TN Department of Human Services | State Rehabilitation Council of Tennessee

State Rehabilitation Council

2024 Annual Report | December 2024

Letter from the State Rehabilitation Council

It has been my esteemed honor to serve as the Chair of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of Tennessee for the 2023-24 term. The SRC-TN works diligently to improve access to employment opportunities and promote a diverse workforce that values and enhances the quality of life for individuals with disabilities. The mission of the SRC-TN is to advise, evaluate, and partner with the public Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program, striving to improve access to employment statewide. Our vision is of a statewide workforce that embraces disability and diversity and is committed to the full participation of all Tennesseans.

In partnership with the Tennessee Department of Human Services' Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS), the SRC advocates for the VR program, providing critical advice on issues affecting its consumers. As a council, we serve as the voice of those individuals and their stakeholders, ensuring their perspectives are included in shaping VR services.

Over the past year, my colleagues and I convened four times, visiting various organizations across the state that embody our core values. These visits left us feeling inspired and reassured that Tennesseans' needs are being addressed effectively and equitably.

Key Milestones Achieved This Year:

- Elimination of Order of Selection: TN VR is no longer under an order of selection.
- Expanded Financial Eligibility: Services such as wardrobe, books, supplies, and assistive technology are no longer subject to financial eligibility requirements.
- Employee Recognition Initiatives: Implementation of awards such as the 120 Club, Outstanding VR Customer Service Award, Outstanding VR Leader Award, and Outstanding VR Team Member Award.
- **Impact Metrics (7/1/23 to 6/30/24)**:
  - 11,047 new referrals received.
  - Average hourly wage at case closure: $15.18.
  - Average hours worked at case closure: 30.01.
  - Average days from application to eligibility determination: 28.
  - Average days from eligibility determination to signing an Individualized Plan for Employment: 40.
  - Customers achieving 90+ days of competitive integrated employment: 1,754.

Looking forward, I remain committed to addressing critical issues such as:

1. Advocating for Higher Wages: Promoting equitable pay for Tennesseans with disabilities based on their abilities and necessary accommodations.
2. Overcoming Transportation Barriers: Working to improve transportation solutions for individuals facing challenges in maintaining consistent employment.
3. Enhancing Advocacy and Communication: Strengthening our efforts to bridge gaps between citizens and government, ensuring all voices are heard and needs are met.

It has been a privilege to work alongside a dedicated team committed to fostering a thriving, inclusive workforce for all Tennesseans. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the progress of the SRC and the state of Tennessee. Together, we will continue to build a future where every individual has the opportunity to thrive in meaningful employment.

Thank you for your trust and support in this endeavor.
Sincerely,
Rhonda Crenshaw, M Ed.SLP
Chair, 2023-24

Message from the Assistant Commissioner

Having the ability to participate in Tennessee's workforce in a meaningful way in an environment where one's talent is recognized and respected alongside peers earning competitive wages for their contributions of talent fulfills some of the most basic human needs: sense of belonging, contribution to family and community along with the dignity and respect that comes with it. Just because you have additional barriers related to a disability should not change that.

At our core, we believe in the power of work with the expectation that everyone who chooses should have the opportunity to work. I am proud to have the privilege of leading a team of dedicated professionals who along with the volunteers of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) share and operationalize that basic principle through supporting thousands of Tennesseans on their unique personal journey to work.

One of the most impactful developments for moving us forward in our service to customers began in 2022 but saw real world progress this year when after more than nearly two decades, the Vocational Rehabilitation program (VR) was able to serve all eligible customers who sought our support regardless of their level of disability related barriers to employment. Prior to this milestone, VR had been in an order of selection since 2001, and only able to serve eligible customers in priority categories one and two, whom are individuals with the most severe disabilities.

Additionally, we, with the guidance and support of the SRC made great strides this year to improve access to technology and enable its use to expand employment options and prepare students for postsecondary success by evaluating financial requirements and removing the requirement for financial eligibility for the following services: books and training supplies, assistive technology devices and services, and other devices or services of a personal nature such as tools and supplies, wardrobe, and uniforms. VR is now able to provide the recommended assistive technology for eligible customers to successfully complete the training they need to achieve their career goal and the assistive technology they need once they achieve their desired employment.

To further meet our customer's needs and in response to their feedback, we developed an online referral form to make connecting with us easier and more convenient for potential customers, families, and community members. We also want to support and recognize the hard work of our teams in providing high quality customer service, support, and timely services to our customers. As a result, we implemented employee recognition award categories: 120 Club, Outstanding VR Customer Service Award, Outstanding VR Leader Award, and Outstanding VR Team Member

As you review the data, stories of success, and descriptions of progress of the past year found in this report I hope that you take time to celebrate our and our customer's accomplishments with us, knowing that our collective dedication to the success of our customers will drive our relentless pursuit to continue be the efficient, effective, and responsive program that our customers expect and frankly deserve.

Together we are strengthening Tennessee by strengthening Tennesseans.

Kevin R. Wright
Assistant Commissioner, Division of Rehabilitation Services
Tennessee Department of Human Services

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Vocational Rehabilitation Program Overview

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is a joint federal and state program that assists people with disabilities achieve their employment goals. Simultaneously, VR serves employers as they look to diversify their workforce with qualified employees.

Through multiple specialized units, VR helps jobs seekers prepare for, secure, retain, advance in or regain employment. VR also help individuals advocate for employment outcomes that are consistent with their individual strengths, resources, abilities, capabilities, and informed choice. VR provides employment-focused services that are individualized and person-centered.

Services are aimed to help prepare a person for employment in the competitive labor market and to help businesses understand the benefit of a diverse workforce, to include individuals with disabilities.

In Tennessee, the VR program is administered by the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS), Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS).

VR educates, coordinates and collaborates to serve students and job seekers with disabilities as well as the business community.

Master's level VR Counselors are located across the state. They specialize in vocational rehabilitation, provide counseling and guidance to job seekers, and work with customers to put together a plan for employment based on person-centered employment goals. They also coordinate service provision for VR customers, which may include services provided by Community Rehabilitation Providers.

VR Services Include:

- **Counseling and Guidance:** The Vocational Rehabilitation team works as a valuable support network that provides individualized counseling, guidance, and encouragement to each customer. Vocational Rehabilitation participants are empowered to make informed decisions knowing their team is here to help facilitate positive outcomes according to their individual needs and employment goals.
- **Training & Support Services:** When a person becomes a Vocational Rehabilitation customer, their VR Counselor and team will work closely with them to outline and facilitate training and other help needed to achieve the chosen career goal. The services received are based on their plan and could include assistance with postsecondary or workplace readiness training, independent living skills development, assistive technology, transportation, personal care assistance or other supports.
- **Employment and Supported Employment Services:** In addition to training, Vocational Rehabilitation customers may receive employment services such as resume writing, interview training and practice, application assistance, job coaching, and other employment preparation that fits the individual's needs.

- **Pre-Employment Transition Service (Pre-ETS):** Vocational Rehabilitation has specific services for students between the ages of 14-21. Vocational Rehabilitation works in partnership with school systems and community providers to help introduce students to the world of work, identify potential career options, and connect with a VR counselor prior to high school graduation.

In addition to the broad array of VR services available to eligible individuals, VR also provides specialized services to target populations.

Specialized VR Services

Business Services provided by the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program works with employers to promote competitive integrated work opportunities and career exploration for customers through job search and placement services, combined service provision with Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA) core partners and stakeholders, and facilitation of work-based learning opportunities and employer-based training and employment programming. Vocational Rehabilitation program customers can work with a Business Employment Consultant from the Business Service Unit to explore career opportunities aligning with their occupational goals and desired geographical location of residence. Together, the Business Employment Consultant and Vocational Rehabilitation customer can search for local employment opportunities of interest, apply for opportunities, conduct interview preparation, and execute final placement into opportunities. The success of Business Employment Consultants is measured by their successful service delivery to enhance competitive integrated employment outcomes for customers.

Tennessee Rehabilitation Center at Smyrna (TRC-Smyrna) is a state operated comprehensive vocational rehabilitation training center that offers person-centered, comprehensive services in a supportive learning environment to individuals with disabilities to help increase independent living skills and employment training. Services are provided on a campus setting that also includes residential living for those students who choose to live on campus while receiving services. In addition to traditional classroom instruction, students participate in community-based work-based learning opportunities and internships as part of their course of study. Students can obtain nationally recognized credentials and/or certificates of completion in the following areas of study:

- Automotive Service Technology
- Business Education Technology
- Certified Logistics Technician
- Certified Production Technician
- Customer Service
- Childcare
- Custodial Technician
- Food Service
- Pharmacy Technician
- Certified Nursing Assistant
- IT/Coding
- Veterinary Assistant Technology

Community Services (CS), Community Services provided by the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program connect VR and non-VR customers to education, training, and employment resources. Community Services are community-based, person-centered services that prepare and support individuals in going to work. The Community Services team is strategically located throughout the state to offer independent living skills and community-based employment training to best meet the needs of the individuals we serve and their communities. The services are provided within the community with the support of local partners such as businesses, non-profits, city, county, and state agencies, as well as local education agencies.

Sensory Services is a specialized unit within VR that addresses the unique needs of individuals who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing.

Tennessee Business Enterprises (TBE) is an entrepreneurial program that offers vocational training and employment opportunities for individuals who are legally blind. The mission of this program is to provide high quality products and customer service while maximizing employment and economic opportunities for legally blind individuals. Federal and state laws grant TBE a priority to operate vending and food service in federal, state and local government buildings. Tennessee Business Enterprises trains, licenses and places blind individuals in a facility where they function much like an independent business owner. Assistance is provided to these managers by TBE Consultants. Tennessee Business Enterprises currently operates 104 facilities across the state. These facilities generate over $30 million in sales annually.

2024 Key Accomplishments

There were several notable accomplishments by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in 2024. A few of these accomplishments are highlighted below.

Vocational Rehabilitation Able to Serve ALL Eligible Customers

We are excited to share that the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program is no longer under an order of selection and now able to serve all customers eligible for VR services. VR had been in an order of selection since 2001 and was only able to serve eligible customers in priority categories one and two, whom are individuals with the most severe disabilities. In October 2022, the VR program implemented a new process for identifying customers in closed priority categories that may begin receiving VR services based on an assessment of active customer data, staffing capacity, and funding availability. These efforts and established processes led the VR program to be able to go out from under an order of selection.

Improving Access to Technology

VR made great strides this year to improve access to technology and enable its use to expand employment options and prepare students for postsecondary success. VR did this through the removal of financial barriers to customers by eliminating the requirement for financial eligibility for the following services: books and training supplies, assistive technology devices and services, and other devices or services of a personal nature such as tools and supplies, wardrobe, and uniforms. VR is now able to provide the recommended assistive technology for eligible customers to successfully complete the training they need to achieve their career goal and the assistive technology they need once they achieve their desired employment.

Enhancing VR Customer Engagement Opportunities

We are excited to announce that Vocational Rehabilitation (VR)has been added to the Department of Human Services' One DHS Omnichannel Customer Support Model. As you may remember, in January 2022, VR launched a new centralized customer service center. Since then, we recognized a need to further expand our VR team and have dedicated VR representatives answering our VR main line **833-772-TDHS (8347)**. Therefore, in September of 2024, we created a new team of VR customer contact representatives who are trained and available to answer inquiries received and provide customers with updates regarding their case. This model is the next step in providing a truly seamless service experience for customers!

The model supports 4 channels: phone, live chat, email, and web-based forms. Now, customers, providers, and partners have the ability to reach us using any of these communication channels. We also added the ability to refer an individual to the VR Program using a web-based form located on our website at Vocational Rehabilitation Referral . Referrals will continue to be received via phone, in-person, or email, should that be the preferred method.

VR Employee Recognition Awards

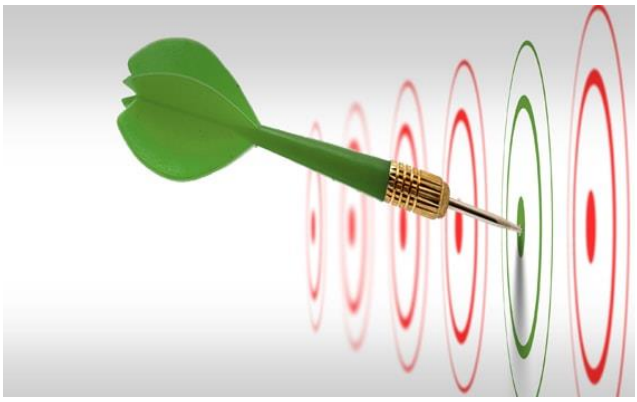
The SRC recommended we consider finding opportunities to demonstrate our support and appreciation for the VR team members serving Tennesseans with disabilities. During the retreat last year, the SRC made appreciation posters for the VR team members. We displayed these during the VR Counselor Appreciation event held on National VR Counselor Appreciation Day-Friday, March 22, 2024. The event entailed specialized training, time to network with peers across the state, and individual recognition from area leaders. Additionally, VR made great strides this year to create and implement four new employee recognition award categories: the 120 Club, Outstanding VR Customer Service Award, Outstanding VR Leader Award, and Outstanding VR Team Member. The hope is to continue to build on to these award categories with the intention of fostering a culture where all VR team members feel appreciated, valued, and supported.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Outcomes

The tables and figures included below offer additional information regarding the performance of the VR program.

Year Name	Start Date	End Date
State Fiscal Year 2024 (SFY24)	July 1, 2023	June 30, 2024

Results Driven:



Rehabilitation by the Numbers (SFY24)

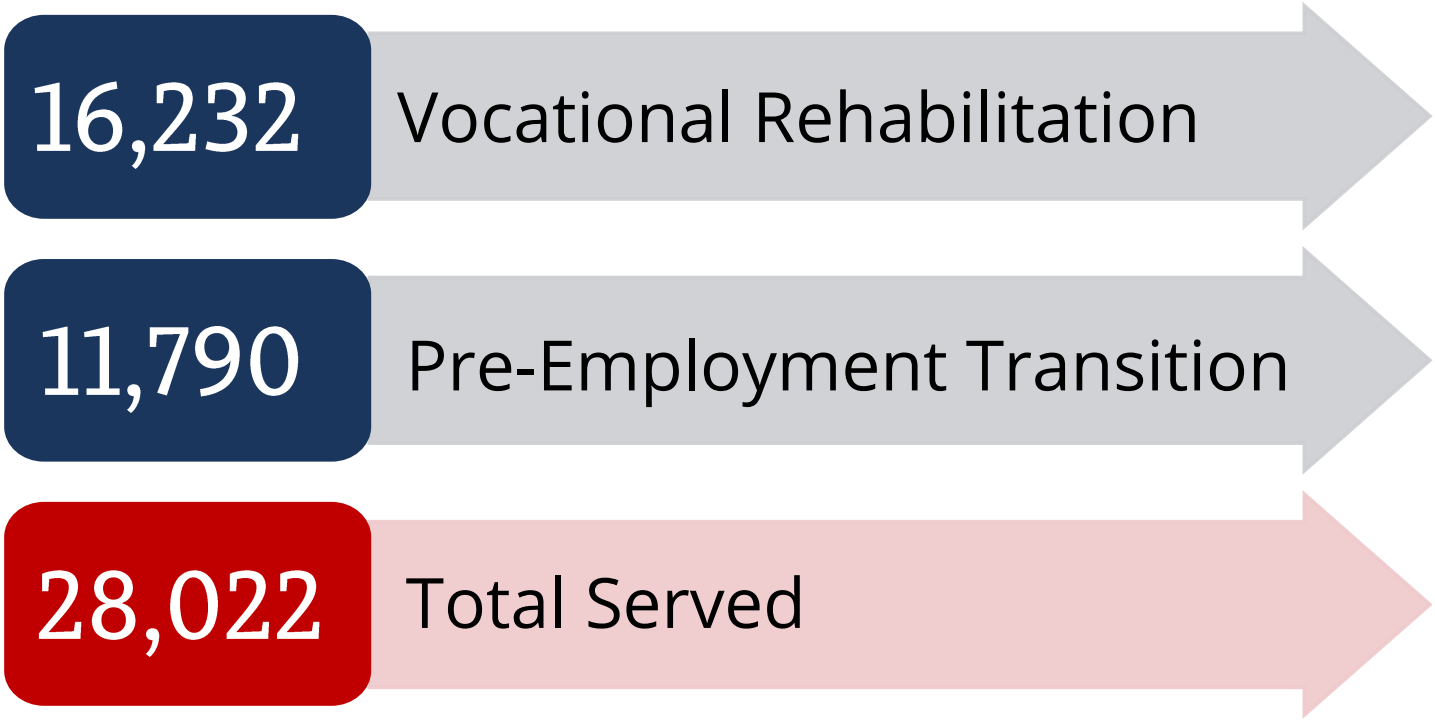
11,047 VR referrals received
6,076 VR applications taken
1,754 customers achieved their employment goals with at least 90 days of competitive, integrated employment
1,749 customized services provided to businesses
287 students served by the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center at Smyrna
50 students attended the Pre-employment Transition Services Summer Camp

The top 5 services in SFY 2024 were:

- Training-related Transportation, Meals, and Housing
- Supported Employment Career Stabilization
- Workplace Readiness Training – Project Search Transition Aged (14-22)
- Supported Employment Career Consultation
- Job Readiness Training

Our Vocational Rehabilitation Program, focuses on connecting Tennesseans with disabilities, their advocates and potential employers with resources that pave pathways to employment and elevated levels of independence.

The number of customers VR served between July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024, was 28,022. The chart below breaks down this number to demonstrate the number of customers VR served and those that received pre-employment transition services.



The chart below provides a sampling of data that the VR program has collected over the last year related to active cases, most commonly reported disabilities, and information related to employment outcomes.

Parameters	SFY 2024
Most Commonly Reported Disabilities	Psychological/ Psychosocial Disabilities Physical Disabilities Blindness Cognitive Disabilities
Statewide Average: Hourly Wages at Closure	$15.18
Statewide Average: Hours Worked at Closure	30.01
Statewide Average: Days from Application to Eligibility Determination	28

Supporting Customers with Timely Decision Making (SFY24)

A key metric in enhancing the customer experience is the speed with which customers are engaged in their individual plan for employment. Over the last year, VR maintained the goal to complete the Individual Plan for Employment (IPE) in 56 days – that is 34 days faster than the federal regulations require. This ensures that VR customers are engaged more rapidly in the pursuit of their employment goals. In its focus on serving the customer, over the last year VR not only met, but exceeded this goal ending the year with a cumulative average of 40 days from eligibility to signed Individual Plan for Employment.

40

Average Number of Days from Eligibility Determination to Signed IPE

Preparing Students with Disabilities for Life After High School

In the past year, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program provided pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to 9,167 students during the school year (August 2023 to June 2024).

Number of Students Served	9,167

Pre-ETS Service Type	Units (15 min. increments)
Counseling in Post-Secondary Education	10,581
Career Exploration	16,749
Self-Advocacy	21,793
Workplace Readiness	30,455
Work-based Learning	8,560

Vocational Rehabilitation's Customer Focused Government Goal

In the past year, the Vocational Rehabilitation Program set a goal to increase the number of completed customer Individualized Plans for Employment (IPE)s. The SFY 2024 target goal was 3,662. Through improved engagement with VR customers, the target goal was exceeded.

4,229

Number of completed customer IPEs

TDHS Celebrates Disability Employment Awareness in October and Year-Round!

By Proclamation 2726, Governor Lee declared October 2024 as Tennessee Disability Employment Awareness Month in support of National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). In our state, the Division of Rehabilitation Services' Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program at the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) consistently works to ensure Tennesseans of all abilities have the opportunity to reach their full potential as members of the state's community, workforce and economy. To commemorate and celebrate the contributions of workers with disabilities, the TDHS VR team hosted and joined several NDEAM events that took place across the state.

The VR Business Services team organized a celebration for Food City in the Grand East Region on October 9th. During the event, a certificate of appreciation signed by Governor Lee was presented to Steve Smith, the CEO of Food City. Food City has been a key partner for Vocational Rehabilitation, hiring approximately 64 customers in the Grand East Region over the past year.

At the Knoxville Area Employment Consortium October breakfast, Mike Hutchison, VR Business Employment Consultant, presented on Vocational Rehabilitation services and VR's partnerships with businesses. He also awarded certificates of appreciation signed by Governor Lee to FedEx and Amazon for being excellent partners over the past year.

The VR Business Services team organized a job fair for jobseekers in celebration of National Disability Employment Awareness Month. The event took place in Chattanooga, TN at the East Lake Recreation Center on October 10, 2024. They featured 15 employers and resources and was attended by 50 job seekers. Roxana Horruitiner, VR Business Employment Consultant, recognized the employer Schnellecke Logistics for their outstanding partnership by presenting them with a certificate of appreciation signed by Governor Lee. This successful event was a collaborative effort between Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and state partners.

VR Business Services team organized a two-day event held on October 1st and 2nd in Cookeville, TN at the TRC. On the first day, the Community Services team led a customer preparation session. The second day included a breakfast with six employers, a VR 101 presentation, and a job fair hosted by the Region 4 team. During the VR 101 presentation, VR gave certificates of appreciation, signed by Governor Lee, to Stonepeak Ceramics and Averitt Express.

Region 5 Vocational Rehabilitation colleagues came together in Smyrna, TN to celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month, honoring Global Connections to Employment for its exemplary commitment to fostering employment opportunities for veterans with disabilities. The award was formally presented to Jim Beasley by VR.

Region 6 VR colleagues gathered in Manchester to celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month by honoring CW Resources, a company dedicated to employing individuals with disabilities and is also a strong workforce partner of VR. VR presented CW Resources a certificate of recognition and we enjoyed a delicious lunch catered by a local company and cake.

VR participated in MCHRA's event in Jackson to honor Old Country Store and the City of Jackson for hiring individuals with disabilities and providing access to good jobs for all.

A certificate of appreciation was presented to Tyson Foods Senior HR Partner Chad Webb, Operations Manager Jonathan Russom and Plant Manager Stan Welch for creating a work culture that generously provides employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Individually tailored supports are available to enhance each person's chances of long-term success. Some of the commonly used strategies to increase success for people with disabilities include extended training, position reassignments, increased individual supports (buddy system, etc.), and an available transportation benefit.

Memphis Goodwill has been a consistent partner in providing VR customers integrative and competitive employment opportunities. VR presented an award of appreciation to Memphis Goodwill.

Success Stories: Kevin Polk

Kevin Polk is a 22-year-old VR customer who uses a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury. Kevin had been employed at U.S Cellular for approximately one year when Business Employment Consultant (BEC) Hutchison was assigned to work with him. Kevin had saved enough money for a personal vehicle and VR was planning on assisting Kevin with necessary vehicle modifications.

Kevin contacted BEC Hutchison in November of 2023 and reported that he was no longer working at U.S Cellular. Kevin further stated that he lived alone in a government subsidized apartment and was not able to leave his apartment because of steep hills on both sides of the building. Kevin also had to start using the money that he had saved for a vehicle to pay for living expenses.

Kevin was hoping to secure a remote customer service job that paid enough to cover his monthly living expenses and allow him to save for a vehicle. BEC Hutchison spoke to Kevin about the remote Roadside Assistance positions with AAA and Kevin believed that he was qualified for the position. BEC Hutchison collaborated with a peer, BEC Chapman, who shared a requisition email for Roadside Assistant positions with AAA in January of 2024. Kevin applied for a full-time position, but still had not received a response from AAA after approximately three weeks. Kevin contacted BEC Hutchison on February 5, 2024, and requested assistance. BEC Hutchison contacted BEC Chapman and learned that AAA could not locate Kevin's application. After discussing with Kevin, they learned that AAA had used the wrong email address to locate his application. BEC Hutchison sent the correct email to BEC Chapman and AAA was able to locate Kevin's application immediately.

Kevin was contacted by AAA in February and completed three interviews. BEC Hutchison received a text message from Kevin on March 15, 2024, that read, "Mike (BEC Hutchison), I got the job!!!" Kevin began training for the Roadside Assistant position with AAA on April 5, 2024, and he said he loves the job." Kevin was extremely grateful to BEC's Chapman and Hutchison for the assistance in obtaining the position.

Kevin said that he had renewed hope that he could get back on his feet again and that he would do anything to help BEC Hutchison as well. BEC Hutchison replied that the most important thing to BEC Hutchison was to see Kevin doing well.

Kevin has continued to do well with AAA and has already saved at least $8000 dollars towards the purchase of a vehicle. He hopes to be a trainer or manager someday with AAA. Kevin has also agreed to allow VR to share his story and is also willing to attend meetings and events to share it himself. Kevin's story is just one example of the difference that a job and income can make in someone's life.

Success Stories: Allen Patterson

Mr. Allen Patterson was a student in the Jackson Madison County School System when he was initially connected to the VR Pre-ETS program. He participated in his school's work-based training at RIFA, Zaxby's, and the DoubleTree Hotel. Most of his tasks were related to cleaning. Once Allen created his VR individual plan for employment (IPE), he began working with the Star Center for employment services to achieve his career goal. It was during this time that Allen participated in Job Readiness Services and Integrated Worksite Assessments. It was thought in the beginning that Allen would be successful with general job placement services if strong natural supports were in place. Allen was not enrolled in any program that would provide him with long term supports but he did have a lot of support from his family and good role models. He displayed a good working personality and made friends easily.

With his work-based experiences and connections in the community, the team moved forward with trying to secure employment for him without success. The team determined he would benefit more from Supported Employment (SE) services, but the issue was, he had no long term supports in place. His family tried to get Allen enrolled in the ECF Choices program without much success. As time passed, Allen, his family, and the team became frustrated. His VR Counselor talked with Allen and his family about possibly getting assistance with applying for ECF again. A referral was made to Madison Haywood Development Services (MHDS). Mr. Kelly Sorrell (MHDS Employment Director) indicated to Allen and his family that they had independent living/coping skills trainings to help Allen in achieving his career goals. Allen could possibly participate in these while waiting for his ECF program acceptance.

Once Allen was approved for ECF, VR was able to make a referral to MHDS for Supported Employment services to start. Allen had always been interested in emergency services and had mentioned how he would like to work with firefighters. MHDS provided discovery services for Allen at the local fire department. While there, the fire chief met Allen and was impressed with his abilities. Funding had been approved for an additional cleaning position and Allen was asked to join the team. It was Allen's dream job! It provided necessary opportunities to promote long term success for Allen such as short shifts and strong natural supports in an environment that he loved.

During the National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) annual luncheon held by MHDS at the Old Country Store, Allen and Don Friddle (Fire Chief) were among those recognized. Chief Friddle spoke to the crowd about how much of an impact Allen had made on their firehouse and how they really enjoy working with him. Allen's friendly personality makes it easy for him to make new friends wherever he goes. VR is extremely excited for Allen's accomplishments and honored to have assisted him in achieving his career goals.

Success Stories: Deborah Wagoner

Deborah Wagoner began working with Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) in November 2023 with the goal of finding and retaining stable employment. Diagnosed with PTSD, major depression, and anxiety, Deborah shared that she had an Individualized Education Plan in high school and had struggled to maintain employment in the past. She speaks quickly, and the VR Counselor, noticing this, gently encouraged her to slow down to ensure clarity. Deborah was always receptive, understanding the importance of clear communication as part of her journey to self-sufficiency.

When Deborah started working with VR, she faced additional challenges—she had been homeless or in unstable housing for about two years. Recently relocated from Kentucky to Tennessee, Deborah had limited support and relied on friends for occasional transportation. Thanks to collaboration with TN Homeless Solutions, Deborah secured her own apartment, an achievement that motivated her even further to pursue employment.

Deborah initially gained a position at Firestone with the support of her VR Counselor and Business Employment Consultant (BEC), Doug Clark. Though she experienced some interpersonal challenges there, VR worked closely with her on conflict resolution, effective communication, and workplace behavior. Despite leaving Firestone, Deborah was undeterred and secured another role at Cracker Barrel, again through VR and BEC referrals. While she encountered some conflicts initially, Deborah demonstrated resilience, handling her concerns through constructive conversations with a supportive colleague.

After 90 successful days of employment at Cracker Barrel, Deborah proudly informed us that she no longer needed VR services. Her case was successfully closed on July 31, 2024, marking a significant step in her journey towards stability and independence. Deborah's story showcases her determination, and the vital role VR plays in helping individuals overcome personal challenges to achieve meaningful, lasting employment.

Success Stories: Sabrina Nelson

Sabrina is 26-years-old and has autism. She began working with VR in June of 2016 and was scared and unsure of what she wanted to do with her life. She did know that she liked computers and wanted to work in that field as a career. Sabrina was very reserved and would spend most of her time at home. She had few friends, and the thought of attending college was terrifying.

Reluctantly, Sabrina decided to try college, and during her first year at Austin Peay University (APSU), she learned about Full-Spectrum Learning and vocational rehabilitation. During this time, Sabrina also wanted to learn how to drive a car but thought the goal was unattainable. Fast forward four years, and Sabrina graduated from APSU with a bachelor's in computer science and multiple qualifications in different computer programs. This is the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic, and progress for her stopped. During this time, she became too scared to even attempt to find a job. Her anxiety levels would not allow her to leave her own house. Shortly after COVID restrictions subsided, she contacted Vocational Rehabilitation for assistance in finding employment. She was very reluctant to ever meet in-person and would choose to meet over the computer, stating her anxiety was too high, as well as transportation issues. She asked that the employment she found allowed her to work from home. She said that she did not have a driver's license and, although she had tried in the past, could not seem to pass the course. Sabrina and her VR Counselor devised a new strategy and some new services. With counseling and guidance and the use of the VR community services team, she began to come out of her shell. She agreed to meet in-person, and from then on, great strides were made. Sabrina has attended in-person Job Clubs. She meets face-to-face with CSU and now wants to work in the workforce instead of just working at home. She also recently passed driver training and testing and applied for jobs conducting in-person interviews.

The transformation in Sabrina's life from her initial application in 2016 to the present day is truly remarkable. She was once apprehensive about the world, defining herself by her disability. Today, she stands as a college graduate with a driver's license, and no longer confined to her room. She is actively engaging with the world, applying for jobs and even conducting in-person interviews. This is just the beginning of her journey towards a fulfilling career, promising an exceptionally bright future.

Success Stories: Stanley McKinnie

In January 2024, Stanley McKinnie reconnected with Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation after being let go from Chick-fil-A due to construction at the location. Having previously been a VR customer, Stanley knew he could rely on the support and encouragement of VR to help him achieve long-term employment. Diagnosed with Schizophrenia, Stanley receives Social Security benefits and participates in the Ticket to Work program. Throughout this process, he regularly reached out to his VR Counselor to discuss the assistance he needed to succeed. For his current case, VR provided essential support, including assistance with work uniforms and guidance through Workable TN, where Stanley found reassurance on how his SSA benefits would work with his income. His commitment to finding stable employment paid off, and he is now a valued team member at Long John Silver's in Dyersburg. Proud of his accomplishments, Stanley often checks in with his VR Counselor to share updates about his work and progress.

Stanley's story is a testament to the power of perseverance and the positive impact of Vocational Rehabilitation in helping individuals achieve their employment goals. He graciously shared a photo of himself and his supportive team at Long John Silver's. We are extremely excited for Stanley and wish him the brightest of futures!

Success Stories: Kara Evans

When Kara Evans first approached Vocational Rehabilitation she faced unemployment due to her disability, Spina Bifida, which hindered her ability to travel independently. This presented significant barriers to both her independence and her career aspirations. However, with VR's comprehensive support, Kara's life underwent a remarkable transformation.

Kara benefited from a wide range of services, including job readiness training, employment services, Benefits to Employment support, guidance and counseling, and assistive technology tailored to her needs. A pivotal moment in her journey was the vehicle modifications provided by Mobility Works, combined with driving training from Kimberly Woulfe, which enabled her to travel and work independently for the first time.

In her own words, Kara reflected, "VR gave me back my life and independence. I'm getting the chance to live up to my potential and be true to myself. Thank you all so much!"

Her VR Counselor played a crucial role in guiding her through each step, ensuring she had the necessary resources to overcome any challenges. BEC Horruitiner was instrumental in helping Kara secure a position at Dynata and provided ongoing support to ensure her success in the workplace.

Additionally, VR's Business Services team helped facilitate connections between Kara and Dynata, ensuring that her skills were matched with the company's needs. This collaboration not only supported her placement but also provided the employer with resources to accommodate Kara's unique requirements, fostering an inclusive work environment.

With the addition of assistive technology, Kara not only maintained her job but also excelled in her role. Before completing her journey with VR, Kara shared exciting news with her VR Counselor: she was in the running for a promotion, transitioning to full-time status with benefits, and receiving a well-deserved raise!

Kara's story exemplifies how VR's comprehensive services can lead to independence and career success. Thanks to the dedicated teamwork of Cox, Horruitiner, the Business Services team, and the entire VR staff, Kara has regained her confidence and is thriving both personally and professionally.

Tennessee VR is proud to have played a part in Kara's journey and looks forward to supporting her bright future.

Success Stories: Paul Casteel

Keep at it! Don't quit Don't give up.

Paul Castell began his journey with Vocational Rehabilitation Services in January 2024 after losing his job and finding himself unable to find a new one. Having been a former customer of Vocational Rehabilitation when he transitioned from high school, he states, "I decided to go back." His mom also encouraged him to apply again because as he states, "I needed help."

Upon completing his intake and developing a plan for employment, Paul began working with the VR team including Tracy Strickland, VR Counselor; Meagan Acklen, VR Career Training Coordinator; Valerie Younger, VR Career Training Specialist; and Jamie Bone, Business Employment Consultant. Together, Paul explains, "They helped me find a job, [learn] job skills to keep a job. Helped me find a house. Helped me clean out my car. [Helped me] learn what to say and what not to say in interviews. Helped me budget my money. [And] helped me fill out [paperwork] for unemployment."

As a result of VR's assistance, Paul was able to obtain a job with CW Resources. He has successfully retained his job for over three months. When asked what he was most proud of, he stated, "I'm most proud of you helping me get interviews to get a good job. I was struggling." When asked what goals he hoped to achieve in the near future, Paul stated that he wants (1) to be sure to make it to work right a 7:00 am, (2) learn how to relate to people with different disabilities, (3) learn how to handle more responsibility, and (4) learn new life skills such as how to clean his house.

Paul was asked about his time with Vocational Rehabilitation and what his advice would be to anyone thinking of applying for services. He stated very clearly, "Even though times get hard, keep at it. Don't quit. Don't give up. Listen to everything they tell you. Pay attention in school. Always listen to your supervisor." VR is excited for Paul and looks forward to hearing more about his successes in life.

Success Stories: Lexie Dill

VR began working with Lexie Dill in November 2023. Lexie had some work experience but was looking for additional career readiness services. She participated in multiple services and classes including resume building, applications, self-advocacy, communication, discovery, pre-vocational training, interview skills, mock interviews, and community tours. Lexie also attended a job club on Financial Literacy. Lexie was very eager to learn and grow on her career journey. VR explored several options with her and discussed various employment opportunities.

Lexie participated in a community tour of Goodwill where she learned a lot about the various jobs one could have at the company. Following the tour, Lexie was interested in applying to Goodwill. Her VR team assisted her with the application and let the Goodwill Representative know it had been submitted. A few days later, Lexie received a call for an interview. She was very excited! For additional practice, Lexie did another mock interview in preparation for the Goodwill interview. On August 1, 2024, Lexie contacted us that she had gotten the job! We congratulated her and told her we were excited about her career journey. She thanked us for everything. We can't wait to see what Lexie's future holds. We are very proud of her and all she is accomplishing!

Success Stories: Karena Repko

Karena has struggled with hearing loss for years due to Charcot-Marie-Tooth Disease. She has been searching for a job for quite a while and shared that she left interviews feeling very defeated because she had such a difficult time hearing during the interview and was embarrassed by how many times she had to ask the interviewer to repeat themselves. She has worked with different community rehabilitation providers (CRPs) and attended job clubs but was hesitant to even apply for jobs because of challenges with hearing. Through VR's assistance, she had a diagnostic evaluation with Tennessee Hearing Instruments, and they recommended hearing aids. VR was able to purchase hearing aids for her. Karena was extremely excited and emailed her VR Counselor the day she got them to share about how life changing they were. In her own words, "I got the hearing aids and they made a HUGE difference in what I can hear! I clearly heard the office receptionist! Adjustment will need to be made during follow-up visits, but the doctor said he wants me to use them to allow my brain to adjust to the new way of hearing. Every little sound seems WAY amplified but he said that is normal and my brain will learn to deal with it. In the meantime, I'm trying them out in different environments. If it doesn't rain on Tuesday, I plan on going to the VR Job Club to see how it helps sitting across or at a conference table for in-person/group communications/interviews. The doctor paired them with my phone and they worked when I called my sister, but she has an amplified phone so I will be trying another phone call to double check. I will also try them with Microsoft Teams using my laptop on Wednesday during my meeting with CiCi (Goodwill Industry counselor). I'm super excited and truly over the top THANKFUL for you, VR and everyone that made this possible! I don't know everyone that was involved but please tell them I said, THANK YOU! This is going to help me so much in job interviews and while on the job!"

Karena attended a job club shortly after receiving her hearing aids and again she reached out to her VR Counselor to share that she "was able to dodge the raindrops and attend the job club today to test the hearing aids in a conference room setting like I would see during an interview. Brian Wilson was there and he sat at the furthest end of the table and I could clearly hear him and have a conversation!!! At the last meeting I could not hear him, so we were both excited! I cannot thank you enough for advocating hearing aids for me. It truly is a blessing and a great birthday present! I now want to go on interviews lol! Tomorrow I have an online meeting with the job coach, CiCi, from Goodwill industries to test the hearing aids on Microsoft Teams." She has told her VR Counselor several times how thankful she is for VR and for us advocating for her to have hearing aids.

State Rehabilitation Council

Mission

Serving all citizens of Tennessee, the mission of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of Tennessee is to advise, evaluate and partner with the public vocational rehabilitation program in support of improving access to employment and promoting a diverse workforce statewide.

Vision

The SRC of Tennessee envisions a statewide workforce that values disability and diversity and is committed to full participation of its citizens.

As a result of the 1992 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, each state VR agency was required to establish a State Rehabilitation Advisory Committee. The role of the committee was strengthened in the 1998 amendments to the Act when each state was mandated to establish a State Rehabilitation Council.

The mandate for the SRC and the definitions of its composition and functions are delineated in Section 105 within Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended, and in Title 34 Parts 361.16 and 361.17 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).

Responsibilities and Functions

The SRC of Tennessee works in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to maximize employment and independent living for Tennesseans with disabilities. The SRC advocates for the Vocational Rehabilitation program as well as advise the division on issues facing consumers of the VR program. The SRC acts as the voice of the consumer and other stakeholders in the VR program.

The SRC's responsibilities and functions, as outlined in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, include:

- Review, analyze, and advise TDHS/DRS regarding responsibilities related to:
  - eligibility, including order of selection;
  - effectiveness of services provided; and
  - functions performed by state agencies that affect the employment of individuals with disabilities.
- Partner with DRS to:
  - develop, agree to, and review VR goals and priorities;

    - evaluate the effectiveness of the VR program and submit reports of progress to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) commissioner.
- Assist in preparation of the VR services portion of the combined state plan and amendments to the plan, applications, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations.
- Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness and consumer satisfaction with:
    - functions performed by the DRS;
    - VR services provided; and
    - the employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals.
- Prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and the RSA commissioner on the status of VR programs in Tennessee.
- Coordinate activities with other councils to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance the number of individuals served.
- Coordinate and establish working relationships between DRS and the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and centers for independent living within Tennessee.
- Perform other functions consistent with VR services deemed appropriate by the SRC.

Membership

Council members are appointed by the Governor to serve a term of three years and may not serve more than two consecutive terms. When making appointments, the Governor must consider participants representing a broad range of individuals with disabilities and organizations interested in individuals with disabilities. The Governor, to the extent possible, must consider that minority populations are represented on the Council. Most members must be individuals with disabilities not employed by the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services.

The council must be comprised of at least 15 members from the following groups/organizations: Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC); Parent Training and Information Center; Client Assistance Program (CAP); VR counselor (ex officio, non-voting member if Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) employee); community program service providers; business, industry, and labor representatives (at least 4); disability groups; current or former VR recipient; state educational agency, state workforce investment board; and the Director of the DRS (ex-officio, non-voting).

2024 Officers

Chair
Rhonda Crenshaw
State Independent Living Council (SILC)
From: Cordova
Tennessee Region: West

Vice Chair
Josh Harper
Current/Former VR applicant/Recipient
From: Nashville
Tennessee Region: Middle

Secretary
Tyler Samuel
Representative of Disability Group
From: Nashville
VR Region: Middle

Immediate Past Chair
Rebecca Bordenet-French
Business, Industry and Labor
From: Manchester
Tennessee Region: Middle

CFR Title 34 Part 361.17 contains details on membership, appointments, terms, and electing of a chairperson.

SRC Council Members Engaging with Community Partners

2024 Members

Brian Stewart
Business, Industry and Labor
From: Cleveland
Tennessee Region: East

Vacant
Representative of Disability Group
From:
Tennessee Region:

Lisa Gosnell
Parent Training and Information Center
From: Jonesborough
Tennessee Region: East

Vacant
Business, Industry, and Labor
From:
Tennessee Region:

Keith Tackett
Business, Industry, and Labor
From: Memphis
Tennessee Region: West

Josh Harper
Current/Former VR Applicant/Recipient
From: Nashville
Tennessee Region: Middle

Tiffany Ramsey
Director of VR Program
From: Nashville
Tennessee Region: Middle

Catherine Bledsoe
State Education Agency
From: Maryville
Tennessee Region: East

Vacant
State Workforce Boards
From:
Tennessee Region:

Rhonda Crenshaw
State Independent Living Council (SILC)
From: Cordova
Tennessee Region: West

Craig Lamak
Client Assistance Program
From: Knoxville
Tennessee Region: East

Alicia Cone
Representative of Disability Group
From: Nashville
VR Region: Middle

Troy Allen
Representative of Community Rehabilitation Provider
From: Memphis
VR Region: Middle

Tyler Samuel
Representative of Disability Group
From: Nashville
VR Region: Middle

Vacant
Current/Former VR Applicant/Recipient
From:
Tennessee Region:

Jason Fox
Business, Industry, and Labor
From: Rockford
Tennessee Region: East

Kamekio D. Lewis
Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor
From: Millington
Tennessee Region: West

Paul "Kelly" Sorrell
Community Rehabilitation Program Service Provider
From: Jackson
Tennessee Region: West

2024 Accomplishments

- Held four SRC quarterly meetings to conduct SRC business. Meetings were held in four different locations across the state with the intent of sharing local community success stories and meeting community partners.
- Prepared Annual Report with the TDHS Division of Rehabilitation Services.
- Continued participation in the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) via participation in national quarterly conference calls.
- Increased Board participation and engagement and added a new CRP seat to the council.
- Continued focus on Order of Selection. We are excited to report Tennessee was able to serve all eligible VR customers and is no longer under an order of selection.
- SRC Chair and three other members of the SRC participated in Disability Day on the Hill.
- Focus areas of interest this year were services provided to students and youth with disabilities, increasing access to assistive technology, the blindness community, VR team member recognition and training, and expanding awareness of the VR program.

2025 SRC Quarterly Meeting Schedule

The SRC holds quarterly meetings, and the dates, times and locations are posted on the State of Tennessee Public Meetings Calendar at http://www.tn.gov/meetings at least 30 days in advance of the meeting.

- March 27, 2025
- June 12, 2025
- August 28, 2025
- November 13, 2025

Join the SRC

If you are a person with a disability or someone interested in having input regarding employment services to individuals with disabilities, the State Rehabilitation Council of Tennessee may be for you. If you are interested in learning more about this unique opportunity to serve, please visit the SRC website at https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/councils-and-committees/state-rehabilitation-council.html for further information regarding the application process. You may also contact the SRC directly at srctennessee@gmail.com.