

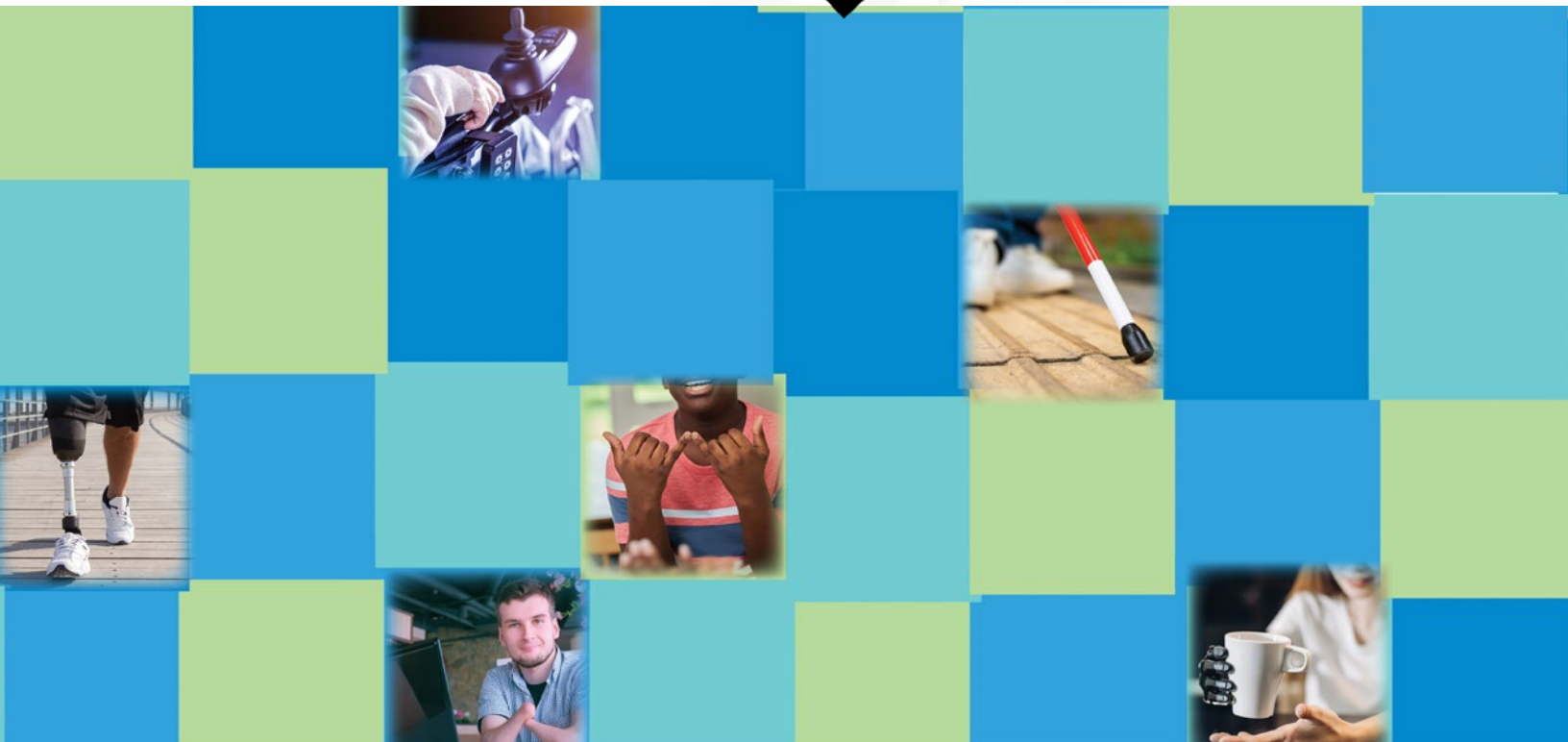


FFY 2024

ANNUAL REPORT



Indiana
VOCATIONAL
REHABILITATION
Empowering People. Changing Lives.



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GREETINGS FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

Dear Hoosiers,

Work through employment is about so much more than just a paycheck, although as we all know, paychecks are pretty nice. Work also provides the opportunity to use our talents and effort to serve others including customers, employers, co-workers and the greater community. Work can change lives, not just the lives of workers but also those they touch in their pursuits. Work provides purpose.

The Indiana Commission on Rehabilitation Services serves the mission of helping create and expand employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the great state of Indiana. We do this by monitoring, providing feedback and guidance, and collaborating to further enhance programs focused on helping Hoosiers with disabilities to obtain employment and be successful in the workplace when they do.

In this mission, we partner with Indiana Bureau of Rehabilitation Services, local service organizations providing training and job placement and employers who seek to include people of diverse abilities and skills on their teams. The commission is grateful for these partnerships and over the past year we have achieved great progress in this important mission.

Employing an individual with a disability can involve added complexities. Sometimes, physical accommodations may be needed in the workspace and in some situations, workflows may need to be adjusted to facilitate the greatest level of success for all employees, but for those employers who choose to enhance their teams with teammates of unique abilities and the diverse perspective of an individual who is impacted by a disability, the return on effort and investment can be immeasurable.

This is why Commission members and our partners work so hard to help further this effort and create possibilities for the people we serve and the employers who seek to expand their workforces in this way. It is a truly fulfilling endeavor to serve alongside members of the business community, service providers, our partners at BRS and most of all members of the commission with the perspective of a disability, to further this cause.

I hope all those who review this year's annual report are inspired to learn more about our mission and motivated to advocate for this important mission and purpose.

Best regards,

F. Marc Ruiz

Chair, Indiana Commission on Rehabilitation Services

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



Reflecting on all that we learned and accomplished over the year is always a highlight for me. Notable this year was the end to the order of selection waitlist, which was implemented in August 2017. All disability service categories are open as of October 2024 and no individuals remain on a waiting list with VR. The number of VR participants who received VR services this year exceeded the total served in each of the last five years, with a 22% increase in applicants and 16% increase in individuals served from two years prior. Despite this growth, timeliness for eligibility determinations and service plans continues to outperform federal standards.

Additional Bureau of Rehabilitation Services programs have a lot to proud of as well! The Business Enterprise Program partnered with the Indiana Department of Corrections to provide Micro Market Snack Bars to all DOC employee breakrooms. This had a positive financial impact for BEP licensed managers and contributed to DOC's employee recruitment by creating a more satisfactory work environment. Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services has made significant effort this past year to increase their visibility and share their vast knowledge and resources. This included providing Deaf Professional Network training to state employees who are deaf or hard of hearing and hosting a booth at State Market Days.

Indiana's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act State Plan, approved this past spring, outlines goals for the VR program for the next two years. This includes a 25% increase in VR participants exiting with employment, a 15% increase in hourly wages of participants exiting with employment and a 20% increase in the number of participants enrolled in postsecondary training. Efforts to provide increased opportunities for post-secondary training, including short-term training leading to credentials, will be a key focus for 2025. Additional priorities include completion of the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment and continuation of efforts to streamline participant access to services, including reduced administrative burden for providers.

I am delighted that once again, we have the opportunity to share the experiences and outcomes of several amazing individuals for whom we worked in partnership to help them realize employment success. Thank you to Connor, James, Deja, Simon, Mathew, Ryan and Joe for helping to articulate the importance of employment for all by sharing some of your experiences. Thank you also to our great staff (Go Team!), Family and Social Services Administration and Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Servic-

es leadership, stakeholders and members of the Commission on Rehabilitation Services for your continued partnership. Our team is ready to approach 2025 with continued momentum toward improving 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 horizontal stroke.

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.

VR STAFF AWARDS

Once again, the Commission on Rehabilitation Services conducted a nomination process to recognize VR state employees. This tradition continues to be well received 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...



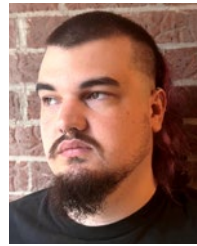
SUPPORT STAFF OF THE YEAR

Marchita Fisher,
VR Case Coordinator
in Marion



COUNSELOR OF THE YEAR

Brenda Jankowski,
VR Counselor
in Valparaiso



RISING STAR

Seth Burden,
VR Case Coordinator
in Clarksville



OUTSTANDING LEADER

Michelle Schaefer,
Region 5 Manager

Congratulations to all 2024 Vocational Rehabilitation staff award nominees!

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

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. This year, in recognition of our increased focus on increasing postsecondary training opportunities for VR participants, several examples of participants completing postsecondary training are featured. A special thanks to Connor, James, Deja, Simon, Mathew and Ryan!

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: CONNOR



Connor Villalobo's journey with VR and Pre-ETS began simultaneously, marking the start of a path toward his career in health care.

Connor's initial steps with Pre-ETS included an informational interview with a fire safety class before he attended the Greater Lafayette Career Academy. This experience was pivotal, as it helped him realize that fire safety wasn't his passion. Instead, he decided to enter the EMT program in his senior year.

During his junior year, Connor's job coach played a crucial role in helping him secure his first job as a dietary aide in a nursing home. This position not only provided him with valuable work experience but also helped him develop essential skills. Around the same time, Connor received specialty driver's training and obtained his license, further enhancing his independence. That summer, Connor gained additional work experience as a ticket taker at the local baseball stadium. This job allowed him to interact with the public and develop his customer service skills.

In his senior year, Connor's VR job coach assisted him in securing a job as an after-school activities assistant at the YMCA. This role was instrumental in building his leadership and organizational skills. Concurrently, Connor completed his first semester of college credits and his EMT training. His hard work paid off when he became one of only three students to pass the EMT exam, leading to a job offer from IU Hospital right after graduation.

After graduating, while waiting for his EMT license, Connor returned to the baseball stadium as a ticket taker. Once he started his job at the hospital on the ambulance, he encountered a challenge: he

couldn't hear properly through the stethoscope. VR stepped in, providing him with a hearing evaluation, a digital stethoscope and assistance with work boots. These resources enabled Connor to perform his duties effectively.

Now a sophomore at Ivy Tech, Connor has been working in the ER for over a year. Initially, he planned to pursue paramedicine training to become a flight medic. However, his experiences in the ER inspired him to shift his focus to nursing. He is currently finishing his last two prerequisites before applying to nursing school. Connor has already obtained three certifications: EMT, Dementia Care and Health Care Specialist. He is set to graduate in May with an associate degree in Health Care Specialist and will then apply to nursing school.

VR also provided Connor with an assistive technology assessment for college. As a result, he received a computer and specialized apps to help him manage his learning disabilities, ensuring he could succeed in his academic pursuits.

Throughout his high school career, Connor's dedication and hard work were recognized with several honors, including the National Honor Society, National Technical Honor Society, Rising Star Award and the Governor's Work Ethic Award.

Connor's journey is a testament to the power of VR and Pre-ETS in helping young individuals explore their interests, overcome challenges and achieve their career goals.



IN THE SPOTLIGHT: JAMES



James is a VR participant with congenital fiber type disproportion myopathy. James shared that when he was a high school student trying to determine what to do after graduation, he had no clue where to even begin. His high school recommended that he apply for VR and James recalls feeling “absolutely terrified” to begin meeting with his VR counselor because it meant that he was officially moving on to the next chapter in his life. James shares that when he first met with his VR counselor, he learned about a variety of resources and opportunities available to him that he was previously unaware of. It “was such an eye-opening moment.”

During high school, James was extremely active in the Indiana FFA and had dreamed of being a district president. However, he recalls that it has “always been a distant dream due to me not having independent transportation.” James’ VR counselor, Lane, shared that VR could assist him by providing driver’s training, adaptive equipment, a vehicle modification and training on using a dual joystick system for driving. James states that being able to drive “opened up a whole new world of opportunities.” He was not only able to serve as the Indiana FFA District IV president, but he was able to serve on other state committees and then attend college at Ball State University due to his newfound independence.

James reports that his VR counselor and a Pre-ETS career coach helped him explore career and training options and better understand how he could achieve independence and strive to reach his goals. In fact, James states that his VR counselor made such a huge impact on his life that he decided to pursue a career in social work where he could help others similarly to how his VR counselor helped him. James shares that his VR counselor worked closely with him to prepare to attend Ball State University after high

school graduation. He realized that “there is assistance available for individuals with disabilities, you just have to know who to contact.”

While attending Ball State University, James reports that he has had the “amazing opportunity” to work with his specialty postsecondary Vocational Rehabilitation counselor, Tracy. During James’ time in college, Tracy has assisted him with obtaining medical equipment needed for independence, learning more about housing options and other accommodations at Ball State, finding attendants to provide attendant care services, providing funding assistance for his college training and navigating the working world while having a disability.

James shares the following statement about his work with VR:

“Throughout my time at Ball State, I have had so many incredible opportunities that wouldn’t have happened without the help of Vocational Rehabilitation. I have been able to have several working opportunities at Ball State and with the help of having independent transportation. I have had a paid internship through Eskenazi Health within the Fehribach Center, I have obtained a part-time job with the Office of Disability Services at Ball State University, I have volunteered with Second Harvest Food Bank and I have been the President of Alliance for Disability Awareness, which is a student organization at Ball State. I have also been able to volunteer with the Indiana Arthritis Foundation as well as attending meetings for the Delaware County Board for Persons with Disabilities.”

James has achieved these extraordinary accomplishments during his undergraduate program. VR looks forward to witnessing his future successes as he pursues his master’s degree in social work at Ball State University and then seeks a career where he will continue to have a positive impact on his local community and the disability community as a whole. Liam shared, “Thanks to people just like [VR counselor] Treasure Trueblood, who invest in helping others overcome challenges and achieve goals.”

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: DEJA



Diadra “Deja” Creer is from Anderson and has been working with VR since February 2024. Deja disenrolled from high school in 1993 but came back determined to earn her diploma in 2021. Deja received a Payroll Tech Certificate from Ivy Tech but struggled to find work due to involvement with the justice system. Deja came to VR as part of the Individual Placement and Supports program for people with severe mental health conditions. Deja’s team at Aspire and her VR Counselor worked with her to help her reach her goals.

Deja experiences anxiety and schizophrenia. She has struggled with mania, hallucinations and the stigma around her mental health diagnosis for as long as she can remember. Deja came to VR with a commitment to changing her circumstances. With the support she received from her mental health team at Aspire Indiana and her counselor at VR, Deja was able to get a job at Applebee’s where she works full-time. After just a few months at Applebee’s, Deja was offered a raise due to her exceptional work ethic, customer praise and high marks from a “secret shopper” customer from Applebee’s corporate.

While Deja continues to blossom in her role as a hostess at Applebee’s, she has also achieved her goal of obtaining housing. Deja came to VR as a person experiencing homelessness. After a long stretch of living in her car in front of a friend’s house, Deja was able to finally get her own apartment in Anderson. VR has provided Deja with rapid employment engagement services through an employment specialist at Aspire. Deja receives full mental health services from her treatment team and has received fundamental services through strong collaboration between VR and her Aspire support network. Today, Deja works around 45 hours each week as a hostess at Applebee’s and was a recent representative for Aspire’s IPS program during a fidelity review.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: SIMON, MATHEW AND RYAN

VR secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration in late 2022 to implement a model demonstration project to support individuals with disabilities to transition from subminimum wage or sheltered work employment to competitive integrated employment. The project is called Supported Employment Plus because it promotes fidelity of supported employment services, plus enhanced benefits and work incentives counseling, peer supports, integrated resource teams, family engagement, designated VR Counselors, and other interventions. Simon, Mathew and Ryan have all secured employment through the SE+ project and have taught us some valuable lessons which in turn can help others on their employment journeys.



SIMON

Simon began receiving services from Stone Belt not long after high school graduation. Though he was unsure of what he wanted to do for a career, he was sure that he wanted to find a job. Through Stone Belt, Simon had the opportunity to participate in several different work-based learning opportunities further cementing his desire to find employment in his community. Through these work-based opportunities and with the assistance of a job coach, Simon eventually began a part-time job working at Jersey Mike's Subs.

Since becoming employed, Simon's supervisors have been so impressed with his dedication that he was moved to a full-time position that included the responsibility of opening the store each morning. Even with the many new tasks being added, Simons' employers have reported they are especially impressed with his ability to coach new team members and create relationships with customers. Not long after this promotion, Simon realized that he could combine the skills he honed training coworkers and those he observed from his job coach, to assist his peers at Stone Belt in seeking employment.

It was a natural progression for Simon to consider taking part in a new program, Peer Support Specialists. The PSS Program was designed as a key component of the VR's Supported Employment Plus project, a model demonstration grant through the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration. The goals of the PSS program are to recruit and train a team of individuals throughout the state who could act as champions for competitive, integrated employment by using their lived experiences to promote the idea of working to individuals currently engaged in sheltered work, specifically those earning subminimum wages. Simon was one of the first candidates selected and, since completing his training, has been seen as the gold standard of what the PSS program could accomplish.

As a PSS, Simon has been able to use his lived experiences and strong communication skills, as well as his strong work ethic and dynamic personality, to be a fierce ally and great resource for peers inquiring about or considering employment. Furthermore, he has been able to promote the idea of employment and introduce the topic to those who had previously thought they would never be able to find a job. He does this by regularly meeting with individuals with disabilities and providing an overview of supported employment services as well as his own personal journey as a road map for success. Though he continues to enjoy working at Jersey Mike's and as a PSS, he hopes to one day be employed as a job coach so that his career can be spent helping people achieve their own successes.



MATHEW

While Mathew was working at Marshall-Starke Development Center in a segregated setting and earning below minimum wage, he had expressed an interest in obtaining Competitive Integrated Employment. He wanted to have the opportunity to work in his community and earn a competitive salary. Previously, Mathew had exhibited nervousness and difficulty with communication which was perceived as a barrier to employ-

ment, but due to the ongoing training provided to MSDC through SE+, the staff were confident they had the tools to support him in reaching his employment goals.

A key element of SE+ is the adoption of embedded SE+ VR Counselors in each pilot site. Through collaboration between the SE+ VR Counselor, MSDC employment staff, case manager and others who support Mathew, the team was committed to helping him reduce communication skill barriers while simultaneously and proactively helping him achieve his goal of obtaining employment.

Mathew is now working at his local grocery store, Kroger. While working he continues to receive ongoing support through SE+. He has shown improvement in his communication skills and exhibits confidence when speaking with customers. In fact, Mathew's job duties have already been expanded due to his progress. He was originally hired to gather carts, a position that requires minimal co-worker and customer interaction. Due to his strong ability to connect with coworkers and customers, he has been assigned a new role as a bagger, which enables him to utilize his increased communication skills much more frequently.

Since taking on this new role, the supervisors at Kroger have shared that he is doing "a fantastic job." Though they highlighted his willingness to take on new responsibilities, they are most pleased with how he interacts with the customers. It was noted by his supervisors that baggers don't always speak with

customers during checkout but Mathew does. In fact, it is well known by his co-workers that Mathew ensures each customer hears him say, “Have a nice day!” before leaving the store. Mathew taught us that prior barriers should not stand in the way of achieving goals, including the goal of employment.



RYAN

Ryan has been working at Sycamore Services in the sheltered workshop for years, but recently expressed a desire to find employment in his community and was referred to SE+. Due to his familiarity with the staff at Sycamore and with the embedded SE+ VR counselor, his services were able to begin quickly. His SE+ team was aware of his magnetic personality and love of movies and suggested a position at a local movie theater. With the assistance of a dedicated team, he was offered a job as an usher in his local cinema.

After accepting the position, some people in Ryan’s life pointed out possible barriers to his success which led to some second guessing. Namely, he was worried about how his work earnings would impact his benefits, as well as concerns about his transportation arrangements on the evenings he works. A key aspect of SE+ is cross agency collaboration and, because of the relationship building that had been done with his SE+ team, led by his SE+ VR Counselor and Sycamore Services employment team, all stakeholders were able to quickly arrange to meet and discuss concerns. Through this collaborative process, concerns were resolved, and Ryan was able to confidently start his new job.

When asked what he likes about his job at the movie theater Ryan jokingly pointed out his “new friends popping out of the woodwork hoping for free tickets.” He also mentioned he has enjoyed getting to know his coworkers and helping customers “feel at home” at the movie theater. On top of this, he believes the job has greatly improved his mental health.

When he learned of the opportunity to be featured in an upcoming success story, Ryan was quick to point out that “my success story is still being written.” Through partnering with Ryan on this phase of his success story, we have learned the value of a team approach to services. Talking through challenges and problem solving as a team was a difference maker for Ryan, who might have otherwise been restricted from pursuing CIE due to potential obstacles like transportation and unknown impact on benefits. The team helped Ryan work through those concerns and pave a path forward to reach his employment goal.

Ryan would like others considering employment to remember “it’s never too late to have a great life and a great future... you have nothing but time and opportunity.”

PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

Pre-employment transition services, or Pre-ETS, 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, almost 8,000 students with disabilities received Pre-ETS. The table below illustrates the number of Pre-ETS activities completed during SFY24 in either group or individual settings through Pre-ETS contract partners:

PRE-ETS ACTIVITIES COMPLETED DURING SFY24

ACTIVITY	SESSIONS COMPLETED
Job exploration	24,869
Workplace readiness	64,249
Work-based learning	23,798
Self-advocacy	19,307
Postsecondary counseling	9,832
Work-based learning stipend	4,384

During 2024, the director and associate director of youth services embarked on a “transition roadshow” to visit with every VR office in the state. The objectives of the roadshow were to identify strategies with each VR office to support an increase in referrals of students receiving Pre-ETS who then continue into VR and to review what’s working well regarding transition services as well as areas of improvement. Transition Best Practice guidance was developed as a result of the roadshow visits.

VR also contracted with the Public Consulting Group to assist with a Pre-ETS needs assessment. While there are many strengths in Indiana's Pre-ETS program (communication, ease of enrollment, educator support, etc.), the needs assessment also indicated the following needs:

- ◆ Greater need for Pre-ETS program knowledge and materials
- ◆ Increased referrals to traditional VR
- ◆ Greater engagement of diploma track students
- ◆ Increased provider capacity

Several initiatives are underway to help address these needs, including:

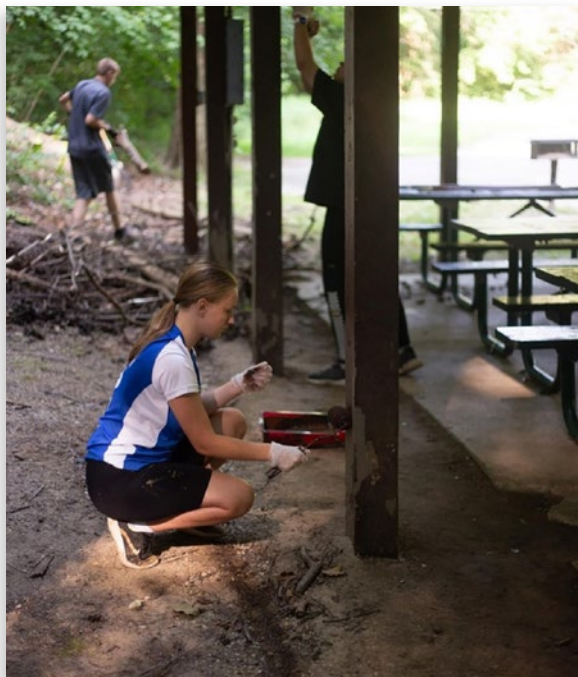
- ◆ Development of a career coach mentoring network
- ◆ [Personal perspective videos](#)
- ◆ Development of several communities of practice
- ◆ Completion of a Pre-ETS comic book information tool
- ◆ Additional training opportunities for Pre-ETS career coaches

VR continues to partner with the Department of Workforce Development's Jobs for America's Graduates program. For SFY 24, 993 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 23% had an IEP or 504 plan in the 2023–2024 school year. The JAG student with disability graduation rate for the class of 2023 was 96.40%, in comparison to the overall Indiana graduation rate for the same population of 83.24%.

VR's 10 youth counselors work in their respective regions throughout the state assisting with transition and Pre-ETS activities. They have helped to strengthen the referral process and communication between VR and local school systems, assisted providers in accessing schools where Pre-ETS were not widely available and provided training and technical assistance to Pre-ETS and transition stakeholders.

Several highlights and examples of Pre-ETS in action are noted below:

- ◆ Logan Community Resources provided work-based learning experiences for 15 students at the South Bend International Airport. Students worked in fire/safety, janitorial, maintenance and hospitality.
- ◆ The ARC of Southwest Indiana established a partnership with the Local 181 Heavy Equipment Operators Union, resulting in six students becoming apprentices.
- ◆ Goodwill Pre-ETS students participated in horticulture education with a Purdue Extension Master Gardener. Students learned gardening practice, soil science and how to care for fruit and vegetable plants while working in the Kendallville Community Garden. Students harvested fruits and vegetables which were shared with the local food bank.
- ◆ There were many work experience opportunities at local parks, including students served through PQC, who spread 46,000 pounds of mulch and painted four parks, 10 benches, six pavilions, over 30 picnic tables, eight dugouts and two sheds, all while working within a seven-week timeline. Students were paid a competitive wage through Pre-ETS stipends.



Here's what some North Miami students had to say about their work experience opportunities at local parks:

“Doing the work-based learning gives me hands-on experience that I can use on my resumé. It also helped me get better with managing a schedule.”

Jeremy Hendricks, senior

“This summer, I was able to learn a lot about painting. I also learned how hard work can pay off when working on a project.”

Grace Hansen-Wise, 8th grader

“Working this summer taught me a lot about teamwork and also about being a supervisor when it was my week to be in charge.”

Alivia Burt, 9th grader

“I enjoyed doing the work and I was able to learn a lot of different skills, like bettering my communication and being able to work in a group better. Those are good skills for my resumé.”

Nik Augustyn, 11th grader

“I was able to learn more about sticking to a schedule and about being accountable for the work you do.”

Madi Nallenweg, senior

“This summer, I was able to learn the value of hard work and watch it pay off in the end with how the park looked when we were finished. I also was able to learn the value of money earned by getting the stipend for being in the program. Because of the stipend money, I was able to buy myself things I needed for school and I was able to pay for my driver's education course I otherwise wouldn't have been able to do. I think this is a good program.”

Bo Miller, 8th grader

“I enjoyed getting to work outside with my hands. I learned to be better at managing my time this summer and that's really important when I go into the workforce. Some days it was a lot of work, but it was still fun.”

Braxton Fritz, 11th grader

BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Business and Community Engagement for Vocational Rehabilitation fosters partnerships with local businesses and community organizations to create job opportunities and promote inclusive workplaces. This is done through providing resources, support, and training to employers, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can successfully integrate into the workforce.

DISABILITY AWARENESS MONTH

In March, Indiana VR kicked off Disability Awareness month at the AES (formerly Indianapolis Power and Light) Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Inaugural Disability Awareness Month Luncheon on IUPUI's campus and continued the celebration with the City of Indianapolis' Celebration of Creativity and Diversity at the Indianapolis International Airport. The Indianapolis Airport Authority, Indiana Association of Rehabilitation Facilities, Ability

Indiana and Mayor Joe Hogsett gathered at the Indianapolis International Airport to unveil an exhibit created by 83 adults with disabilities. The event emphasized and celebrated diverse artists and creatives in Indiana, which included Hoosiers with disabilities. The month also saw events around the state like job/resource fairs for individuals with disabilities and a stakeholder convening at Eli Lilly global headquarters.



NATIONAL SUMMIT FOR THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT TEAM, CHARLOTTE, N.C.

This September, Indiana VR's director of business and community engagement attended the National Employment Team annual meeting hosted by Wells Fargo at their corporate headquarters in Charlotte, N.C. The NET represents a unified approach to serving businesses, supported by the leadership of VR agencies nationwide.

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.

INNOVATION 2024

This year, the focus has been on effectively connecting the field with resources discovered by the Business and Community Engagement Team during their outreach. Through a mix of in-person and virtual office visits, engaging discussions on the latest best practices and employment resources occurred. Pilot projects were launched in Hamilton and surrounding counties that emphasize career preparation through training programs. By the year's end, a job club was launched for individuals who are completing college and preparing to enter the professional workforce.

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

During National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the value and talent of workers with disabilities and their contribution to America's workplaces and economy is celebrated.

NDEAM takes place each October and its purpose is to reaffirm our commitment to ensuring job seekers with disabilities have access to good jobs, every month of every year. That's the spirit behind this year's official theme: "Access to Good Jobs for All."



WORKING WITH THE EMPLOYER: A SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIP TO FIND THE RIGHT EMPLOYEE



Late in 2022, the director of business and community engagement received a phone call from FBI Administrative Officer Tom White. He was relocating from California to the Indianapolis area with his family and he hoped to bring his positive experience of working with VR in California to Indiana VR. In California, he participated in monthly applicant calls and presented at virtual events to source candidates. He built the relationship in LA and began connecting the other FBI offices to VR offices in San Francisco and Sacramento before he moved to Indiana.

A key part of the Business and Community Engagement team's work is partnering with employers to share information with community rehabilitation providers and other stakeholders to help identify and connect qualified applicants to those employers.

Early in 2023, the Business and Community Engagement team visited community rehabilitation providers one-on-one sharing resources and information about new employer partnerships. The FBI opportunity was a key highlight in these meetings. Around the same time, the Indianapolis-area Talent Showcase kicked off their monthly meetings. This showcase brings together employers, community rehabilitation providers and job seekers to learn about employment opportunities directly from employers. Job seekers can also speak directly to the employers and ask questions about those opportunities. AO White consistently attended these showcases, presented information on the FBI employment opportunities and built relationships with the different community rehabilitation providers in the local area. At one of these showcases, AO White learned about a reverse job fair hosted by BOSMA, where he would meet his future hire, Joe Presley.

With the support of his BOSMA employment specialist, Matt Edwards, Joe considered the possibility of working with the FBI and decided to apply. Joe is a person that is determined to overcome whatever challenge is in front of him and the lengthy application process didn't discourage him. After an intensive interview process and nearly seven months of extensive background checks, Joe's first day at the FBI is still a celebrated moment. Joe currently works as an operations support technician, performing critical administrative duties that support the Bureau's daily activities. Matt shared that working through the accommodations process was a smooth and seamless.

After almost two years of working together and after dedicated efforts to spread the word about this employment opportunity, numerous applicants and a successful hire at the FBI Indianapolis office have been achieved. Partnering with an employer to help amplify their voice within the community of providers who are supporting our VR participants is what the Business and Community Engagement Team does. The importance of community outreach and collaboration with employers to help identify and match qualified jobseekers to great employment opportunities is key to the work we do.

EMPLOYMENT FIRST

Within the Division of Disability 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 and Rehabilitative Services, the division that houses BRS, continues to fund numerous organizations to support transition from subminimum wage to competitive integrated employment.
- ◆ 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 large federal grant to support individuals in moving from subminimum wage to competitive integrated employment. This project, called SE+, started with four pilot organizations across seven different sheltered workshop settings. In July, 2024, the project expanded to a fifth pilot site and 10 sheltered workshop settings. At the end of the grants initial full first year of implementation, 25 individuals have obtained employment with average wages of \$11.69 per hour. Additionally, the project has trained five individuals with intellectual disabilities to become peer support specialists and be hired by pilot sites to deliver peer support services.
- ◆ DDRS continued 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 continued to partner with the Arc of Indiana and Self Advocates of Indiana to conduct Career Counseling, Information and Referral services for individuals engaged in subminimum wage employment and are now providing these activities through individual conversations with each subminimum wage employee, whereas in prior years, it was largely conducted through small group settings. We are hopeful that the more individualized approach will support the tailoring of information and better ‘meet the individual where they are’ in their employment journey.
- ◆ VR expanded its partnership with the Indiana Division of Mental Health and Addiction to roll out Individual Placement and Support, an evidence-based employment model, to two additional community mental health centers. Starting in January 2024, there were four total IPS sites across Indiana.

The [Employment First plan](#) was adopted by the Commission on Rehabilitation Services in September 2020.

ADDITIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

- ◆ The Indiana VR program exceeded performance on three of five federal common performance measures for program year 2023 (state fiscal year 2024), including employment rate both second and fourth quarters after exit and credential attainment rate. While performance on the remaining two measures— quarterly median earnings and measurable skill gains—was just short of the negotiated level, both measures were considered to be met with performance above 96% of the target.

FEDERAL COMMON PERFORMANCE MEASURES FOR STATE FISCAL YEAR 2024

	PROGRAM YEAR: 2023 (SFY 2024)	
	ACTUAL LEVEL	NEGOTIATED LEVEL
Employment (2nd quarter after exit)	57.6%	53.3%
Employment (4th quarter after exit)	55.9%	50.3%
Quarterly median earnings (2nd quarter after exit)	\$3,479	\$3,534
Credential attainment rate	51.7%	21%
Measurable skill gains	62.8%	64.8%

- ◆ 1,463 VR participants exited with employment outcomes during the last performance year, with average wages of \$15.28/hour. This shows slight improvement from the prior year (1,454 exits with employment and average wages of \$15.10/hour). VR has outlined a goal in the new state plan of a 25% increase in employment outcomes by SFY26.
- ◆ Indiana VR has released approximately 4400 individuals from the order of selection waitlist and ended the order of selection in October 2024.
- ◆ VR staff exceeded federal timeliness standards for the determination of eligibility and development of service plans at a 96% compliance rate (standard 90%).
- ◆ 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 \$165,000 in performance incentive payments to providers as of the end of federal fiscal year 2024.
- ◆ Indiana VR team members were selected to participate in several sessions at the Council for State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation 2024 fall conference, including sharing Indiana expertise and best practices around Pre-ETS, State Plans and strategies for improving service provider capacity.

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 the following individuals representing specific categories outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations Section 361.17. The following individuals served during federal fiscal year 2024.

Amanda Bagwell, ADA Coordinator, FSSA Office of Healthy Opportunities

Kate Barrow, Governor's Council for People with Disabilities

Ron Brown, Indiana Business Enterprise Program

Brian Carnes (Courtney Scott, pending), INARF

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

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.

Willaine St. Pierre Sandy, Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation

Stacey Smith, Prairie Quest Consulting

Barbara Thompson, Indiana National Alliance on Mental Illness

Kindall Stewart, Youth Representative

Michael Thibideau, Invest Hamilton County

“WHY I SERVE ON THE COMMISSION”



I am choosing to serve as a member of the VR Commission because I believe in the transformative power of empowering individuals with disabilities to achieve their career goals and lead fulfilling lives. My commitment to ensuring that students are exiting school with a pathway to individual success aligns with the Commission’s mission to enhance access to vocational resources and supports for this cause. I am eager to contribute my experiences working for the Bureau of Disabilities Services and the Office of Special Education to collaborate and develop effective strategies to break the barriers to employment that prevent Hoosiers with disabilities from realizing their potential.

Ian Ragains



I serve on the commission because I know those of diverse abilities and talents have so much to offer the employers and businesses in our great state. The commission helps prepare people with disabilities to be successful and helps educate firms on how to hire and nurture these unique employees for success in the workplace. Work changes lives.

Marc Ruiz



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.



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

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**Division of Disability and
Rehabilitative Services**