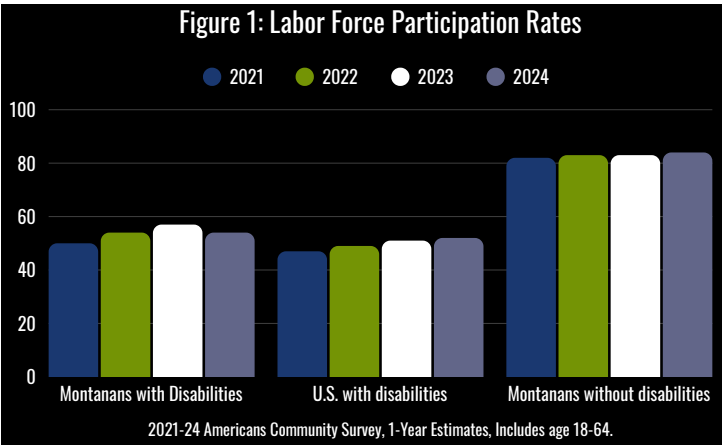
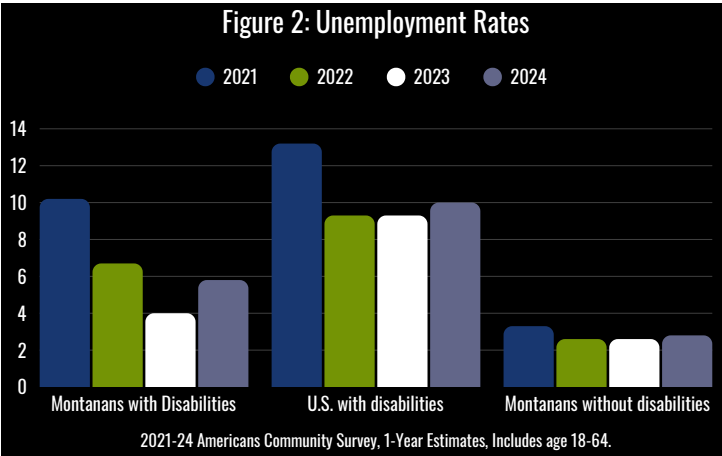
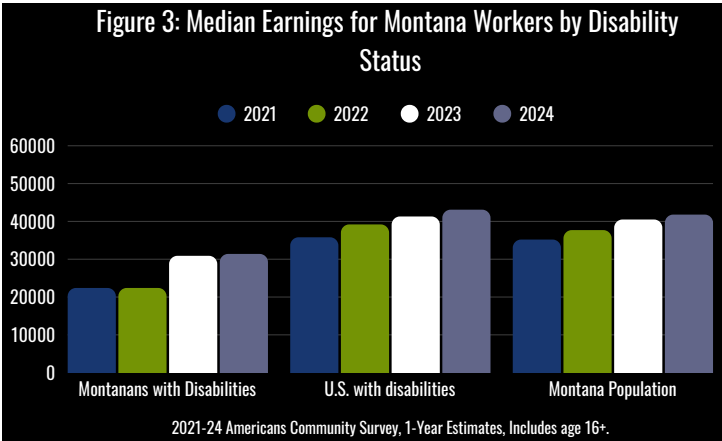


Figure 2 shows the unemployment rate for Montanans with disabilities at 5.8%. The unemployment rate increased to 5.8% from 4.0% in 2023. The unemployment rates for Montanans with disabilities is lower than the U.S. average of 10%, but it remains higher than the rate for Montanans without disabilities, at 2.8%.

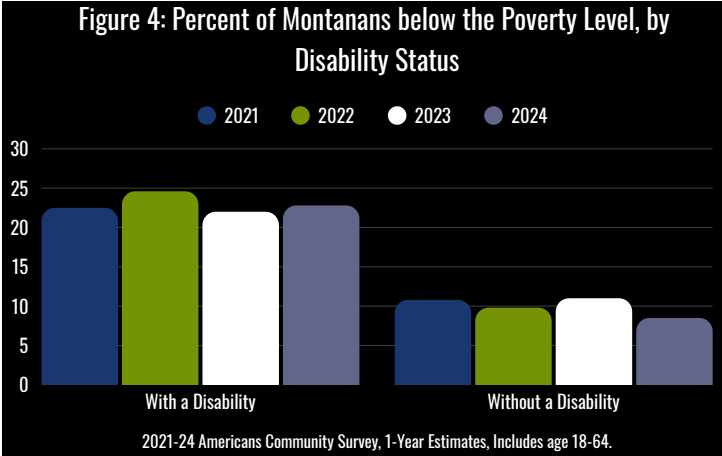


Montanans with disabilities are less likely to work full-time year-round (57%) than Montanans without disabilities (67%). Fewer hours worked explains some of the difference in income levels between the two groups. Median earnings for people with a disability were \$31,436. Median earnings for people without a disability were \$43,101.[1]

Since 2021, earnings increased fastest for Montanans with disabilities, by a total of 40% compared with 20% for Montanans without disabilities. Part of the fast growth in earnings is an increase in hours worked. More Montanans with disabilities are working full-time year-round than they were in past years (about 57% in 2024 compared with 50% in 2021). Figure 3 shows annual earnings over the last four years.



In 2024, about 23% of Montanans with disabilities (17,900 people) had income at or below the poverty level, compared to 8.5% for Montanans without disabilities. This represents nearly triple the rate of poverty for Montanans with disabilities. As such, the population with disabilities makes up about 27% of the population at or below poverty levels, despite representing 12% of the population aged 18 to 64. Figure 4 shows the percentage of Montanans below the poverty level by disability status, for 2021 through 2024.





SRC RECOMMENDATIONS TO VRBS

GOAL 1: ALL MONTANANS WITH DISABILITIES CAN ACCESS HIGH-QUALITY COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT.

- Establish clearer criteria and counseling practices to ensure VR participants pursuing post-secondary education demonstrate commitment and readiness for academic success.
- Continue collaboration with the Harkin Institute and advocate for Employment First policies that promote Competitive Integrated Employment for individuals with significant disabilities.
- Increase awareness and utilization of On-the-Job-Training as a powerful tool for skill-building and employment placement.
- Develop a Memorandum of Understanding between VR and Montana's American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) that establishes referral procedures, service coordination, data sharing, and joint planning to ensure seamless collaboration, eliminate duplication, and maximize resources for shared customers.
- Ensure effective communication access is provided for all consumers, including Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, through qualified interpreters and accessible communication methods as defined by the ADA.
- Promote equity in service delivery by addressing disability-specific access needs (e.g., communication, mobility, sensory, and behavioral health supports) to ensure all Montanans can participate fully.

GOAL 2: MONTANA YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES ARE EFFECTIVELY ENGAGED IN VOCATIONAL EXPLORATION AND WORK READINESS TRAINING.

- Prioritize individualized, student-centered services to ensure Pre-ETS funding is used in ways that directly benefit students.
- Provide robust career counseling and postsecondary planning to youth, ensuring informed decisions that support successful transitions into adulthood.
- Enhance Pre-ETS to more effectively support students with disabilities in college environments, ensuring continuity of services and successful outcomes.
- Develop a Memorandum of Understanding between VR and Montana's American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation Services (AIVRS) regarding Pre-ETS that establishes referral procedures, service coordination, data sharing, and joint planning to ensure seamless collaboration, eliminate duplication, and maximize resources for shared customers.

GOAL 3: MONTANA'S WORKFORCE SYSTEM IS COORDINATED TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR EMPLOYERS.

- Invest in tools and training that help VR job seekers build essential soft skills and equip counselors with resources to deliver these effectively.
- Update VR strategies to reflect the evolving labor market, emphasizing real-world competencies beyond academic credentials.

GOAL 4: VRBS IS A STABLE, SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION.

- Continue rebranding initiatives to improve public perception, outreach, and stakeholder engagement.
- Incorporate feedback from Consumer Satisfaction Survey to improve services.
- Implement a staff engagement survey to assess employee engagement and incorporate feedback into future planning.

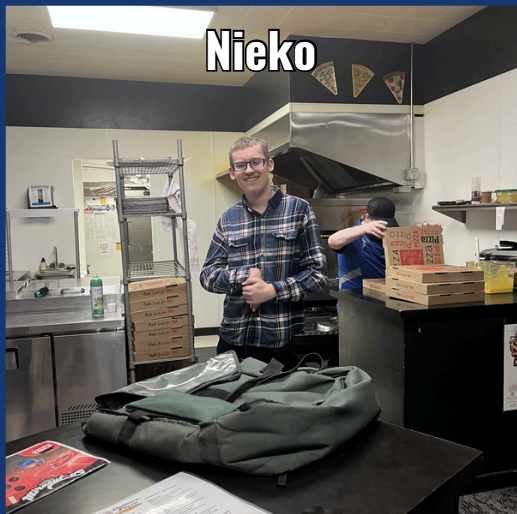
DISABILITY MENTORING WEEK

This year, about 117 students from communities throughout Montana, including Kalispell, Havre, Miles City, Plentywood, Great Falls, Townsend, and Big Sandy, participated in Disability Mentoring Week, October 20th through the 24th.

Throughout the week, students were matched with employers and community leaders to explore careers aligned with their interests and passions. These meaningful experiences helped build confidence, spark new goals, and foster connections that could shape future opportunities.

From shadowing professionals in dynamic industries to engaging in hands-on activities and heartfelt conversations, students embraced the chance to envision their futures in new and exciting ways. The images below represent just a few of the incredible experiences that unfolded during the week:

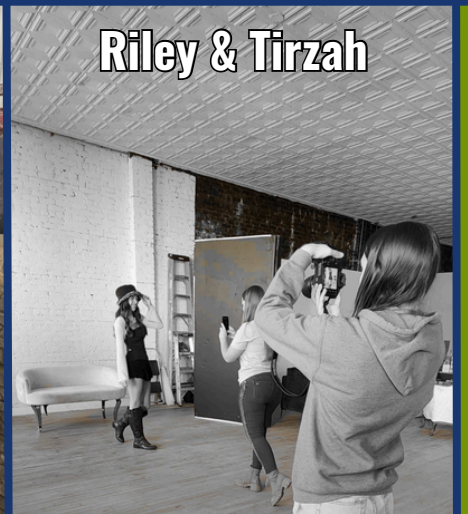
- **Nieko**, sophomore at Havre High, got a taste of the culinary world during his job shadow at Dyllan's Pizza.
- **T.H.**, a senior at Custer County High in Miles City, completed a paid work experience at Tire Rama that led to a part-time employment.
- **Riley & Tirzah**, Billings high school students, participated in a mock photo shoot with live models, learned about lighting techniques, and captured their own images behind the lens.
- **Ben** before a job shadow with Deputy Director of Montana's Department of Commerce, Mandy Rambo.
- **Anthony**, senior from Kalispell, shadowed an X-Ray Technician at Logan Health's Ortho Walk-In Clinic.
- **Maya**, high school student from Missoula, completed a paid work experience as an Activity Aide at Village Health.



Nieko



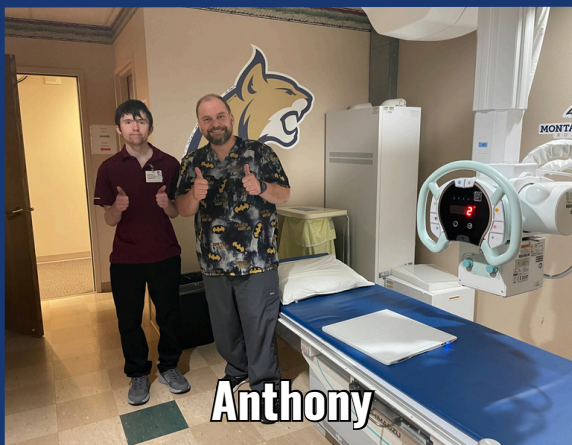
T.H.



Riley & Tirzah



Ben



Anthony



Maya