

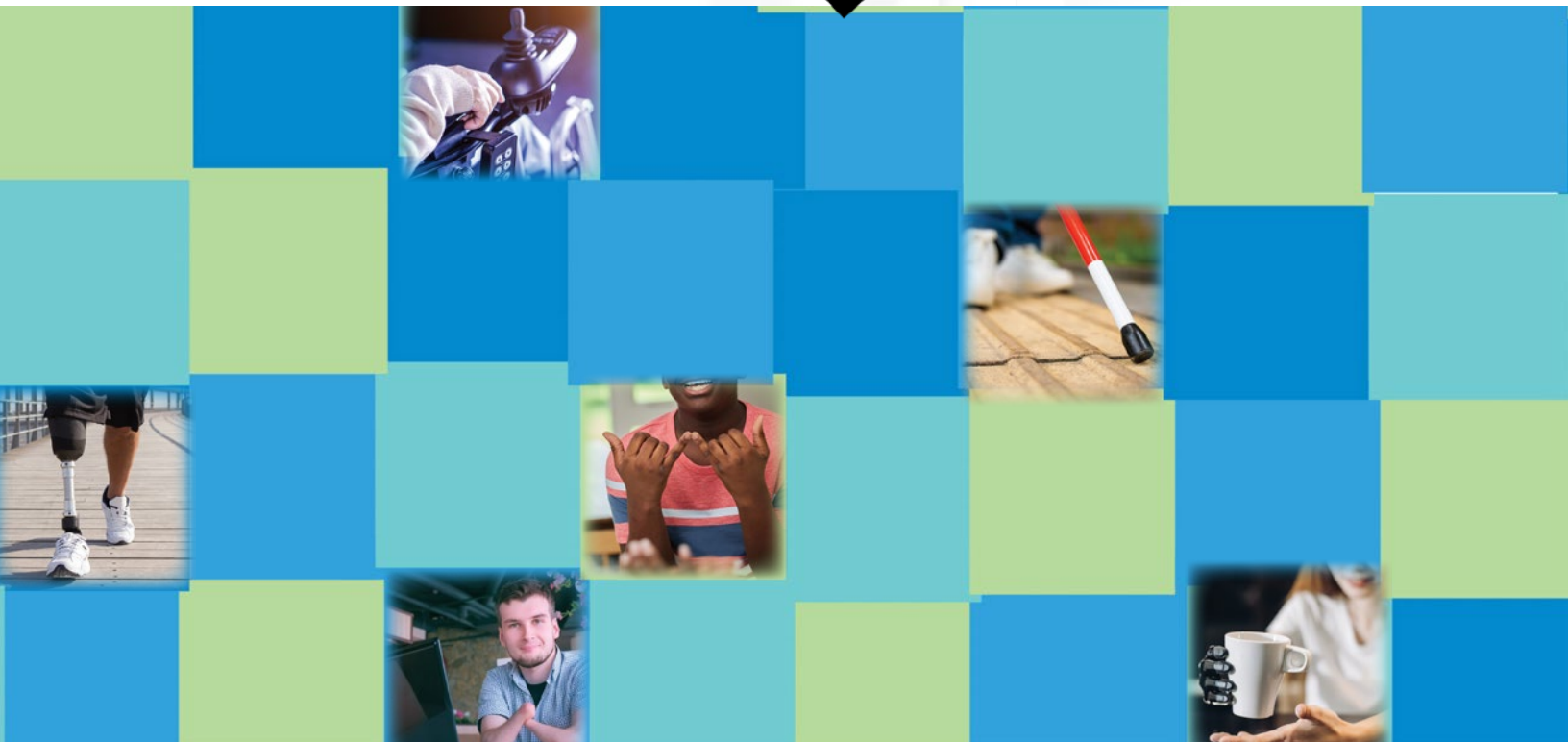


**FFY 2025**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**



**Indiana**  
**VOCATIONAL**  
**REHABILITATION**  
Empowering People. Changing Lives.



## CONTENTS

Greetings from the chairperson .....	3
Message from the Director.....	4
BRS vision, mission and values .....	5
In the Spotlight: Kiley.....	6
In the Spotlight: Logan.....	7
In the Spotlight: Matthew .....	8
In the Spotlight: AJ .....	9
In the Spotlight: Bailey.....	10
In the Spotlight: Ted .....	11
Pre-employment transition services.....	12
Business and community engagement.....	14
VR staff awards .....	17
Employment First .....	18
Additional highlights .....	19
Commission members .....	20
About Indiana's Commission on Rehabilitation Services .....	21

# GREETINGS FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

Dear Hoosiers,

This year, my fellow Commission members and I observed improvement in the employment of Hoosiers with disabilities. The Commission on Rehabilitation Services is comprised of citizens with disabilities, businesses dedicated to the continual growth of Indiana's economic infrastructure, and providers that help make employment a reality. Each appointed member is dedicated to promoting individuals with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining competitive employment within the community. Providing a person with the opportunity to earn competitive wages helps them reach goals and have a life that otherwise may not be possible. Greater support systems are created and the individuals who are supported can reinvest into the community, continuing a cycle of healthy economic and social growth.



The Commission partners with our Bureau of Rehabilitation Services to provide feedback around customer satisfaction with services, the quality of said services, policy and procedure, and goals. This year the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment was completed; there was an increase in Pre-Employment Transition Services and an increase in participation within the VR program overall. In our ever-changing economic and social landscape VR has continued to provide excellent service and increase employment opportunities for our Hoosiers. Our state also ended Order of Selection, which means that more eligible individuals will receive services to support their employment stability. I am proud of the Commission and the state staff that are helping Indiana move forward and responsibly invest in our best asset—our people. As a prior participant in VR, I strongly believe that a well-balanced program focusing on compassionate compliance can make a difference in a person's life. We can read regulations all day and advocate for laws, but hard work is realized when you can experience people having the ability to earn a living alongside their non-disabled peers. All Commission meetings are public, and we welcome comments. Please attend a meeting and let your views and concerns be noted. We can also be reached at [vrcommission.vr@fssa.in.gov](mailto:vrcommission.vr@fssa.in.gov).

Humbly yours,

Amanda M Blaise, JD  
Chair, Indiana Commission on Rehabilitation Services

# MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



This past year has been focused on two primary objectives: improve employment outcomes for VR participants and effectively utilize available resources to sustain quality services to a growing service population. I am very pleased to share that the number of VR participants exiting with employment increased an astounding 43% from the prior year! Our VR teams are working hard to keep this momentum going as we support greater participation of individuals with all types of disabilities to become part of, and remain in, the workforce.

VR is serving 30% more individuals today than we did three years ago. The growth is to be celebrated but also poses challenges in balancing services to all eligible individuals with available resources. The VR team tackled this challenge through identifying and implementing numerous strategies this past year. Just a few examples include transitioning some contractual duties in house, authorization and service duration standards for discovery and other services, and reduced travel. More efforts are underway including a systems consolidation project targeted for implementation in 2026. These efforts, along with a focus on intentional service delivery, continue to be key strategies to support sustained service delivery for all eligible individuals.

I am excited that once again, we have the opportunity to share the experiences and outcomes of several amazing individuals who received VR services to help them realize employment success. Thank you to Kiley, Logan, Matthew, AJ, Bailey, Ted and Josh for helping to articulate the importance of employment for all by sharing some of their experiences. Thank you also to our great staff (go team!), agency and division leadership, stakeholders and members of the Commission on Rehabilitation Services for your continued partnership. We welcome 2026 with continued momentum toward improving employment outcomes for Hoosiers with disabilities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a stylized 'T' followed by a series of loops and a final flourish.

Theresa Koleszar MS, CRC  
Director, Bureau of Rehabilitation Services

# BRS VISION, MISSION AND VALUES

The Bureau of Rehabilitation Services includes Blind and Visually Impaired Services, Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services, Centers for Independent Living and Vocational Rehabilitation Services.

## BRS VISION STATEMENT

All Hoosiers are encouraged and empowered to pursue opportunities that promote their independence.

## VR VISION STATEMENT

To partner with individuals with disabilities to explore career pathways to achieve their employment success.

## VALUES STATEMENT

### VR VALUES:

1. **Quality:** To support an effective, skilled and engaged team as the most valuable asset in achieving person-centered services that produce quality outcomes.
2. **Purposeful:** To engage in thoughtful, intentional actions that drive progress toward each individual's employment success.
3. **Empowerment:** To entrust staff to think and act creatively, foster hope and empower individuals to take ownership of their path to employment success.
4. **Strengths-based:** To focus on each individual's unique abilities and interest as the foundation for employment success.
5. **Inclusion:** To uphold the belief that each individual's contributions have value and, with access to a broad range of opportunities and appropriate supports, all Hoosiers can achieve employment success.

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: KILEY

Kiley Sickler began services at VR as a junior in high school through the Carey Services Transition program. She explored a few areas to determine an employment goal and eventually landed on social work after working with a hospital social worker with her dad. VR helped her complete her bachelor's degree and she worked for a time as an Employment Specialist before continuing her education. Kiley enrolled in a social work graduate program and began working with VR counselor Kate Boller. Kiley also worked with her as a high school student through the Carey Services Transition program, where Kate worked before joining the VR team.

Kiley faced challenges and obstacles in passing her path toward becoming a licensed social worker. She worked with VR to obtain necessary accommodations to help her work toward completing her training and worked with a specialized tutoring service. These supports and her determination led her to obtain her license in social work. Kate gave her much needed moral support and access to the tools that she needed to be successful. After graduation and licensing, Kate encouraged Kiley to look for a position that would utilize her skills to get a job that was more closely aligned with her goals to work in medical social work. Kate helped her to gather the necessary paperwork to transfer her social work license to the state of Nevada and Kiley was able to secure employment as a medical social worker with the state of Nevada at the top-tier pay grade. She reports that she loves her job!



"I am beyond proud of Kiley and beyond grateful to have seen her full circle through this journey. I initially involved her with VR as a high school student and then was her VR counselor when she completed her training and achieved her goal. Kiley's perseverance, tenacity and gratefulness is one of my 'whys' for doing my job."

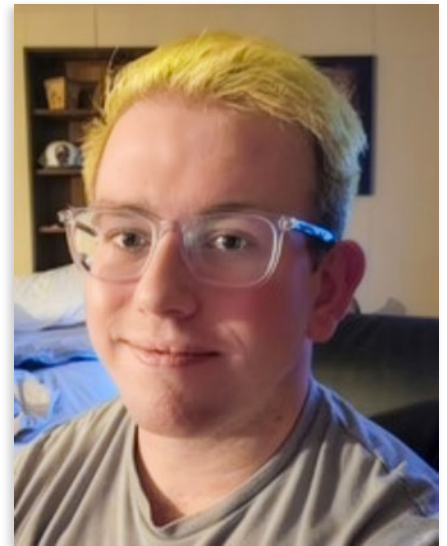
Each year, the annual report spotlights outstanding individuals who were able to achieve their employment goals with the assistance of VR and other local partners. A special thanks to Kiley, Logan, Matthew, AJ, Bailey, Ted and Josh!



## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: LOGAN

Overcoming challenges that lead to successful employment outcomes is what VR is all about. Logan Choate said he always knew he would successfully complete college, but with the help of VR services, he was given help to overcome significant barriers. Logan experiences several cognitive and behavioral health conditions, but this did not hold him back. He has tremendous drive and motivation that led him to earn a full-ride scholarship at Anderson University for mechanical engineering.

Logan said, “I have always been self-driven, but Voc Rehab gave me financial resources and tools to be able to proceed with college while also offering me tutoring so I could excel in my classes.” Logan talked about taking Calculus 1 and barely passing with a 73 which was the bare minimum. He received tutoring for Calculus 2, Calculus 3 and Linear Equations. Kate Boller, Post Secondary Lead and his VR counselor, set him up to receive tutoring from Club Z and purchased a great calculator; his math grades went from barely passing to 85-95 percent out of 100. Logan also valued support from VR in securing a laptop for his coursework, which was the “backbone” of his education. Logan graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering in May of 2025 cum laude with a 3.701.



After graduation, Logan was worried about finding employment, but he didn't have to worry for long. He graduated in May and was working by July. His VR Counselor provided support, checked on him regularly and provided him with job leads. Kate also reached out to Kristina Blankenship, Director of Business and Community Engagement, to assist Logan in finding employment. Kristina provided some resources which included information on a monthly Indianapolis Talent Showcase meeting. Fellow VR counselor Amber Main provided Logan with a mock interview and assisted him with interviewing skills.

Shortly after his mock interview, Logan got a job as an engineering technician with Element Materials in Daleville, Ind., with a starting pay of \$21 per hour. Logan loves his job. He is earning qualifications and learning as many jobs as possible through the different branches within his company. Logan reported his manager has already talked about promoting him in the future. He said his workplace also loves his recently dyed UV radiant green hair. Logan has gained self-confidence and is off to a great start in his mechanical engineering career.

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: MATTHEW



In March 2022, Matt began working with VR, a partnership that would become instrumental in shaping his future. Through discovery services, Matt explored his interests and potential career paths. One of the first hurdles was his outdated walker, which lacked wheels and caused him to lose balance. An assistive technology evaluation recommended a rollator walker, greatly improving his safety and stamina. To support his employment goal, Matt underwent transit training with Wabash County Transit, learning how to navigate his community confidently. A benefits analysis ensured that his employment wouldn't jeopardize his essential supports, allowing him to pursue work without fear.

Another assistive technology evaluation focused on his speech. The recommendation: an Augmentative and Alternative Communication device. With job readiness training, Matt learned to use the device effectively, opening new doors for communication and connection.

During a team meeting using person-centered planning tools, Matt shared a dream that surprised everyone—he wanted to be a teacher's assistant. This was a significant shift from his initial goal of working in laundry and dry cleaning. His employment specialist helped him find a situational assessment opportunity at a newly opened preschool in town. The result? Matt was offered a position at Westminster Preschool.

Today, Matt is a beloved figure in the classroom. He reads books to children using his AAC device connected to a Bluetooth speaker. He helps line up students for recess, supervises outdoor play and even assists with tying shoes. His AAC device includes a button that says, "Please turn the volume down"—a gentle way to manage classroom noise. Hailey, the teacher Matt works with, shared, "Matt is always so helpful with the kids. I love having him in the classroom." She added that the children adore Mr. Matt, often gathering around him during story time, with two or three kids nestled on his lap.

Matt is succeeding in his role and absolutely loves his job. When asked what the best part of his work is, he grew emotional and used his AAC to say, "Being with the kids." He also expressed joy that his job is located in a church, a place that brings him peace.

Matt's journey is a testament to what's possible when services are tailored to the individual. He shared that VR didn't push him into a job, it helped him discover the one he truly wanted. Today, Matt is thriving in a role that brings him joy, purpose and connection. His story reminds us that with the right support, every person can find their place—and shine.



## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: AJ



VRC met Alex J. “AJ” Hummer in high school. He explained his medical diagnoses of cerebral palsy, ADHD, asthma and scoliosis and how the diagnoses would affect his college experience. AJ was interested in business marketing or business management. Additionally, AJ accepted a scholarship to play basketball with the University of Texas at Arlington Movin’ Mavs wheelchair basketball team. AJ received support from VR throughout his college experience, including counseling on benefits and work incentives to support his eventual employment outcome.

While in college, AJ woke up around 4 a.m. to go to practice. He practiced four-six hours per day for five days a week. As a full-time student he went to classes and spent evenings studying. AJ was a key player for the University of Texas at Arlington Movin’ Mavs wheelchair basketball team that won the National Wheelchair Basketball Association Intercollegiate Men’s National Championship.

Due to his championship win, AJ was invited to tryouts for the NWBA’s United States Men’s U23 Team for the upcoming World Championships.

After graduation, AJ completed an internship and went to work for an energy company. His VR counselor assisted him in understanding his rights with requesting workplace accommodations.

Through faith and perseverance AJ received the call he had been praying for. The coach for the Doneck Dolphins in Trier, Germany, had followed this talented wheelchair basketball player from Waterloo, Ind. He reached out to AJ and offered him his dream job—to train for and play competitive professional wheelchair basketball!



## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: BAILEY

Despite facing significant physical challenges, including a diagnosis of club foot with leg length discrepancy, scoliosis and autoimmune disorders, Bailey was determined to achieve her career goals in the cosmetology field. Having undergone multiple surgeries for leg lengthening, Bailey Riggins continued to experience limitations in standing for extended periods—an essential requirement in the cosmetology field.



Recognizing her passion for beauty and wellness, Bailey’s vocational rehabilitation counselor, Tracy Cahee, stepped in to provide comprehensive support tailored to her unique needs. Through an assistive technology evaluation, VR identified a specialized adaptive chair to enhance her mobility and stamina in the salon environment. This was critical to addressing challenges with prolonged standing.

This specialized chair allows Bailey to sit when needed without interrupting her workflow, swivel easily to access tools and supplies and position herself optimally while working on clients. This accommodation allowed Bailey to successfully complete training and obtain employment as a stylist. VR also provided educational support for Bailey’s

cosmetology training, ensuring she had the resources to thrive academically and professionally.

Bailey is excelling in her career and furthering her training to become a training instructor! Her story is a testament to resilience, innovation and the power of personalized support.

“I had an amazing VR counselor, Tracy... Even when I would get frustrated during school, I had the support of my mom and Tracy, helping or counseling me throughout my school time. After I graduated from cosmetology school, Tracy was able to help me get more training for extensions. I was thankful to find a job that offered additional training and support for men’s haircuts. I worked for Great Clips for six months and I then felt ready to find a job where I could do more, so I applied to JC Penney Salon and I have been happy here since April 2025. I have also been in the instructor training program at Tricoci [University of Beauty Culture] since August 2025. I love learning new things and teaching students will help me in the future to improve my skills. I don’t believe I would be in the job I am in now or in school now if it weren’t for the amazing VR program. Thank you for giving me that opportunity and giving me the support I needed to get me where I am now.”

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: TED

Through VR's Supported Employment Plus project, a model demonstration project funded through a disability innovation fund grant from the Rehabilitation Services Administration, Ted found success working in his local community. SE+ aims to increase competitive integrated employment opportunities for individuals transitioning from sheltered workshops.

Ted had attended Shares, Inc. workshops for nearly 30 years, earning subminimum wages throughout that time. Despite his long tenure, Ted shared that his true goal was to find a job in his local community. In the past, he worried that being blind and having an intellectual disability might prevent him from succeeding. However, with ongoing education and encouragement from his SE+ Vocational Rehabilitation counselor and access to the opportunity to pursue CIE, Ted began to believe that he could find a role that suited him.

With continued guidance from his SE+ VRC and trained SE+ employment consultants at Shares Inc., Ted secured a position in laundry services at a local senior living center in March 2025. His starting wage was \$16.00 per hour and he now works 12–15 hours per week—a significant improvement from his previous earnings! Since starting, Ted has expressed how much he enjoys both the work and the social activities he shares with his new friends and coworkers.

After successfully completing his new hire probationary period, Ted was recognized for his dedication and received a raise. He was also honored in a special ceremony where he was awarded a “Blue Badge.” This badge signifies that Ted is a valued employee and wearing it proudly each day shows that he is committed and hardworking.

Initially, Ted planned to stay part time at the sheltered workshop. However, he has since decided to focus solely on his new job. His reasons are simple and relatable: the pay is better and he now has a vibrant circle of friends.



# PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

Pre-employment transition services are available to students with disabilities ages 14 through age 22 who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR. Pre-ETS activities include job exploration counseling; work-based learning experiences; counseling on enrollment in post-secondary training opportunities; workplace readiness training; and instruction in self-advocacy. Pre-ETS are available in all 92 counties statewide. An updated listing of providers, counties and schools can be found on [the DDRS website](#).

This past state fiscal year, over 8,000 students with disabilities received Pre-ETS. Table 1 illustrates the number of Pre-ETS activities completed during SFY25 in either group or individual settings through Pre-ETS contract partners:

## PRE-ETS ACTIVITIES COMPLETED DURING SFY25

ACTIVITY	SESSIONS COMPLETED
Job exploration counseling	25,316
Workplace readiness training	65,074
Work-based learning experiences	24,270
Instruction in self-advocacy	24,345
Counseling on enrollment in postsecondary training	10,478

A Pre-ETS needs assessment began in 2023 in partnership with Public Consulting Group, to assess program improvement opportunities. While the program showed strong foundations—such as clear communication, streamlined enrollment and educator support—the assessment highlighted key areas for growth: expanding program knowledge, increasing VR referrals, engaging more diploma-track students and strengthening provider capacity.

To address these needs, a series of initiatives was launched between summer 2023 and June 2025. These included career coach mentoring, personal perspective videos, Communities of Practice, a Pre-ETS comic book and audio companion, expanded training modules and outreach tools like brochures and FAQs. More than 1,000 career coaches and stakeholders engaged in Communities of Practice, fostering shared learning and consistent implementation. The Pre-ETS comic book and audio companion reached hun-





*Ty at Sadona Farms pulling weeds and learning about fresh herbs and vegetables and practicing making the stir fry for their presentation.*



dreds of students, offering an accessible and engaging entry point to career exploration. Training modules, both in-person and virtual, boosted provider confidence and consistency, while the “Empowering Futures” guide equipped students and families with practical tools for postsecondary planning. These efforts not only addressed identified gaps but also laid a foundation for sustained improvement and innovation.

VR continued to partner with the Department of Workforce Development’s Jobs for America’s Graduates program during 2025. For SFY 25, 1,616 students with disabilities received Pre-ETS through JAG. Prior to access to Pre-ETS funding, 4% of students participating in JAG had an IEP or 504 plan, while 24% had an IEP or 504 plan in the 2024–2025 school year. The JAG student with disability graduation rate for the class of 2024 was 96.96%, in comparison to the overall Indiana graduation rate for the same population of 82.20%.

In 2025, Indiana VR focused on preparing providers for Pre-ETS system changes scheduled to launch in 2026. To support this transition, VR is developing and distributing key resources, including a Pre-ETS manual, a student career profile tool and an FAQ, to clarify expectations and assist with implementation. VR is also delivering targeted training for career coaches on how to use the career profile effectively and sequence services with other programs and resources. These efforts are designed to promote consistency, strengthen vocational planning and ensure Pre-ETS activities are aligned with each student’s path toward a meaningful employment goal.

In Marshall County, students participated in a summer work-based learning experience through Cardinal Services at Potawatomi Wildlife Park. Under the guidance of the Park Ranger, students learned trail maintenance, cleared debris, including chainsaw use for fallen branches—and cleaned key areas like the pavilion and welcome center. Within weeks, students were working independently and demonstrating strong workplace readiness. Meanwhile, ADEC launched its Pre-ETS program in October 2024 and quickly expanded from 37 to 177 active students across multiple schools. Their summer program included work-based learning at Camp Millhouse and Potawatomi Zoo, along with business tours that introduced students to a range of career possibilities.

In Madison, Ind., New Hope Services supported a student named Ty in exploring his dream of becoming a chef. Ty toured The River Oak Chophouse, observed professional chefs in action and asked questions about culinary techniques. Throughout the summer, Ty and a peer-planned recipes, purchased ingredients and prepared meals weekly. They also volunteered at Sadona Farms, learning about vegetable cultivation and food sourcing. The program culminated in a live cooking demonstration for the adult day program, where Ty taught knife safety and stir-fry preparation before serving the dish to participants, an experience that blended skill-building, self-advocacy and community engagement.

# BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## DISABILITY AWARENESS MONTH

In March, Indiana VR kicked off Disability Awareness month at the Third Annual City of Indianapolis' Celebration of Creativity at the Indianapolis International Airport. Representatives from the Indianapolis Airport Authority, Indiana Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, Ability Indiana and the mayor's office gathered at the Airport to unveil an exhibit created by adults with disabilities. The event emphasized and celebrated artists and creatives in Indiana which included Hoosiers with disabilities.



## NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

October 2025 was the 80th anniversary of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, an annual recognition of the positive impact of people with disabilities in the American workforce. This annual event began in 1945 as a weeklong national observance of the contributions of people with physical disabilities. In 1988, Congress designated the commemoration as NDEAM, which then evolved to acknowledge the importance of increasing opportunities for people with disabilities, including those with mental health conditions and other nonobvious disabilities, in the workforce. In 2001, ODEP was created and entrusted to administer NDEAM, including the selection and promotion of its annual theme.

Leading up to the celebration of America's 250th anniversary in 2026, this year's NDEAM theme and graphics will also honor the national milestone. NDEAM 2025 will recognize the value and talent American workers with disabilities add to our workplaces and economy and highlight their achievements both past and present. That's the spirit behind this year's official theme: "Celebrating Value and Talent."







## NATIONAL SUMMIT FOR THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT TEAM

In September, the National Employment Team annual meeting was hosted by Microsoft at their corporate headquarters in Redmond, Wash. The NET represents a unified approach to serving businesses, supported by the leadership of VR agencies nationwide. Also, the NET celebrated its 20th year and Microsoft celebrated its 50th year of existence. This in-person summit facilitated an exchange of information, focusing on emerging trends and best practices in employer engagement and the employment of people with disabilities. Each of the 77 VR agencies has a lead business consultant who is part of the NET. In celebration of the 20th anniversary of the NET, Kathleen West-Evans, Director of Business Relations, NET shared the following with state VR agencies.

The NET originated in 2004, when business relations specialists from across the country collaborated with RSA and CSAVR to incorporate a business roundtable within the National Employment Conference. During this event, business partners were consulted on ways to enhance their involvement in career planning and employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities. This initiative yielded several significant insights:

- ◆ Establish a team capable of supporting businesses throughout their operational footprint and develop consistent messaging across all VR programs.
- ◆ Foster trust and cultivate long-term partnerships with business entities.
- ◆ Attain a comprehensive understanding of each business's operations.
- ◆ Identify both short- and long-term talent needs, emphasizing career progression.
- ◆ Explore various avenues for business service delivery, including TA and consultation. Collaborate with companies to build effective strategies across their footprint at the national, state and local level.
- ◆ Honor commitments by actively listening to and delivering on business partner expectations.

In 2005, CSAVR membership supported the development of the Director of Business Relations role to further these strategies and support a dual customer model at the national level. Subsequently, relevant language was incorporated into the Rehabilitation Act as part of the 2014 amendments under Title IV of WIOA. As the NET marks its twentieth anniversary, we remain committed to ongoing growth and development of the NET and our work in the dual customer environment.

## INVESTED IN THE TEAM

### HOW JOSH EARNED HIS PLACE AT THE PACER TEAM STORE

In August 2024, Josh began working at the Indiana Pacers Team Store, which sells fan gear and apparel for both the NBA's Pacers and the WNBA's Indiana Fever. It didn't take long for Josh's work ethic and positive attitude to get noticed.

Josh credits his success to the early work experience he gained through summer jobs while in school and after graduation. When the pandemic shut down his workplace, Josh found himself without a job. Thanks to consistent support from his family, his vocational rehabilitation counselor and job coaches, he stayed focused and didn't let the setback define him. Josh even recalls his new manager telling him, "I've got your back." That belief in his potential helped him regain confidence and momentum.

One year later, Josh continues to thrive in a role where he feels valued and seen. "Josh has been a valuable member of the Pacers and Fever Team Store over the past year," his manager shared. "He's friendly, dependable and quick to offer a smile. He did a marvelous job packing web orders and helping us through the Pacers NBA Finals, the WNBA All-Star game and the Fever Stranger Things collection release. No matter how tall our task is for the day, Josh always approaches work with a positive attitude and is ready to contribute to our success. We are lucky to have him on our team!"

A supervisor shared that he had no doubt Josh would be a fantastic addition to the team when he learned Josh had purchased the same tape dispenser used on the job just to practice at home. After noticing he wasn't as fast as his colleagues, Josh took it upon himself to improve, showing initiative, self-awareness and a deep commitment to the team. Any lingering doubt disappeared when the supervisor saw that Josh was willing to do what it takes to stay on the team... a fitting mindset for someone working in the heart of Indiana's pro basketball scene.



# VR STAFF AWARDS

Once again, the Commission on Rehabilitation Services conducted a nomination process to recognize VR state employees. This tradition continues to be celebrated and the time and effort of the Commission to conduct this process is much appreciated. The Commission's awards committee reviewed numerous nominations and selected four award recipients this year.

## AND THE WINNERS ARE...



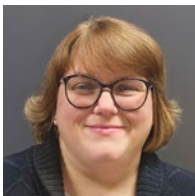
**SUPPORT STAFF OF THE YEAR: PATRICK ROBINSON, SECRETARY, FORT WAYNE OFFICE**

The recipient should demonstrate exemplary traits in the areas of organization, creating working systems and interacting with compassion, kindness and a positive attitude with customers, colleagues and the community at large.



**RISING STAR: MARY WOLFE, VR COUNSELOR, MARION (GRANT COUNTY) OFFICE**

This recipient demonstrates a can-do attitude and exhibits qualities which suggest potential future advancement within Vocational Rehabilitation. This award is open to all VR staff who have been employed for 36 months or less.



**COUNSELOR OF THE YEAR: LINDA MILLER, VR COUNSELOR, CASTLETON OFFICE**

The recipient should demonstrate the highest level of organizational skills, knowledge of resources and programs and is timely in providing assistance to customers, colleagues and the community at large. The candidate should also exhibit superior listening skills that empower their customers to reach their highest potential.



**OUTSTANDING LEADER: STEVE UPCHURCH, TRAINING DIRECTOR, CENTRAL OFFICE**

The recipient of this award is dedicated to fostering the development of others. They have a can-do attitude. They are a positive role model to others and inspire others to do their best. Through leading by example, they promote and maintain high morale while always adhering to the mission of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program.

**Congratulations to all 2025 VR staff award nominees!**

# EMPLOYMENT FIRST

Within the Division of Disability, Aging and Rehabilitative Services, an elevated focus on competitive, integrated employment remains a high priority and is supported through several initiatives and strategies:

- ◆ The Division of Disability, Aging and Rehabilitative Services, the division that houses BRS, directed American Rescue Plan Act funds to numerous organizations to support transition from subminimum wage to competitive integrated employment. Those projects were completed this past year. DDARS continues to progress through a systems transformation to include expanded access to meaningful employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
- ◆ A cross-council summit was held during 2023 to engage various councils and stakeholder groups across Indiana to generate awareness and excitement around employment.
- ◆ In late 2022, BRS received a five-year federal grant to support individuals in moving from subminimum wage employment to competitive integrated employment. This project, called Supported Employment Plus, is a model demonstration project with five pilot organizations that include 10 sheltered workshop settings. Approximately 50 project participants have obtained employment with average wages of \$11.39 per hour as of September 2025 and five individuals with intellectual disabilities have been trained as peer support specialists and were hired by pilot sites to deliver peer support services.
- ◆ DDARS continues to engage with the State Employment Leadership Network, a membership-based network of state intellectual and developmental disability agencies committed to making changes in their service systems to improve integrated employment outcomes.
- ◆ VR has enhanced Career Counseling, Information and Referral services for individuals engaged in subminimum wage employment, including incorporation of more individualized services.
- ◆ VR continues to partner with the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction, including supporting Individual Placement and Support, an evidence-based employment model, across four community mental health centers in Indiana.

The [Employment First plan](#), adopted by the Commission on Rehabilitation Services in September 2020, can be viewed on the DDARS website.



## ADDITIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

In July 2023, VR implemented provider performance incentive payments to promote increased wages, work hours and employer offered health benefits for VR participants achieving employment. VR Employment Service providers are eligible to receive these incentive payments if their efforts result in participant employment outcomes with wages of at least **\$15.78/hour**, and/or **30** weekly work hours, and/or employer offered benefits. Higher incentive payments are made for outcomes meeting multiple benchmarks. To date, VR has paid over **\$320,000** in performance incentive payments to providers since implementation, for almost **350** VR participant outcomes meeting one or more of the three benchmarks.

The average hourly wage for individuals exiting with employment during the last performance year was **\$17.96/hour** and average weekly work hours of **27**. The average wages increased **17.5%** from the prior year and average weekly work hours increased **11%**.

Additionally, over **8,000** students with disabilities received pre-employment transition services during the last fiscal year.

VR staff exceeded federal timeliness standards for the determination of eligibility and development of service plans at a **99%** compliance rate (standard 90%).

81% of the VR population were individuals with the most significant disabilities.

The most common primary disability experienced by VR participants is intellectual and developmental disability, while mental health diagnosis is the most common overall disability experienced by participants when considering primary and secondary disabilities.

**2,091** VR participants exited with employment outcomes during the last performance year, which was a **43%** increase in exits with employment over the prior year.

There were over **18,000** open individual cases in the Indiana VR program this past year, with services provided to **15,803** individuals under an Individual Plan for Employment. This represents a **12%** increase in individuals receiving services over the prior year and a **30%** increase over the last three years.

# COMMISSION MEMBERS

The Rehabilitation Act requires the state VR agency to establish a State Rehabilitation Council. Council members are appointed by the governor and serve no more than two consecutive full terms. No terms can exceed three years. Indiana's Commission on Rehabilitation Services is comprised of individuals representing specific categories outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations Section 361.17. The following individuals served during federal fiscal year 2025. Additional member appointments are pending.

**Amanda Blaise**, ADA Coordinator, FSSA Office of General Counsel

**Kate Barrow**, Governor's Council for People with Disabilities

**Ron Brown**, Indiana Business Enterprise Program

**Katie Connel**, Indiana Bureau of Disabilities Services

**Jennifer Diaz**, INSOURCE

**Mason Ellis**, Crane Navy Base

**Whitney Ertel**, Governors Workforce Cabinet

**Abigail Fleenor**, Indiana Statewide Independent Living Council

**Shawn Fulton**, The Arc of Indiana

**Katherine Heger**, Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction

**Theresa Koleszar**, Indiana Bureau of Rehabilitation Services Director

**Zaida Maldonado-Prather**, Indiana Disability Rights

**Danie'l Mize**, Self-Advocates of Indiana

**Ian Ragains**, Indiana Department of Education

**Cadence Riley**, Youth Representative

**Marc Ruiz**, Oak Partners, Inc.

**Stacey Smith**, Prairie Quest Consulting

**Barbara Thompson**, Indiana National Alliance on Mental Illness

**Willaine St. Pierre Sandy**, Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor

**Kindall Stewart**, Youth Representative

**Michael Thibideau**, Invest Hamilton County





# Indiana's Commission on Rehabilitation Services

## About the commission

Appointed by the Governor, members of Indiana's Commission on Rehabilitation Services are knowledgeable of and have concern for rehabilitation and disability issues. A majority of the members are people with disabilities.

Commission members represent the disability community in matters pertaining to the quality and effectiveness of Indiana's Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Serving in an advisory capacity, the commission provides oversight of VR programs, policies and procedures by:

- ◆ Partnering with VR to develop goals and priorities.
- ◆ Making recommendations on program policies.
- ◆ Reviewing and providing comments on the state plan for VR.
- ◆ Collaborating with other governor-appointed councils.
- ◆ Increasing public awareness of disability issues such as employment, education and independent living in the community.
- ◆ Assisting VR staff in the administration of a consumer satisfaction survey.
- ◆ Monitoring and evaluating the VR program.
- ◆ Producing an annual report that addresses the effectiveness of VR services.



## Get involved

- ◆ Attend commission meetings and share your views.
- ◆ Ask a member to contact you so that you can share your views.
- ◆ Tell a member that you would like to join the commission.
- ◆ Share information about the commission with others.

## Commission meetings

The commission has at least four business meetings each year. We invite you to share your comments about VR services during the open forum which is scheduled during each meeting. If you would like information about the meeting dates, times and locations, please [contact us](#) or [visit our website](#).

You may also request that a commission member contact you. Your name and contact information will be forwarded to a commission member in your area upon your request.



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**VOCATIONAL**  
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## Contact us

### Mail to:

Indiana Commission on Rehabilitation Services  
c/o Vocational Rehabilitation Services  
402 W. Washington St., MS-20  
P.O. Box 7083  
Indianapolis, IN 46207-7083

### Email:

VRCommission.VR@fssa.IN.gov

### Telephone:

Toll-free: 800-545-7763  
VP to VP: 317-542-3449 or 317-542-3324

### Online:

[www.VRS.IN.gov](http://www.VRS.IN.gov)



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**Division of Disability, Aging and  
and Rehabilitative Services**