



Department of  
**Human Services**

State Rehabilitation Council  
of Tennessee

# State Rehabilitation Council

2022 Annual Report

December 2022



# Letter from the State Rehabilitation Council



Rebecca M. Bordenet-  
French, SRC Chair

It is my great pleasure to submit to you the 2022 annual report for the Tennessee State Rehabilitation Council (SRC). The SRC partners with the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program to ensure that the highest quality of services and supports are provided to individuals with disabilities seeking employment assistance. To that end, the SRC serves as the voice of the customer and provides input to VR in a variety of ways.

In the past year the SRC adapted to help champion VR in its mission to provide timely, high-quality supports and services to Tennesseans with disabilities, despite the challenges of shifting service delivery models, departmental transformation already in progress, and administrative functions to virtual and remote environments following a worldwide pandemic.

In the next year we plan to have a renewed focus on the following areas:

- Communication within the department and its providers.
- Modernization of systems and processes including timeliness beyond the initial transformation roll out.
- Company culture with extensive emphasis on training, coaching, ownership, and support for staff and providers in a new, healthier way.
- VR's brand and message. The paths people receive VR's message.
- Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility via pathway from our DEIA Committee.

I want to thank our previous Chair, Christina Clift, whose guidance has been key to a smooth transition without disruption to progress. Today, I sit in a seat elected by my peers to speak for the Council. I appreciate the SRC and its Committees for all the hard work and commitment to the total transformation which we only capture as brief glimpses in the annual report. This transformation has many pieces, rolling out independently and simultaneously and often overlapping. There has been a lot of change in the last year and more change is coming. While this may feel overwhelming and rushed at times, the reality is this change was long overdue and necessary to provide timely services to our customers. I appreciate the visionaries who built the strategic plan and had the impeccable detail to key pieces to ensure success when the plan begins its process. The SRC has had a direct focus on communicating and collaborating with State agencies this year and the outcome has produced positive results and the effects of this mentality continue to foster improvements throughout.

I encourage you to review this report, particularly the Committee highlights, to learn more about the SRC Committees and their accomplishments this past year. Most of our priorities and projects are fluid and ongoing; I hope the report inspires you to consider where you can help be part of the change in this crucial time in Vocational Rehabilitation in Tennessee.

Together, let's continue to change the work culture for individuals seeking independence through successful career paths.

Respectfully Submitted,

Rebecca M Bordenet- French, State Rehabilitation Council Chair

# Message from the Assistant Commissioner

“And what do you do?” is often the first question that is asked when you meet someone for the first time right after “what is your name?” Work not only allows for people to provide an answer while, more importantly, serving as a means to support themselves and their family, it is much more than that. Meaningful work in an environment where one’s talent is recognized and respected alongside peers earning competitive wages for their work, fulfills some of the most basic human needs: sense of belonging, contribution to family and community along with the dignity and respect that comes with it.



At our core, we believe in the power of work with the expectation that everyone who chooses to should have the opportunity to work. I am proud to have the privilege of leading a team of dedicated professionals who along with the volunteers of the State Rehabilitation Council share that basic principle. We see more than the potential value and talent that our customers bring to strengthen the workforce, the economy and community. We work hard every day to provide high quality counseling, guidance, support, goods, and services that help customers realize their own ambitions to earn a living doing the things that they are interested in while developing the skills they need to be successful.

To further our mission in collaboration with, and using feedback from, the SRC and many community partners, advocates and stakeholders, we took on an ambitious transformation that touched nearly every facet of the VR program. At the core of this multi-year transformation remained our steadfast focus on the customer experience. While challenging, evolving with the needs of the customer, employers and community created a more agile program that is responsive to today’s workforce requirements.

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

Together we are transforming lives, transforming businesses, and transforming communities.

## **Kevin R. Wright**

*Assistant Commissioner, Division of Rehabilitation Services  
Tennessee Department of Human Services*

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# Vocational Rehabilitation Program Overview

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

In Tennessee, the VR program is administered by the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS), Division of Rehabilitation Services. Through multiple specialized units, VR helps job seekers prepare for, secure, retain, advance in or regain employment. VR also helps individuals advocate for employment outcomes that are consistent with their individual strengths, resources, abilities, capabilities, and informed choice. VR provides employment-focused services that are individualized and person-centered. VR educates, coordinates, and collaborates to serve students and job seekers with disabilities as well as the business community.

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

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

## **VR Services Include:**

- Counseling and Guidance
- Information and Referral
- Training and Education
- Transportation
- Rehabilitation Technology Services
- Job Placement
- Post-Employment Services
- Supported Employment Services
- Independent Living Services

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

## **Specialized VR Services**

**Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)** are available to students with disabilities ages 14-22. Pre-Employment Transition services are focused on preparing students for life after high school. Pre-ETS services include the following services:

- Job exploration counseling,
- Work-based learning experiences,
- Counseling on opportunities for postsecondary educational programs,
- Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, and
- Instruction in self-advocacy.

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*“VR Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) has not just shaped one student, but it has redesigned how our community perceives our students, programs, and school district. Through the expansion of providing Pre-ETS to students, community members have embraced their involvement to assist in developing stronger citizens.” Catherine Bledsoe, Maryville City Schools*

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

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

- Automotive Detailing Technician
- Automotive Maintenance & Lubrication Technician

- Business Education Technology
- Certified Logistics Associate/Technician
- Certified Production Technician
- Customer Care (Retail)
- Food Service
- Pharmacy Technician
- Power Equipment
- Certified Nursing Assistant

**Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers (CTRCs)** are community-based resource centers strategically located throughout the state offering community-based employment training, and connecting VR and non-VR customers to education, training, and employment resources. The CTRCs are funded with federal and local dollars. The Vocational Rehabilitation program recently transformed the service delivery model of the CTRCs to best meet the needs of the individuals we serve and their communities. Services offered are community-based person-centered services that prepare and support individuals in going to work. The services are provided within the community with the support of local partners such as businesses, non-profits, city, county, and state agencies, as well as local education agencies.

**Sensory Services** is a specialized unit within VR that addresses the unique needs of individuals who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing. Included within the VR Sensory Services unit is **Tennessee Business Enterprises (TBE)**. Authorized by the Randolph-Sheppard Act and state statute, this program offers vocational training and employment opportunities for individuals who are legally blind. The mission of TBE is to provide high quality products and customer service while maximizing employment and economic opportunities for legally blind individuals. Federal and State laws grant TBE a priority to operate vending and food service in Federal, State and local government buildings. Tennessee Business Enterprises trains, licenses and places blind individuals in a facility where they function much like an independent business owner. Assistance is provided to these managers by the VR program. Tennessee Business Enterprises currently operates 110 facilities across the state. These facilities generate over \$20 million in sales annually.





# Key Accomplishments 2022

There were several notable accomplishments by the VR program in 2022. A few of these accomplishments are highlighted below.

## Modernizing the Customer Experience

The VR program simplified the customer experience with the launch of the NICE inContact phone platform in January 2022. The new system allows a more efficient method of receiving phone calls with the ability to provide real-time response to customer inquiries across program areas. More than 30 different phone numbers statewide were condensed into one phone number and staffed with a knowledgeable team of agents ready to help callers. The platform enables VR to decrease time for inquiry resolution, reduce transfers and delays and creates customer self-service opportunities. The new system also improves operations through enhanced visibility into call type, volume, and other analytics, and demonstrates improvement opportunities through recording and caller surveys.

## Investing in Vocational Rehabilitation Providers

The State Rehabilitation Council, Disability Rights Tennessee, and the VR program worked with providers to better understand concerns related to service payment rates.



Research was conducted which included benchmarking other state VR programs, reviewing current economic and labor market data, and obtaining feedback from stakeholders. Based on these findings, the VR program approved a 13% rate increase for the provision of services listed in the CRP Service Guide effective October 1, 2022. The VR program also increased rates for driver's education training, service animals, tutorial services, meals, and reader, notetaker, transcriber, and typing services. This increase has had a positive impact on the providers we so greatly depend on for delivering quality services to Tennesseans with disabilities.

## **Students Return to a New Normal After COVID-19**

After nearly two years of remote learning due to COVID-19, TRC-Smyrna began welcoming students back on campus in January 2022. Students have flexibility in learning with both in-person and remote learning options. Spring semester concluded with the first in-person graduation in over two years. More than 140 students were invited to attend with a streaming option available. The Fall 2022 semester welcomed 218 students on campus - an all-time semester record!



*Assistant Commissioner Kevin Wright delivers keynote address to graduates at TRC Smyrna*

## **Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers are Co-locating in the Community**

To continue the community-based service delivery model for the VR program, many CTRCs have begun co-locating within community partners, including American Job Centers. A great example of a co-location partnership occurred halfway between Nashville and Chattanooga in Manchester, a town of about 12,634 people located in Coffee County.

The Tennessee College of Applied Technology (TCAT) McMinnville operates a satellite campus in Coffee County. The building used by TCAT was sold, prompting TCAT to begin looking for a new space for their program operations. The new community-based service delivery model of the CTRCs freed up available workshop space in the building which fit the needs of TCAT perfectly. A solution to partner and co-locate with VR at CTRC Manchester was developed with impact to the overall community.

In March 2022, TCAT McMinnville relocated the Industrial Maintenance program to CTRC Manchester. According to the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TNDOLWD), Coffee County will average 60 annual openings through 2026 for industrial maintenance technicians with an average annual salary of \$49,410. By continuing and expanding this program in Coffee County, TCAT McMinnville can supply the workforce to meet this demand. Additionally, the warehouse space available at CTRC Manchester will provide the opportunity for TCAT to develop and expand other high-demand programs in Coffee County

such as a Licensed Practical Nursing program and a full-time Machine Tool Technology program.

The office space at CTRC Manchester will continue to be a landing spot for VR staff to conduct appointments and meet customer needs as appropriate. The partnership between TCAT and CTRC Manchester will help to meet the needs of job seeking Tennesseans with disabilities and the workforce development needs of Tennessee business and industry. This is an opportunity to fulfill the mission of the VR program and be innovative in the way we do business and deliver services.



TENNESSEE COLLEGE  
OF APPLIED TECHNOLOGY  
MCMINNVILLE



Stacey Lowe-State of TN – Business Consultant & TCAT Industrial Maintenance Instructor – Fred Green & McMinnville TCAT students inside the new partnership classroom located in Manchester Industrial Park Vocational Rehabilitation Center.

<https://tcatmcminnville.edu/>

### **Partnership Expansion- Individual Placements and Supports**

#### ***Helping Tennesseans with Behavioral Health Disorders and Addictions Find Work and Independence***

Tennessee's VR program is full of examples of partnerships and collaborations between State departments that are working to strengthen existing and new service delivery systems to achieve increased employment opportunities for Tennesseans with disabilities. A primary example of this cooperative spirit across state government is the interagency agreement with the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (TDMHSAS) for the Individual Placements and Supports (IPS) model of supported employment.

This year, the VR program and TDMHSAS expanded the IPS Program. This model of supported employment successfully helps persons with serious mental illness obtain competitive integrated employment. The expansion will serve 740 more Tennesseans per year. In state fiscal

year 2022, 1,167 people with serious mental illness were helped with a supported employment goal by an IPS team in Tennessee. Since establishing an interagency agreement in 2017, TDMHSAS and VR continue to develop, expand, and improve opportunities for competitive integrated employment for Tennesseans living with disabilities including mental health and/or substance abuse issues.

*When VR Customer Jessica Graves first sought VR services, she lacked confidence in interacting with the public. She experienced an injury that resulted in facial disfigurement. She has post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. During her VR journey, she built relationships with her VR Counselor and Individual Placement and Support (IPS) provider. VR services helped Jessica gain skills necessary to meet her employment goals. Jessica's confidence increased and she learned the value she could contribute to society. She currently works as a Personal Home Care Aide. She enjoys her job and feels she is a positive example to others.*

### **Organizational Restructure**

To attract and retain top talent and improve customer experience outcomes, the VR program made changes to the existing staffing model to align classifications with the roles and responsibilities of a modernized, community-based vocational rehabilitation program and to offer compensation commensurate with position qualifications, responsibilities, and fair market value. Changes aim to:

- Ensure a workforce strategy which increases candidate pools without degrading qualifications.
- Create a career pathway for employees with opportunities for growth and advancement.
- Offer a competitive salary with incentives tied to education and certification milestones.
- Align supervisory qualifications to the education and experience necessary to supervise master's level counselors and their scope of work.
- Provide administrative and case management support to VR Counselors and the VR program.



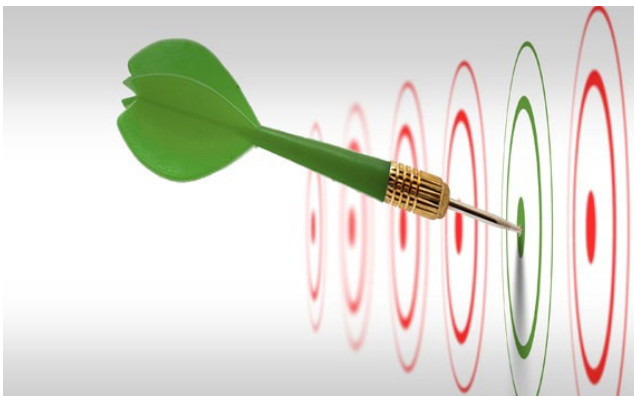
VR Staff Training at the ResourceAbility Fair October 2022

# Vocational Rehabilitation Program Outcomes

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

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## Results Driven:



## Rehabilitation Services by the Numbers (SFY22)

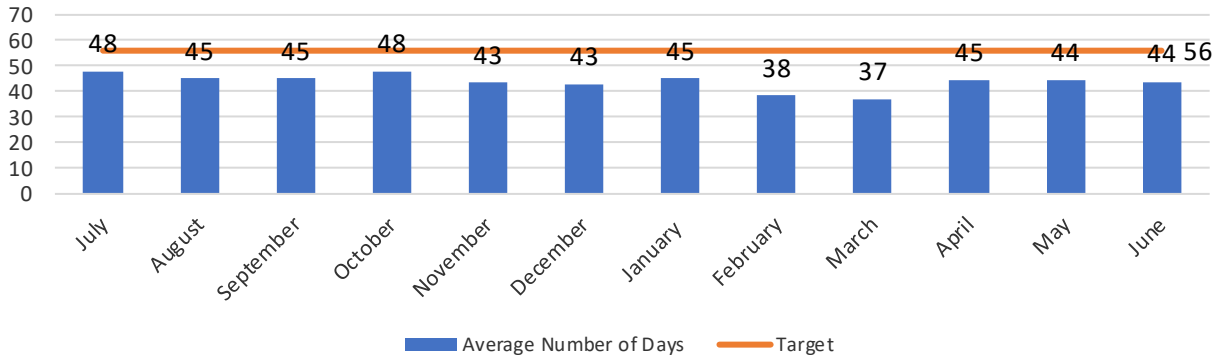
**6,766** VR referrals received  
**4,647** VR applications taken  
**11,622** people with disabilities served  
**9,485** students received transition services  
**1,954** services provided to businesses  
**1,400** customers achieved their employment goals with at least 90 days of competitive, integrated employment  
**288** students served by the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center at Smyrna  
**29.51** average hours VR customers worked per week  
**\$12.65** average hourly wage of VR customers

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### Supporting Customers with Timely Decision Making (SFY22)

A key metric in enhancing the customer experience is the speed with which customers are engaged in their individual plan for employment. Over the last year, VR set a goal to complete the individual plan for employment in 56 days – that is 34 days faster than the federal regulations require. This ensures that VR customers are engaged more rapidly in the pursuit of their employment goals. In its focus on serving the customer, over the last year VR not only met, but exceeded this goal ending the year with a cumulative average of 44 days from eligibility to signed individual plan for employment.

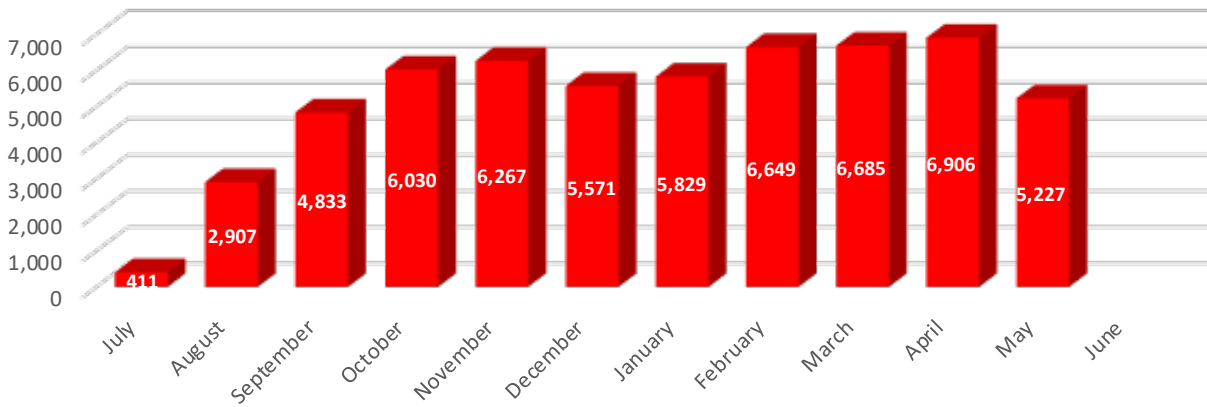
### Average # Days from Eligibility Determination to Signed Individual Plan for Employment



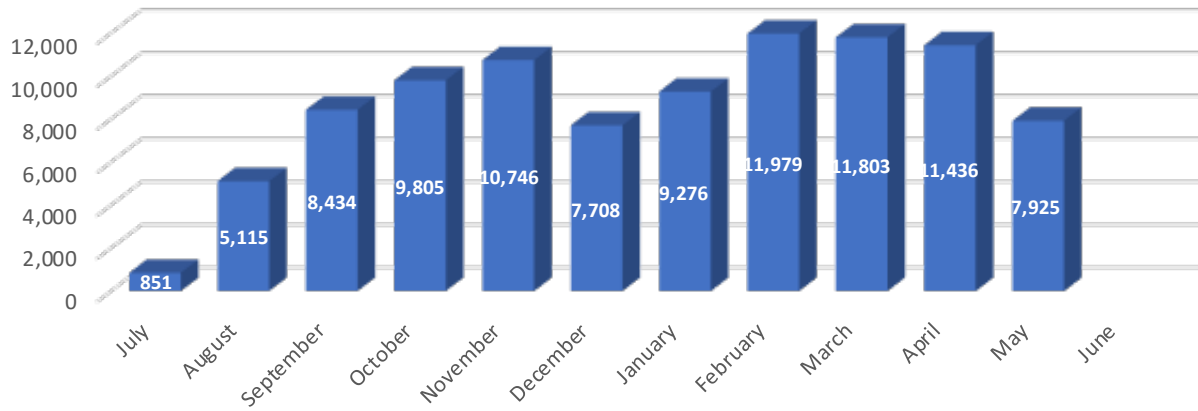
### Preparing Students with Disabilities for Life After High School

In the past year, an average of 9,423 pre-employment transition services were provided to an average of 5,690 students during each month of the school year (August 2021 to May 2022). A total of 9,485 students participated in the Pre-ETS program during SFY 2022.

### Pre-ETS Total Students Served



### Pre-ETS Total Units of Service Provided



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*“VR Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) has been a critical part of helping students in Hamilton County prepare for postsecondary outcomes. They are an invaluable resource to our families.”* Wendy Evett, Hamilton County Schools

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# NDEAM 2022

In addition to promoting the #HireMyStrengths campaign as part of the larger National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) celebrations led by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, the VR program and the State Rehabilitation Council led initiatives across the state to recognize all the unique ways Tennesseans make the workforce better. With or without a disability, everyone has valuable skills to bring to the table. A few examples of events hosted across the state are highlighted below.

## The State of Tennessee is a Model Employer

By [Proclamation 2383](#), on September 22, 2022, Governor Lee declared October 2022 as Tennessee Disability Employment Awareness Month. On October 3, 2022, an email was sent to every State of Tennessee employee to ask employees to please take time to celebrate our team members that are differently abled and reinforce our commitment to be an inclusive workplace where all employees thrive.

Dear state employees,

National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) is honored each October to commemorate the numerous and varied contributions of people with disabilities to America's workplaces and economy. By [Proclamation 2383](#), Governor Lee has declared October 2022 as Tennessee Disability Employment Awareness Month.

This month please take time to celebrate our team members that are differently abled and reinforce our commitment to an inclusive workplace where all employees thrive. For more information on NDEAM please visit [dol.gov/NDEAM](https://dol.gov/NDEAM).

Sincerely,  
DOHR Strategic Communications



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312 Rosa L. Parks Ave., Nashville, TN 37243  
[DOHR.Communications@tn.gov](mailto:DOHR.Communications@tn.gov)  
[tn.gov/hr](https://tn.gov/hr)



## **NDEAM Event: Employer Training Session in Maryville, TN**

Community employers attended a VR event that included Guest Speaker, Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Schlitz sharing insight on the topic of valuing and hiring employees for their strengths.

In February of 2007, while serving in southern Baghdad, Army Sgt. 1st Class Michael Schlitz and his platoon experienced an explosion that threw him from his vehicle, killing his driver, gunner and medic. Schlitz sustained burns on 85% of his body, lost vision in his left eye and became a double amputee. Now retired and the recipient of multiple valorous medals for his honorable service to our country, Schlitz is on a new mission to give back to veteran communities and “live a better life for the friends he lost that day; a life they would be proud of.” He travels the country to speak to many audiences, including Congress, about veteran issues and is heavily invested in veteran mentorship and related non-profits.



Army Sgt. 1<sup>st</sup> Class Michael Schlitz

## **NDEAM Event: Community Job Fair in Cookeville, TN** (as relayed by Jimmie Simpson, Vocational Rehabilitation Business Services Employee)

### **DAY 1:**

- VR Customers were treated to guest speakers and learned about self-employment, personal motivation, rights under the ADA, and local employment services available to the homeless.
- American Job Centers partnered to produce professional resumes for individuals.
- Life Church provided fresh haircuts for any customer who wanted them and treated them to lunch.
- Customers went through a graded mock interview with VR staff and learned how the entire interview and hiring process works in most companies.

### **DAY 2:**

- Washington Avenue Baptist Church provided breakfast for the employer appreciation and education portion of the NDEAM event.
- Presentation to employers of how all facets of VR works together to aid VR customers in finding their place in the workforce.
- Job Fair to bring together job seekers and employers.

# Success Stories

## **Ann Stafford Relies on her Determination to Get a Great Job!**

Ann Stafford has a fantastic employment story. She works with the Tennessee Department of Human Services in Trenton, TN. Ann received Individual Placements and Supports (IPS) through the Tennessee VR program and Carey Counseling. She previously attempted several job placements which did not initially work for her, but she never gave up. Ann was tenacious and persistent and kept submitting applications to openings that appealed to her.

Ann received job development and support services through the VR program. Extensive job readiness training was also an important factor in Ann's vocational goals. Ann learned job searching and interview strategies that helped her to identify employment that would be a good fit for her. She practiced skills related to networking, interviewing, and resume writing. VR services were continuously reviewed and adjusted as she progressed toward meeting her employment objectives.

Ann is thankful for the VR services provided that helped her develop the skills she needed. She is also grateful for the other services VR provided such as mental health services, VR counseling, transportation, and eyeglasses. Ann was able to bring all this together and land a great job that she enjoys.

## **Maitland Farms and Entrepreneurship through VR**



Sydney Maitland has wanted to own his own business since he was in high school. Back then, he thought it would be a taxidermy business, but as he got older, he became more interested in having his own farm. He says he likes the idea of being his own boss. He first learned about VR in high school and became a VR customer as a senior at Gibson County High School. VR has helped with startup costs related to his business. With the help from VR, he has been able to purchase much-needed equipment and supplies to start Maitland Farms. He has some advice to give people with disabilities who want to own their own business like him. He says, get in touch with VR and "let them help you get the process started". He sees his business growing in the future and wants to one day have different breeds of chickens, maybe even different types of birds and eggs.

## **VR Customer Sawyer Parlier is Paving his Path for the Future**

When Sawyer Parlier came to VR, he didn't know what career he wanted for himself. After earning his associate degree in History from Pellissippi State Community College, he attended the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, but soon discovered that a larger campus was not a good fit for him. Sawyer had never received special education services or accommodations in the classroom and had never registered with any kind of Disability Services office. He did not know what assistance was available to him until he met with his VR Counselor. Through Counseling & Guidance services with his VR Counselor, Sawyer soon found a variety of services that have helped him to identify his employment goals. VR helped Sawyer with visiting an audiologist where his hearing was tested. Based on the results, hearing aids were recommended and it was determined that he qualified for additional VR services. Additionally, a Vocational Evaluation was completed with Sawyer that helped him to consider jobs that he was not aware of and that could be a good fit for him. He learned he was more interested in a certificate type of educational program, rather than working on completing a bachelor's degree in History. Sawyer found a program at Pellissippi State Community College that interested him, and he applied for and was accepted into their Medical Coding certificate program. He also registered with the college's Disability Services office.

Vocational Rehabilitation purchased hearing aids for Sawyer, and he was amazed at the difference they made in his life. Sawyer began his certificate program in the Spring 2021 semester. Sawyer was diligent in his schoolwork and kept in communication with his VR Counselor. Sawyer successfully completed his courses and obtained his Medical Coding and Electronic Health Records Specialist Certificates in May 2022.

Sawyer was referred to the Vocational Rehabilitation Business Services Unit upon receiving his certificates. He met with his Employment Specialist and discussed his specific goals, including work location and rate of pay. They worked together on preparing his professional resume and identifying business opportunities that Sawyer showed interest in. Sawyer is excited to finally be engaged in job searching and is encouraged by the opportunities available. He feels that Vocational Rehabilitation has supported him in identifying his career goals and realizing a path toward independence. He hopes for an income and benefits that will help him move out on his own.

## **The VR Program is collaborative and innovative**

In October 2022, VR staff from the Pre-Employment Transition Services Team and Camden Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (CTRC) met to collaborate on a way to begin providing services to students at Lexington High School (LHS) who qualified for Pre-ETS but were not receiving them through traditional means such as a Transition School to Work program or Community Rehabilitation Provider. After meeting with the school and establishing what

services the students needed most, a plan was developed and implemented. The Pre-ETS team and CTRC started providing services to the students at the beginning of November. They alternate weekly going to LHS and providing instruction that covers the five career-based services (Job Exploration Counseling, Work Based Learning, Workplace Readiness, Post-Secondary Enrollment Assistance, and Self-Advocacy). The students show great enthusiasm as they learn about life after high school and the transition from school to work. When teaching these students, the VR team



From left to right, Brenda Hardin (VR Pre-ETS), Bethany Patton (VR CTRC), Kelly Page, Special Educator (LHS)

builds a professional relationship to better understand the student's strengths and preferences to assist in determining what types of jobs may interest them. Staff are currently serving nine students in this class and are eager to continue to work with them after returning from Winter Break. It's great to see a VR team that will do what it takes to get the job done!

### **Scott Smith: VR is an Important Part of the Community in Sparta, TN**



Scott Smith interview day at NHC  
Sparta

Scott Smith's VR journey started with discovery so that the VR Career Training Coordinator and Scott could get to know each other and find out what Scott likes to do. Prior to Scott's full onset of Muscular Dystrophy, he worked in landscaping. Scott is a chair user and wanted to explore new career options, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to do for a living since all he knew was landscaping. While working with Scott, the VR Coordinator quickly realized some of Scott's gifts. Scott is a great conversationalist and has a knack for putting people at ease and making them feel comfortable. Scott was interested in part-time work, so the VR Coordinator set up a volunteer opportunity at National Healthcare Corporation (NHC), a local nursing home. Once he started volunteering at NHC, the VR Coordinator has noticed a new energy in

Scott.

During the discovery meetings, Scott shared that he has not had a bed to sleep in for the past seven years and he has been sleeping in his wheelchair. The VR Coordinator reached out to Cookeville Regional Hospital's Charitable Foundation. The director informed the VR Coordinator that they had a new electric adjustable bed for Scott and a new mattress. The VR Counselor and VR Coordinator personally picked up and delivered the new bed and mattress to Scott's apartment. Scott was humbled and grateful. The VR Counselor and VR Coordinator are proud that VR is an important part of the Putnam County community and were honored to help meet the needs of a community member.

Here's what Scott has to say:

*"If it wasn't for VR, I probably would still just be sitting here doing nothing but playing video games and being bored and now I have an opportunity to help others. I know the background of NHC and they're very great people and they care about their patients! Because at one time, they took care of me..."*

## Plans for the Future

Tennessee's Vocational Rehabilitation Program has opportunities to improve and strengthen service delivery, internal and external communication, and efforts to recruit and retain VR's most important asset – its staff. As a result of the 2022 Comprehensive Needs Assessment, the VR program, in collaboration with the SRC, identified the following priorities and specific actions for VR to take in the upcoming year.

### ***Key Priorities Identified***

- **Talent Management** - Staff hiring, training and retention, including addressing adequate compensation to improve recruitment and retention of master's degree holding Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and other critical VR staff.
- **Communication and Responsiveness** – Communication and responsiveness within VR and with customers, Community Resource Providers (CRPs), partners, and the public.
- **Customer Engagement** - Focus on engaging customers throughout the VR process to ensure customers are empowered to practice informed choice throughout their person-centered journey with VR and to increase successful employment outcomes for VR customers.
- **Community Partners and Resources** – Invest time in educating and informing the public, community partners, staff, and customers to ensure communities have a clearer understanding of the services available through Vocational Rehabilitation, and other community agencies.

### ***Specific Actions Identified***

- **Talent Management** - Continue to improve and expand training opportunities for staff through the development and deployment of role specific training and ongoing professional learning and development plans.
- **Communication and Responsiveness** - *Aware* case management system enhancements to include the implementation of a vendor portal, which will allow CRPs to easily submit payment requests and other correspondence to VR staff in a secure and efficient method and a Pre-ETS provider portal for documenting actual services.
- **Customer Engagement** – Update online and printed materials available to the public to ensure access and understanding of VR services and processes.

- **Community Partners and Resources** - Develop a public outreach strategy that assures reach and understanding of VR services.

Through these efforts, the Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation program, together with our community partners and stakeholders, including the State Rehabilitation Council, are transforming the VR program to better meet the needs of the individuals we serve, the businesses we rely on, and the communities we live in.



# State Rehabilitation Council

## ▶ **Mission**

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

## ▶ **Vision**

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

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

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

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## ▶ **Responsibilities and Functions**

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

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

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

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

## ► **Membership**

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

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

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## ▶ 2022 Officers

### Chair

**Rebecca French**

*Business, Industry, and Labor*

**From:** Manchester

**Tennessee Region:** Middle

### Secretary

**Nathan Walsh**

*Client Assistance Program*

**From:** Nashville

**Tennessee Region:** Middle

### Vice Chair

**Christina Clift**

*Representative of Disability Groups*

**From:** Millington

**Tennessee Region:** West

### Immediate Past Chair

**Christina Clift**

*Representative of Disability Groups*

**From:** Millington

**Tennessee Region:** West

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



**From Left to right: (bottom row) Kamekio Lewis, Rebecca Bordenet-French, Tyler Samuels, Nathan Walsh, Julie Johnson (top row) Tiffany Ramsey, Alicia Cone, Jason Fox, Josh Harper, Christina Clift, Rhonda Crenshaw, Troy Allen**

## ▶ 2022 Members

**Rebecca Bordenet-French**  
*Business, Industry and Labor*  
From: Manchester  
Tennessee Region: Middle

**Christina Clift**  
*Representative of Disability Group*  
From: Millington  
Tennessee Region: West

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

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

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

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

**Julie Johnson**  
*Director of VR Program*  
From: Nashville  
Tennessee Region: Middle

**Martina Stump**  
*State Education Agency*  
From: Nashville  
Tennessee Region: Middle

**Denice Thomas**  
*State Workforce Boards*  
From: Nashville  
Tennessee Region: Middle

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

**Nathan Walsh**  
*Client Assistance Program*  
From: Nashville  
Tennessee Region: Middle

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

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

**Tyler Samuels**  
*Representative of Disability Group*  
From: Nashville  
VR Region: Middle

**Laura Payne**  
*Current/Former VR Applicant/Recipient*  
From: Knoxville  
Tennessee Region: East

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

## ▶ 2022 SRC Accomplishments



- Held four SRC quarterly meetings to conduct SRC business. Meetings were held in four different locations across the state with the intent of sharing local community success stories and meeting community partners.
- Held multiple conference calls to conduct SRC committee business and to prepare for quarterly meetings.
- Created SRC onboarding materials for all members.
- Prepared Annual Report with the TDHS Division of Rehabilitation Services.
- Continued participation in the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) via participation in national quarterly conference calls and sent two representatives to the National meetings in San Antonio, Texas.
- Communicated CRP rate concerns and partnered with VR to request a review of historical rates, current rates, market median rates, and a plan moving forward to review rates regularly. VR worked together with the Council on this concern and was expeditious in a solution.
- Updated SRC bylaws.
- Increased Board participation and engagement.
- Requested TDHS to review Order of Selection and explore opening priority categories to serve more Tennesseans.
- Collaborated with VR to encourage raises for VR staff through organization modernization and restructure.
- SRC Chair came to Capital Hearings for help with House Bill 2801 and Senate Bill 2650 to demonstrate support of community-based VR services.
- SRC Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility committee reviewed several areas of VR and submitted recommendations to the Department of Human Services.
- Focus areas of interest this year were CRP rates and services provided to the blindness community.
- Contacted the Office of Governor Lee via TDHS to monitor the appointment of previously nominated SRC membership positions which were subsequently appointed.
- Partnered with VR to prepare for the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment. Reviewed all questions in multiple meetings and phone calls for the Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee and adjusted questions in areas where needed.
- Council members participated in VR staff meetings to build support and emphasize to all stakeholders the importance of participating in annual surveys.

## ▶ **2023 SRC Quarterly Meeting Schedule**

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

Upcoming Meetings:

- March 9, 2023
- June 15, 2023
- September 14, 2023
- November 9, 2023

## ▶ **Join the SRC**

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

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