

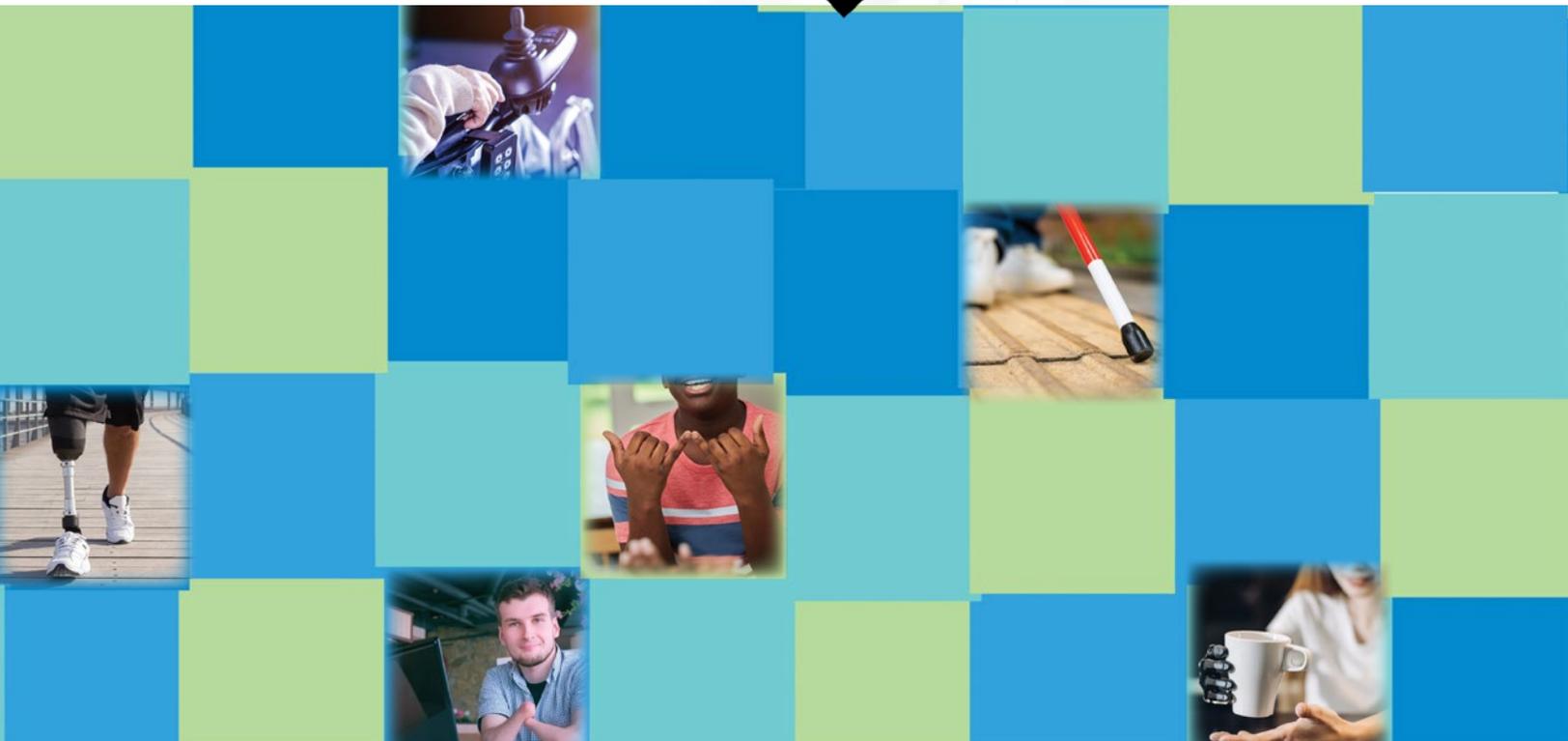


**FFY 2023**

# **ANNUAL REPORT**



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



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# GREETINGS FROM THE CHAIRPERSON

Dear Hoosiers,

Employment provides us with the opportunity to contribute to our community. Employment offers the opportunity to serve customers, co-workers and serve missions that are larger than ourselves. Employment offers expanded purpose, and, of course, employment offers the chance to earn and progress financially. Employment matters.

Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation works to expand the opportunity for employment for all Hoosiers. The Indiana Commission on Rehabilitation works with VR in this mission. We have had a busy and successful 2023 and look forward to continuing our efforts into 2024. An important part of this success is reflected in the assembly of the Commission members themselves, which continues to reflect the larger community that we serve. Through its members, the Commission brings together employers, service providers, VR and Indiana state staff and of course, individuals served by VR, where we can all provide feedback and guidance on our important mission. It's hard to overstate the value of having so many diverse and insightful voices collaborating together. In this forum, all voices are heard, all voices are vital.

As the Commission works with VR to enhance the experience and outcomes of those seeking the services and advocacy intrinsic to Vocational Rehabilitation, the goals are nothing short of exciting. We seek and strive to increase outreach, shorten waiting periods, enhance engagement and edify young Hoosiers in achieving employment success. In order to meet these important objectives, we will advocate, educate, recruit new talent and implement technology to tie it all together. This is what VR is endeavoring to do and the Commission is proud to contribute insight and provide support.

This is a great time to work in Indiana. Our strong Indiana employers are seeking now, more than ever before, talented individuals to help them continue growing through serving their customers and communities. VR and the Commission are determined in our role to support Hoosiers of unique abilities and diverse skill sets achieve employment success in our great state.

Please join in our efforts. Commission meetings are open to the public and each meeting involves the opportunity for public feedback. In addition, you can reach us at [VRCommission.VR@fssa.in.gov](mailto:VRCommission.VR@fssa.in.gov) or even consider serving on the Commission. Learn more or apply on our website.

Best regards,

F. Marc Ruiz

Chair, Indiana Commission on Rehabilitation Services

# MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



As we celebrate the upcoming new year, there is also much to celebrate in Vocational Rehabilitation. 2023 was packed with new projects, including kicking off the \$13.9M supported employment plus grant received last year, decreased waiting lists for eligible individuals, the introduction of provider performance incentives, exceeding performance on all federal performance measures, a federal monitoring visit that resulted in no findings, achieving one of the lowest VR counselor vacancy rates in the country and so much more! Read on for highlights on just a few of these accomplishments throughout this report.

VR and the Commission on Rehabilitation Services have remained in close communication regarding the status of order of selection and progress with opening all service categories. Significant progress was achieved this past year, including opening a second service priority category in July 2023 after reducing the Category 2 waitlist to zero. VR has established a target goal of opening the final closed priority category before the end of calendar year 2024.

The Indiana VR program saw improved performance this year compared to the prior year, in all federal common performance measures, including the employment rate in both second and fourth quarters after exit, median earnings, credential attainment rate and measurable skill gains. More details about program performance can be viewed in the Additional Program Highlights section of this report.

Another highlight during 2023 was the completion of a federal monitoring visit in May, which resulted in no compliance findings. The Rehabilitation Services Administration provided several helpful recommendations to VR as part of the monitoring process, many of which are well aligned with our goals and strategies outlined in our upcoming draft State Plan for the next two performance years.

As another year comes to a close, it is helpful to look back not only at successes, but also challenges and opportunities for growth, to help inform actions and priorities for the coming year. The upcoming State Plan will outline new goals, priorities and strategies to work toward improving participant engagement in the VR program, increase the number of students applying for VR services and identify further opportunities for streamlining processes to support improved capacity of staff and providers. Another important goal is increasing employment outcomes for VR participants, through strategies related to improving VR vendor capacity, expanding opportunities for work-based learning, increasing the quality

of outcomes including higher wages and increasing the number of VR participants enrolled in postsecondary training resulting in recognized credentials.

As has become tradition over the past several years, we are honored to once again feature individuals who achieved employment success in this year's annual report. Thank you to Christopher, Liam, Gail and Tom for helping to articulate the importance of employment for all, including those with disabilities, by sharing some of your experiences. Thank you to our great staff (*go team!*), leadership, stakeholders and members of the Commission on Rehabilitation Services for your continued partnership. I welcome 2024 as we embrace areas of growth and opportunities to drive improved employment success for Hoosiers with disabilities.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Theresa" followed by a stylized monogram or initials.

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 five award recipients this year.

## AND THE WINNERS ARE...

### SUPPORT STAFF OF THE YEAR

Elizabeth "Libby" Love, VR case coordinator in Indianapolis-Kessler, Area 14

### RISING STAR

Brooke Shirley, VR counselor in Clarksville South, Area 25

### COUNSELOR OF THE YEAR

Robin Cochran, VR counselor in Clarksville North, Area 26

### OUTSTANDING LEADER—A TIE!

Melissa Cook, VR supervisor in Evansville, Area 20; and Rheonna Snedigar, Region 2 manager

*Congratulations to all 2023 Vocational Rehabilitation staff award nominees!*

Three BRS staff members also received Division of Disability and Rehabilitative Services awards during 2023. Congratulations to:

### LIFECOURSE FRAMEWORK CHAMPION

Brittany Estep, VR counselor in Marion, Area 10

### TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

Virginia Bates, BRS Director of Program Improvement in Central Office

### OUTSTANDING LEADERSHIP

Kirstin Gibson, Itinerant/Working Lead VR Counselor in Evansville Area 20

*Congratulations to all 2023 DDRS 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. A special thanks to Christopher, Liam, Gail and Tom!

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: CHRISTOPHER WRAY



Christopher Wray began a new chapter in his life when he was hired by the Indiana Department of Correction as a Hoosier Initiative for Re-Entry coordinator for the New Castle Correctional Facility. Molly McGuire, Area Supervisor at the Muncie, Indiana Vocational Rehabilitation office, urged Christopher to apply for VR services for assistance with job search and placement after he shared with her his struggle to find and obtain meaningful employment. Christopher had previous experience working in the field of special education as a middle school teacher until a motor vehicle accident changed the course of his life.

Holly Worrick was assigned as Christopher's VR counselor. VR assisted Christopher with job search and placement activities.

Christopher, who is a single father, had a lot on his plate between caring for his young son and working 12-hour shifts as a new hire trainer at Dollar General Distribution Center. This didn't leave much time to focus on his job search. This is where VR staff stepped in and went above the call of duty and took on the heavy lift of the job search. Also, any invitations he received to interview for a position required him to take a day off work, so it was important that he focus in on those select opportunities that were the best fit for him.

"Christopher had so much more potential. He deserved a career, one that allowed him to maximize his talents as an educator and utilize all the skills he learned while in college, good benefits, a retirement plan and something that allowed him more work/life balance and the potential for future promotion," said McGuire.

When McGuire learned that the position with Indiana Department of Correction was available in the New Castle area, she immediately thought of Christopher and discussed the opportunity with him and his VR counselor, Holly. The HIRE program assists those with past involvement with the legal system to reintegrate into society and to create career paths to give them opportunities to improve their lives in a sustainable way through employment. HIRE focuses on preventing adult incarceration by focusing on placing clients who have completed certification and training into employment that will provide them a livable wage and career path for success. HIRE coordinators teach a course related to employment inside IDOC facilities.

McGuire reached out to IDOC-HIRE to let them know that VR had the “perfect person” for the job and with Christopher’s permission shared with them his accommodation which included a work site evaluation to determine seating and positioning related to office equipment. When Christopher learned he was hired for the position in New Castle, VR worked with IDOC-HR staff to ensure Christopher got all the necessary accommodations he needed for his new position and the rest is history. According to McGuire, “All Christopher needed from VR was a bit of help to get his foot in the door and get his accommodations in place and then he took it from there.”



When VR let HIRE Director Carrie Heck know about the submission of Christopher’s story to the Indiana Rehabilitation Commission, her response was, “That’s amazing! Since he reports to Molly (Bennett), I’ll let her give you a quote about the amazing work we have gotten accomplished in our partnership. We love him!”

According to Molly Bennett, the HIRE North Regional Director for IDOC, “Chris has been a wonderful asset to the HIRE Program. He is not only diligent and thorough in his work, but he truly cares for his client base. Chris gives his all to whatever he is doing and remains calm, poised and professional throughout the process. I wish we could hire 100 more of him!”

Christopher shared “I am very thankful for VR guidance, assistance and accommodations created in my workspace. Without Molly [McGuire] and Holly [Worrick], the opportunity to succeed with IDOC HIRE would never have even been on my radar. My real-life experience and perseverance through similar reentry, barriers to life and acclimation to the workforce with an employment barrier has been extremely helpful. VR focused my mind, guided my choices and improved my physical environment for not only my success, but my clients.” McGuire adds that Christopher “is an example of what is possible when VR goes the extra distance. Christopher’s story is not only a success story for the Indiana VR program, but a success story for the Indiana IDOC-HIRE program. This is a great example of how success happens when state agencies work together!”

# IN THE SPOTLIGHT: LIAM PRICE



Liam Price has received services through Vocational Rehabilitation since 2021 for postsecondary education and support services at University of Indianapolis, where he plans to graduate in May 2024 with his bachelor's degree in communications with a public relations concentration.

Liam began receiving services as a toddler through First Steps and later in life through County Special Services, Indiana Autism Waiver and Special Olympics. Liam credits his behavior consultant for helping him learn how to interact with his family as well as people in his community and schools in more positive ways. She also helped Liam figure out how to advocate for himself. Liam gained self-confidence, developed coping skills and learned how to play an active part

in deciding goals for himself, creating his own plan for navigating through challenges. This led to Liam making his own decisions regarding opportunities he wanted to pursue in his life.

Liam enrolled at Center Grove High School his freshman year and became a student athlete, participating in sports like Unified Track and Field and Unified Basketball. He became the manager for the boys varsity basketball team. Through those experiences, Liam made many friendships, found opportunities to serve his community and advocate for others with intellectual disabilities. Liam has traveled throughout Indiana to promote unified high school sports and activities to school assemblies. He served two years as a Special Olympics Youth Ambassador, where he addressed youth leadership conventions around the country, as well as members of Congress and the Senate on Capitol Hill, about the value of inclusive programs like Special Olympics and Unified Champions Together. Liam finished his senior year of high school being voted both Homecoming and Prom King and served as a board member for his school's Best Buddies chapter. He earned the Governor's Work Ethic Award, was voted by the school board as the recipient of their 2020 Rising Star award and was selected by Indiana Lt. Governor Suzanne Crouch as her recipient for the 2020 Brilliant Firefly Award. Liam was also nominated and chosen as the Indiana Association of Rehabilitation Facilities recipient of the 2020 Justin P. Dart Award. Liam shared "It was a true honor to be recognized in the name of an individual who was the father of the Americans with Disabilities Act."

Liam is now a collegiate student athlete at the University of Indianapolis. With that comes the added responsibility of balancing academics with sports. To ensure his best opportunity for academic success,

Liam became part of U Indy's BUILD program, which is designed to help students with disabilities earn their degree with supports like on-demand tutoring, mentoring services and advocacy counseling. Liam was proud to share he most recently made the university's Dean's List!

In addition to serving his fourth year on the swim team and working through his final year of classes, Liam is finding ways to use his new skills in communications and public relations to give back to his local community. He was a paid intern with a local fire department for Project Lifesaver and continues to contribute through volunteering with the department's search and rescue dog, Rosie. Liam speaks at Critical Intervention Training events where he has the opportunity to address members of law enforcement agencies on what it is like to have an intellectual disability like autism, what stress and anxiety can look like when feeling stressed and overwhelmed, how he reacts in high stress situations along with examples of calming techniques and what it might look, or sound like to help Liam feel safe and calm. According to Liam, this work provides the Sheriff's Department with an added resource in their toolbox for effectively engaging individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Liam competed in swimming at his first Special Olympics Indiana Summer Games in 2016. After several years competing, he was chosen as one of four Special Olympics swimmers to represent the Hoosier state on Indiana's Men's Swim team at the 2022 USA Summer games in Orlando, Fla., where he won two silver medals and one gold medal with the fastest overall time for the 50 YD backstroke event. Liam spent almost three weeks in Berlin, Germany, as the only Hoosier athlete selected to compete for Special Olympics USA's swim team at the 2023 World Games. He finished eighth in the 400 meter freestyle, sixth in the 100 meter backstroke and swam backstroke in the 4 x 50 medley relay along with three of his USA teammates. Together, they brought home some "silver hardware." According to Liam, "My dream of competing on the world stage and showing the world that I am a competitor has become a reality. I am focused on returning to the World Games in the future and bringing home GOLD."

Liam is currently running for International Global Ambassador for Special Olympics and if elected, will travel to Abu-Dhabi, to Italy and around the world (a two-year gig that will go hand-in-hand with his degree). He was invited to be part of the Michael Phelps and Rowdy Gaines "One America" event in Indianapolis in October 2023.

Liam reports that he is humbled by the many opportunities that others within his family, community and organizations like VR have given to help assist him along the way with achieving his goals.

# IN THE SPOTLIGHT: GAIL HELLER



Gail Heller has always been fond of animals. She has a lot of experience in the animal services field and has worked as a boarding kennel technician, a veterinary assistant and an animal control officer. She is particularly fond of dogs and has trained and shown them in obedience trials.

Gail initially inquired at her local Vocational Rehabilitation office in Clarksville for assistance with obtaining hearing aids. She was having difficulty working due to bilateral hearing loss. Once she received her hearing aids, she approached her counselor about assistance with self-employment.

After some initial exploration of self-employment ideas, Gail's idea for Woof n' Waggin was identified as the desired employment outcome. Gail bought a used ambulance, did a lot of work on her own to repurpose it to meet her business needs (she is a gifted and talented artist) and created her own dog treat rec-



ipes. VR assisted with several pieces of equipment, supplies, business consulting services, structural modifications to the food truck, business licensing and city permit fees, marketing and advertising costs and transportation assistance. Her “food truck for dogs” can be found at local festivals, dog parks and fundraisers. Gail makes treats like Icy Paws, Pup Cakes and Bow-Wow Biscuits and dogs love them. She also makes Pawty Packs that include a custom cake, ice cream and cookies for dog owners who want to celebrate their pup’s birthday or another special day.



“Woof n’ Waggin is such a fun business to have,” Gail says. “Coming up with treat ideas allows me to tap my creativity and seeing the dogs enjoy them makes me happy.”

Gail doesn’t work alone. Her constant and faithful companion is her hearing dog, Noah. He accompanies her everywhere and is quite the Woof n’ Waggin mascot while her other dog, Zoey, prefers to lead a dog’s life consisting of lots of naps and fresh treats.

You can find Woof n’ Waggin on Instagram and Facebook, or at [woofnwaggin.com](http://woofnwaggin.com).



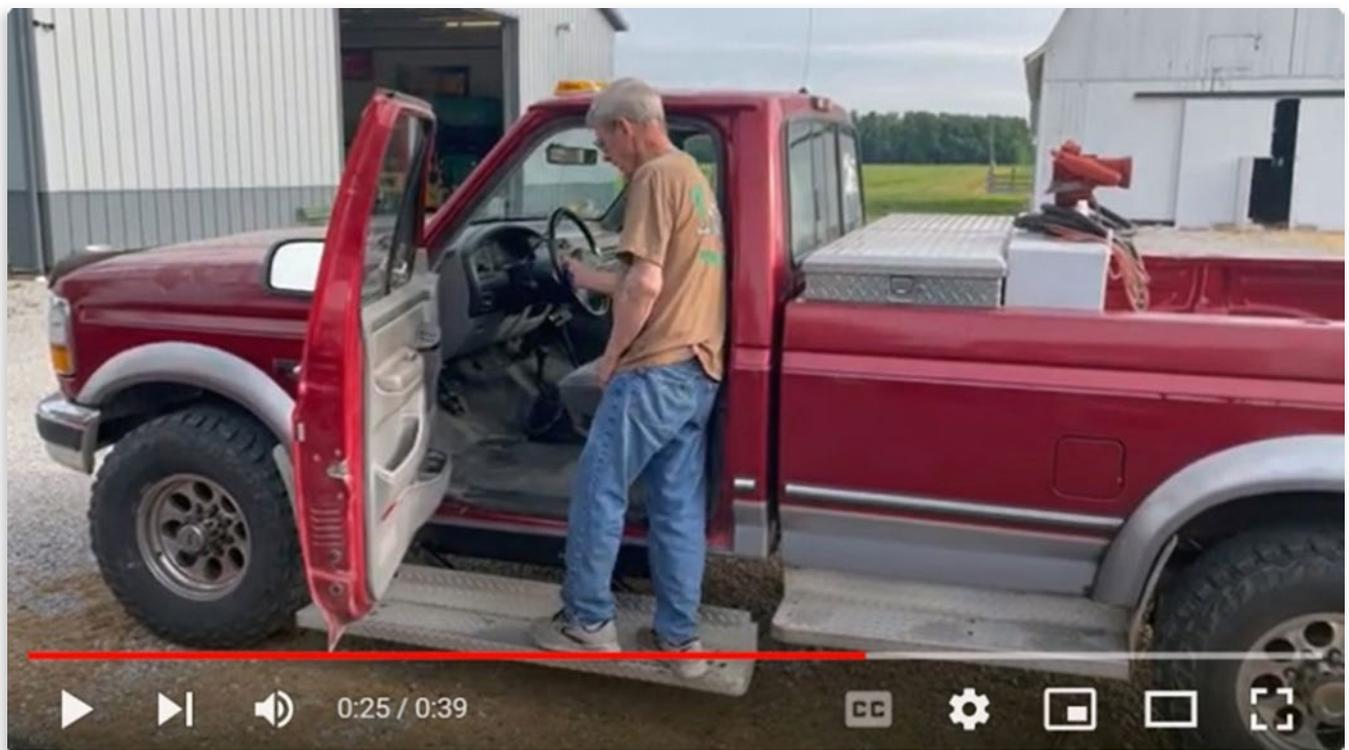
## IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THOMAS (TOM) LOW



Thomas Low is a farmer who had a stroke on Oct. 6, 2021, followed by a second stroke in March 2022. Tom lost most of the use of his left side with left facial droop, left leg weakness and the inability to move his left fingers and arm. After physical therapy, Tom saw improvements, gained the ability to ambulate with a cane and found that he could still drive his tractors and combines, but could not climb the ladders to get into the cab of the tractors and combines.

After an evaluation by Steve Swain from AgrAbility, VR was able to provide three Life Essentials platform lifts on his John Deere 7810 tractor, John Deere 8335 R tractor and John Deere 9220 four-wheel drive tractor so Tom could access the cab of the tractor easily, safely and independently and Tom could continue to drive the tractors in the field. A modified LifeLyfts by Life Essentials running board lift was also installed on Tom's 1997 Ford F-250 four-wheel drive pickup truck so that Tom could enter the cab of the truck easily, safely and independently, as Tom would injure his shoulder at times trying to pull himself into the truck.

Vocational Rehabilitation counselor Tim Filson visited the farm while the lifts were being installed and Tom showed Tim how they worked. Tom continued to tell Tim how grateful he was to VR and how he was “tickled to death.” Tom is more independent now, assisting his sons on the farm with the driving work in the fields while they handle other aspects of the farm. If you do not work with farmers often, you may not know that farmers never retire; they continue to work their whole life. To give a farmer their ability to work the farm again after that loss is to give their life back.



# PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES

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

VR is required to set aside 15% of its federal allotment for PreETS and has exceeded this requirement for the last two completed federal fiscal years. This was due to a number of strategies including increased availability of stipends to support paid work experiences for students with disabilities, continued partnership with the Department of Workforce Development's Jobs for America's Graduates program, increased summer programming for students and implementing Family Employment Awareness Training.

JAG continues to successfully serve students with disabilities through PreETS funding. Prior to access to PreETS funding, 4% of students participating in JAG had an IEP or 504 plan. As of this writing, 20% of JAG Indiana students have an IEP or 504. Additionally, the overall 2022 graduation rate for students with disabilities was 76.41%, while those students with disabilities enrolled in JAG had a graduation rate of 93%.

A series of training modules has been developed and are now available to PreETS career coaches that cover topics such as effective community-based instruction, effective partnerships with schools and improving access to underserved populations. In addition, VR partnered with Public Consulting Group, in creating a PreETS toolkit to assist career coaches in accessing resources and developing quality activities including improving collaboration with schools, lesson plans and skill-building exercises and other online resources.

VR's 10 youth counselors work in their respective regions throughout the state assisting with transition and PreETS activities. They have helped to strengthen the referral process and communication in general with VR and many school systems, assisted providers in accessing schools where PreETS was not widely available and provided numerous trainings and technical assistance to PreETS and transition stakeholders. Ongoing updates to PreETS maintenance and expansion plans allows the youth counselors to keep current on student enrollment, referrals to VR and strengths and concerns with transition and PreETS processes. They work closely with all stakeholders to address concerns, highlight strengths and continually improve processes, procedures and outreach to students and youth with disabilities.

Each year, youth counselors help with PreETS summer programs. This includes assisting providers with making business connections, working directly with students during the program and working with schools and parents/guardians to help enroll students in PreETS.

LaToya Allen, a youth counselor from the Fort Wayne office, shared some highlights from this year's summer programs in her area including:

- ◆ Students and staff from Wabash County and the Arc of Wabash participated in work-based learning activities at Fort Wayne's Little River Wetlands Project at Eagle Marsh. They had the chance to learn about careers in nature conservation, ecology, entomology and environmental sciences. They learned about the vegetation, wildlife and various insects that live in the marsh.
- ◆ Easterseals Arc students and staff worked with the Allen County Soil and Water Conservation District and the Urban and Small Farms Program to clean and maintain the Bloomingdale Community Garden. Students talked to the Allen County Soil and Water employees to learn about their careers and worked alongside them to water, harvest and weed the garden. Students got the chance to eat and taste various fruits and vegetables.
- ◆ Students and staff from Huntington County participated in a work-based learning activity in the Huntington Arts and Entrepreneurial Center, Arts Included Gallery. They created a mini restaurant pop-up shop to sell lunch, fresh salads, fruit, sandwiches and other items. The students named their shop Grab and Go and they sold lunches two days a week. On the other days, the students planned, shopped, prepared and baked desserts to sell for lunch. Pathfinder staff also taught the students food handling and safety skills before opening their shop. They worked with students on entrepreneurial skills and taught them how to run a small business. They were able to learn goal-setting, financial and economic self-sufficiency, leadership skills, customer service skills and the pitfalls of running a business. The students, along with Pathfinder staff, planned the lunch menu, went to the grocery store to purchase items and prepared, cooked and baked the food for sale.

Sandy Smail, a youth counselor from central Indiana, reported on a student from Warren Central High School. This Easterseals Crossroads' PreETS participant volunteered at CampAbility over the summer and assisted staff in supervising and engaging campers in activities.

# BUSINESS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



## DISABILITY AWARENESS MONTH

Events around the state during March were well attended by stakeholders and employers interested in learning more about disability awareness. The Indianapolis local area Chambers of Commerce invited the VR Director of Business and Community Engagement to participate on a panel that had the theme “Finding Your Next Great Hire.” This led to several direct connections with employers interested in learning more about partnering with Indiana VR. One employer requested a customized “lunch and learn” for their supervisors and employees and another two workforce agencies requested presentations from the Business and Community Engagement Team as a result of this well-attended event.

## INDIANA CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The Indiana Civil Rights Commission, in partnership with the Indiana Governor’s Council for People with Disabilities, hosted a conference that convened individuals, state and federal agencies, policymakers, and social service professionals together to learn about best practices and emerging trends around the theme of “Humanity.” The VR business and community engagement director was invited to moderate a panel on “Building a Framework for a Disability-Inclusive Organization.” Employers representing hospitality, manufacturing and healthcare spoke about building their organizations with inclusion as a priority. The well-attended session was a catalyst for great conversation between panelists and the audience.

## NATIONAL SUMMIT FOR THE NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT TEAM, WASHINGTON DC

This fall, Indiana’s Director of Business and Community Engagement, along with VR business consulting teams from around the U.S., attended the Annual Summit in Washington, D.C. This in-person informational exchange included the sharing of emerging trends and best practices in employer engagement. The National Employment Team is a one-company approach to serving businesses supported by the leadership of the VR agencies nationally. Each of the 78 VR agencies has a lead business consultant who is part of the NET.

## DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

Observed each October, National Disability Employment Awareness Month celebrates the contributions of America’s workers with disabilities past and present and showcases supportive, inclusive employment policies and practices that benefit employers and employees. The Office of Disability Employment Policy has chosen “Advancing Access and Equity” as the theme for NDEAM 2023. Twitter and Facebook are used to help share information and resources to the public. This year, a first of its kind “Speed Networking” event was planned to engage employers and jobseekers with disabilities. Networking is a key to any job search and an event for employers that helps them to directly connect with jobseekers is a win-win for both job seekers and employers. The VR social media accounts of Facebook and Twitter continue to share content for employers and stakeholders that focuses on sharing of resources around disability awareness, etiquette, employment and other topics, like the celebration of the Rehabilitation Act turning 50 years old.



## BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT WITH COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROVIDERS

This year, the Business Engagement Team made it a priority to connect with local community rehabilitation providers and their employment service teams, starting with the Central Indiana area. The main purpose for these meetings is to share information on employers and hiring initiatives for persons with disabilities in the local service area and to build a relationship with that employment team. There has been some early success, as described below.

### WALGREEN'S

New Hope of Indiana was one of the first providers to meet with the team and start monthly update meetings. Retail giant Walgreen’s was the first employer to connect with this collaboration via its National Disability Inclusion Team’s area field specialist, Lauren Spradley. Lauren travels the nation sharing information about initiatives to support increasing disability employment to 12% across all business units.

In addition to the thousands of retail stores across the state, Walgreen’s has a return center in Valparaiso and a micro-fulfillment center for their pharmacies in Plainfield. Patrick Mitchell, Employment Team lead at NHI had jobseekers who were interested in trying the REDI training program in the retail stores and had two additional jobseekers who toured the micro fulfillment center and were interested in trying the training opportunities there. As of fall 2023, two VR participants have completed REDI training in the stores and two individuals have completed the micro pharmacy fulfillment center training to hire program and are employed.

### OTHER EMPLOYER SUCCESS WITH NHI SUPPORT

Two individuals have successfully completed CDL truck driver training from NHI. One of these individuals became employed as a waste management employee/driver and the other jobseeker is working for an Over the Road trucking company.

### UNIVERSAL DRY CLEANERS

Universal Cleaners and its owner, Rob Yeary, connected with NHI to inquire about hiring potential employees. After candidates toured the cleaners with employment specialists, two candidates were hired!



*Felicia has been employed as the cashier/closer at the store.*



*Ephen works mornings in the back of the store as the assistant dry cleaner.*

# EMPLOYMENT FIRST

In September 2020, the Commission on Rehabilitation Services members approved Indiana's Employment First plan. Several activities to educate stakeholders about Employment First were subsequently completed including an Employment First celebration at the Statehouse, a convening of state agencies and collaboration meetings with key staff from the Office of Equity, Inclusion and Opportunity.

The Commission member chairing the Employment First committee ended her appointed term in June. A new committee chair was identified and the committee reconvened in September 2023. The committee plans to address both short-term and long-term strategies related to the Employment First plan. A short-term area of focus is review of liability concerns expressed by employers when providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities to participate in onsite activities, including work experiences. The committee is researching this matter and identifying recommendations for addressing potential barriers.

Long-term strategies will be explored with the full commission membership and may include opportunities to develop communication around successes with Employment First, including communication strategies that highlight completed action steps.

At the state level, several important actions implemented in 2022 to support Employment First efforts have continued throughout 2023.

- ◆ 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.
- ◆ BRS received a large federal grant to support individuals in moving from subminimum wage to competitive integrated employment. This project completed its planning year in September and has now been implemented with four pilot providers.

- ◆ DDORS 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. These activities are now provided 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 will be four total IPS sites across Indiana.

# ADDITIONAL HIGHLIGHTS

The Indiana VR program has experienced a positive trend in performance on federal common performance indicators, from performance year 2020 to performance year 2022 (ending June 30, 2023). The table below reflects these trends over the last three years. The table also compares PY22 targets to PY22 actual performance and reflects that actual performance exceeds targets in all five performance measures for PY22.

Indicator	2020	2021	2022 targets	2022 actual
Employment rate Q2	47.90%	56.00%	51.30%	60.40%
Employment rate Q4	45.00%	51.40%	48.30%	57.90%
Median earnings	\$3,082	\$3,448	\$3,431	\$3,561.54
Credential rate	13.50%	34.50%	20%	47.70%
Measurable skill gains	63.70%	63.50%	63.80%	65.20%

- ◆ A total of 1,454 VR participants exited with employment outcomes during the last performance year, with average wages of \$15.10/hour. VR has outlined a goal in the upcoming state plan of a 25% increase in employment outcomes by PY25.
- ◆ Indiana VR has released over 3,500 individuals from the order of selection waitlist and now has two open service categories with one category closed. Regular releases from the waitlist will continue with the goal of opening all service categories by December 2024.
- ◆ VR staff exceeded federal timeliness standards for the determination of eligibility and development of service plans at a 97% compliance rate.
- ◆ 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.

- ◆ VR participated in a federal monitoring visit with the Rehabilitation Services Administration in May 2023, which resulted in no compliance findings. RSA provided helpful technical assistance and several recommendations.
- ◆ The Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management, a national VR partner, conducted a brief study to review vacancy rates of VR staff across the nation. The VR counselor vacancy rate for Indiana, based on data submitted with the most recent State Plan, indicated a 4.6% vacancy rate for VR counselors in Indiana, compared to a 14.2% national average VR counselor vacancy rate at that time. Indiana VR has since shared updated data reflecting a 4.5% vacancy rate of VR counselors as of July 2023 and a 2.5% vacancy rate as of November 2023.

# 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 2023.

**Amanda Bagwell**, ADA Coordinator, FSSA Office of Healthy Opportunities

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

**Bonnie Bomer/Zaida Maldonado-Prather**, Indiana Disability Rights

**Ron Brown**, Indiana Business Enterprise Program

**Brian Carnes**, INARF

**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

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

**Michelle Oja/Ian Ragains**, Indiana Department of Education

**Richard Propes/Katie Connel**, Indiana Bureau of Disabilities Services

**Cadence Riley**, Youth Representative

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

**Stacey Smith**, Prairie Quest Consulting

**David Spradley/Barbara Thompson**, Indiana National Alliance on Mental Illness

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

**Kindall Stewart**, Youth Representative

**Michael Thibideau**, Invest Hamilton County

## “WHY I SERVE ON THE COMMISSION”



The prospect to serve others, whether it be customers, a team, a cause, community, business or enterprise through employment can be one of the most satisfying roles any of us fulfill in life. I believe all Hoosiers merit the opportunity to serve and earn through employment. The mission of the VR Commission is to support the mission of employment for individuals with disabilities in the state of Indiana. This important purpose is accomplished on the VR Commission through collaboration, listening and innovating. It is an honor to assist Hoosiers in this way and this is why I serve on the VR Commission.

*Marc Ruiz*



I have long believed that having a service mentality ensures that you build a better place/life for those around you. Teddy Roosevelt said, “This country will not be a good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a good place for all of us to live in.” Being a part of the commission allows me, as a vocational rehabilitation provider to not only to stay abreast to the mission and goals of the state VR but to bring back ideas and vision from the community I represent.

*Stacey Smith*



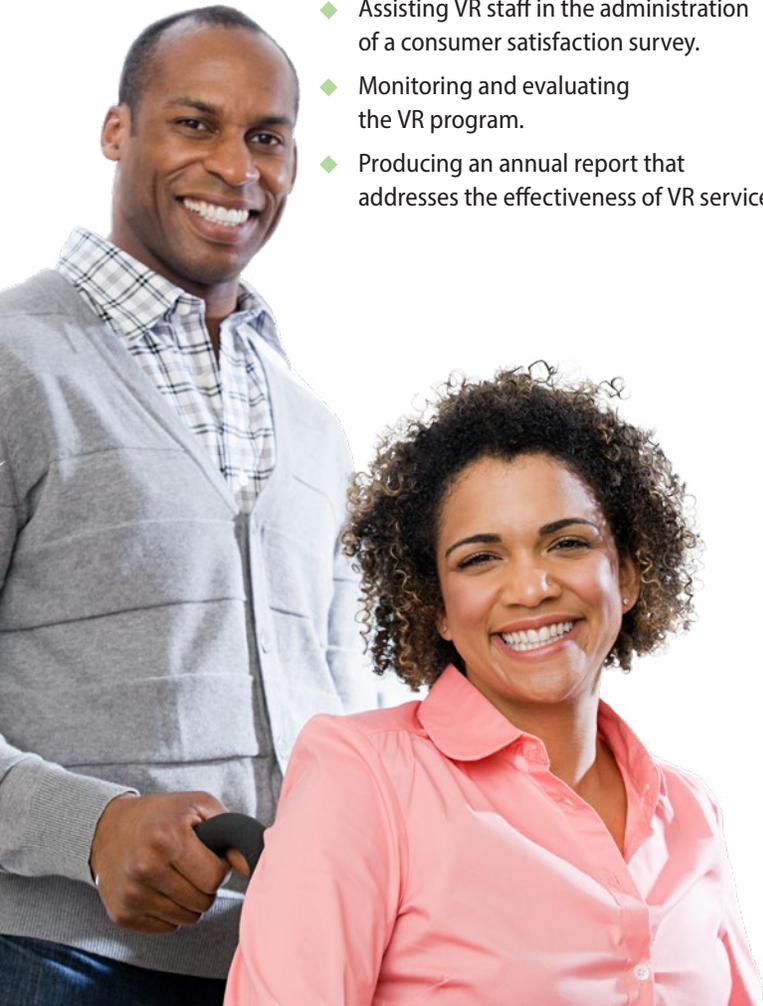
# Indiana's Commission on Rehabilitation Services

## 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.

## 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 and  
Rehabilitative Services**