

Annual Report for FY 2024

**New Jersey Division of Vocational
Rehabilitation Services**

State Rehabilitation Council



**SRC/DVRS Partnership Celebrates Accomplishments
October 1, 2023 through September 30, 2024**

**New Jersey Department of Labor
Tel: (609) 292-5987, P. O. Box 398, Trenton, NJ 08625-0398
dvradmin@dol.nj.gov**

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Rehabilitation Council Members

Council Membership is in accordance with Section 105 of the 1998 Amendments to the Rehabilitation Act and New Jersey Executive Order 110 and reflects a diverse range of disability groups, geographical areas, racial, ethnic and gender groups. Each member is appointed by the Governor of New Jersey (or awaiting re-appointment). The Council represents a broad spectrum of individuals who are concerned with the vocational needs of people with disabilities and who support the objectives of the public rehabilitation program in New Jersey. The majority of members are people with disabilities or family members of people with disabilities (55%). For 2024 representation on the Council was as follows:

Member	Representation
Karen J. Alexander	Advocate 1
Vacant	State Workforce Development Board Representative
Mohsen T. Badran	Community Rehabilitation Provider Representative
LaTasha Brown	Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services
Tatsiana DaGrosa	Advocate 2
William Freeman	Office of Special Education Representative
Margaret T. Gilbride, JD	Advocate 3
Stephen Gruzlovic	Advocate 4
Carolyn D. Hayer	Parent Training and Information Center Representative
Dr. Felicia Hopson	Asst. Director of the Division of Voc. Rehab. Services -Ex Officio
Thomas G. Jennings	Business, Industry and Labor Representative 1
Nantanee Koppstein	Advocate 5
Helen Liu	Asst. Director of the Division of Voc. Rehab. Services -Ex Officio
Lori Margolin	Business, Industry and Labor Representative 2
Janet Mills	Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Nkechi Okoli	Division of Developmental Disabilities
Gwen Orlowski, JD	Client Assistance Program - Disability Rights New Jersey
Dr. Janice Oursler	Vocation Rehabilitation Counselor Representative
Lorna F.M. Runkle	Business, Industry and Labor Representative 3 and Advocate 6
Rebecca Shulman	Advocate 7
Carmela Slivinski	Statewide Independent Living Council
Patricia Tomlinson	Advocate 8
Cyndy Walsh-Rintzler	Business, Industry and Labor Representative 4
Dr. Charyl Yarbrough	Asst. Commissioner DOL/ Interim DVRS Director- Ex Officio

Message from the Chair

New Jerseyans,

As 2024 draws to a close, I'd like to share some of this year's work of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) in supporting, advising, and collaboratively problem-solving with its partner, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS). As you will read, this annual report reflects progress that was made, systems and operational challenges that were navigated to varying degrees of success, and plans that were drafted and sometimes redrafted. It also provides an outline of priorities and objectives we've identified (both the SRC and DVRS) to advance employment first throughout our state in 2025.

It is the mission of the SRC to ensure through policy development, implementation, and advocacy that New Jersey has a comprehensive, consumer responsive, and effective rehabilitation program. The SRC strives to reflect the larger community by seeking ways to ensure all New Jersey voices are represented. As a result, our meetings remained hybrid this year to accommodate those for whom attending in-person meetings is not affordable, safe and/or reasonable. If you are a person with a disability, have been a recipient of vocational rehabilitation services, and/or are passionate about working to remove barriers to employment for people with disabilities, please reach out to me or any member of the SRC (listed on Page 3) to express interest in applying to the council. Your input is needed and welcome.

Accomplishments of the SRC this past year included:

- an in-depth examination and discussion of proposed NJDVRS Customized Employment Innovation Project and vote to support its submission to RSA; and
- the continuation of "mini training sessions" on vocational rehabilitation services each meeting (NCSRC Website, VR Eligibility, Informed Choice, and Overview of the Combined State Plan) ; and
- review and provision of input into the VR section of the Combined State Plan; and
- successful establishment of a paid DVRS internship program for graduate students; and
- removal of the SSN request for students seeking Pre-ETS from DVRS; and
- upgrading of the survey monkey package used for the customer satisfaction surveys to better capture, analyze, and report on customer satisfaction trends; and
- a standing agenda item regarding school-to-work and school-to-post secondary education outcomes and potential strategies to address systemic obstacles, including submission of a letter of support for the Collaborations in Transition for New Jersey Federal Grant that was subsequently awarded.

Planned items of concentration for 2025 include increased advocacy with the Governor's Office regarding the on-going and pervasive lack of new appointments and re-appointments, clarity of purpose and increased client representation in SRC public forums, working with DVRS staff to identify and document best practices for interagency collaboration between local DVRS offices and local school districts for smoother transition to adult services, review and provide feedback to DVRS on upcoming policy changes such as those related to financial needs testing and continued monitoring of the implementation of SAME (State as Model Employer) by the NJ Civil Service Commission. I extend deep appreciation to the members of the SRC for their dedication to disability employment and commitment community integrated employment for New Jersey.

Respectfully,
Margaret T. Gilbride, J.D.
Chair, New Jersey Rehabilitation Council



Beliefs and Mission

SRC Beliefs

As members of the New Jersey State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), we believe:

- that each person with a disability has value; and
- that people with disabilities, like all people, have diverse strengths that must be defined and identified along many dimensions; and
- in a public system of vocational rehabilitation that is responsible and accountable to those it serves and to those who fund it.

SRC Beliefs Continued...

in partnerships, affiliations, and linkages; and

that optimal results in rehabilitation depend on an equal partnership between consumers and the professional (service provider); and

that all consumers should be given enough information to make informed choices; and

that all people with disabilities are ultimately responsible and accountable for the choices they make; and

that all people with disabilities should have the opportunity to maximize their potential; and

that respect for all is critical to this process; and

that it is necessary to support, advance and exemplify diversity and multiculturalism within the disability community and the community at large; and

that the rights of people with disabilities should be advanced and protected.

SRC Mission

The SRC is a partnership of people with disabilities (PWD), advocates, and other interested persons. It is dedicated to ensuring that PWD receive rehabilitation services that result in competitive, integrated employment. It is committed to ensuring appropriate support to DVRS in carrying out the spirit, intent, and mandates of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Messages Received from DVRS Consumers:

Throughout the year, DVRS receives comments and feedback from the consumers. Below is a sampling of the comments that were received this year.

DVRS Consumer Messages from the Field

I am writing this document of my own volition and out of gratitude for Jeff Bell goodwill and professional nature. Since starting my CDL-a journey with Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Jeff Bell has been the ideal counselor for me. Jeff Bell has displayed a degree of patience that is rarely seen but it is essential for a counselor or instructor. Regardless of the weather or multiple delays in the progress of the coursework Jeff Bell displayed an even temperament and maintained patience. I would also like to write about the nature of Jeff Bell's character. The ideal instructor not only accurately guides students through the coursework, but they also advocate for their students when necessary. Should a student's work slip due to an outside stressor or even health concerns, Jeff Bell has taken upon himself to advocate on their behalf. Jeff Bell has shown to be trustworthy, caring, and honorable on multiple accounts. There is a great possibility that without his guidance and care I would not be where I am today. His nature has been influential during my time at the school, and I look forward to carrying the lessons I've learned in this time with me through my career and life.

Jeff Bell: Pleasantville Office

I wanted to reach out and thank you for helping me as much as you do. I've been in a very transformative time in life these last 2 years (no pun intended) and I really do appreciate having someone who not only believes in me but someone who actively chooses to advocate for my success. So, with all that being said, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I also wanted to let you know that I'm currently reaching out to Pennfoster to obtain information on my certification. I'll have all the documents you requested by tomorrow morning.

Jennifer Shaw Knab: Sewell Office

I am writing to express my appreciation for Kathleen Kindya who has been our agency's assigned PPDS for several years now. We have been a DVR vendor for almost 30 years, and we are so grateful for the support we have received from Kathleen over the years. The work we all do together can be very stressful and there are so many moving parts, everyone is doing their best to provide a quality service to our consumers and we often forget to reach out to communicate the positives instead of the negatives. I wanted to share that Kathleen's patience, responsiveness, and willingness to listen is certainly worth sharing. Our agency is very thankful that she is our assigned PPDS.

Kathleen Kindya: Central Office

DVRS Consumer Messages from the Field (continued)

I hope this message finds you well. Your guidance has been a cornerstone of my success at the university, and I am deeply grateful for the support I've received from you and the DVR team. It's hard to overstate the impact of your help on my student journey.Thank you once again for everything you've done for me. The department's support has been a lifeline, and I am truly thankful for it. I look forward to hearing from you soon to schedule a meeting. Best regards,

Ana Cortes: Jersey City Office

Well, it is official! I graduated from St John's on Sunday, May 19th, magna cum laude, double majoring in history and art history, 15 graduate credits toward a master's degree in museum administration, and recipient of the Michael Pisano athletic and academic honors award. I originally chose to go to St. John's to be on their division 1 fencing team; however, my time here has been filled with so many amazing experiences and opportunities - more than I could have ever hoped for. Next year I will be completing my master's degree in museum administration. My dream of becoming a museum curator is now within reach. Thank you so much for being with me every step of the way. Your guidance and the support I received from DVRS has made all of this possible. I will always be grateful for your unwavering dedication. I know that you are excited about your retirement, but I am saddened that others will not have the same opportunity to have you to help them grow and navigate their journey towards their dreams. Please know that you and DVRS have made a difference in so many lives, like me and my sister. Thank you for believing in all of us. May every day of your retirement be filled with happiness and adventure. Warmest regards,

Garrett Harvest: Newark Office

Function, Committees and Resources

SRC Mandated Function

The SRC, on behalf of the community it represents, reviews, analyzes, and advises the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) regarding the performance of its responsibilities. Council goals and activities are set annually and in response to both national and state issues, as mandated by Section 105 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended. The focus of Council goals and activities includes, but is not limited to, consumer satisfaction, the statewide needs assessment, the state plan and amendments, policy, interagency collaboration, and the extent, scope and effectiveness of the DVRS, community integrated employment programs.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), signed into law July 22, 2014, reauthorized the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 under title IV. It is important to note that most provisions under title IV went into effect upon enactment of WIOA. The SRC is committed to ensuring appropriate support to the DVRS in its WIOA implementation.

Membership Development

The full council participates in identification of potential members appropriate to the beliefs and mission of the SRC and an ad hoc membership committee, led by the Chair and with the support of DVRS staff, monitors the process and reports regularly to the council. Member attendance, vacancies, and upcoming term expirations are reviewed on an ongoing basis, and recommendations are made to the Governor's office to fill vacancies according to the categories needed.

The appointments process has not gone smoothly for years, with 2024 having been the worst: despite having submitted 11 complete application packets for people with disabilities and 2 complete packets for business/industry reps, 0 appointments were made. Additionally, despite sending 7 updated application packets for members seeking reappointment, 0 re-appointments were made by the Governor.

Despite this on-going lack of timely appointments and re-appointments, the SRC remained compliant with its requirements under Section 105 in the law, in large part because the members awaiting reappointment have been "grandfathered" and

graciously continue to serve. At least half (55%) of the SRC membership is still comprised of persons with disabilities or their family members (who are not employed by the DVRS), and a wide range of disability representation/lived experience is reflected in council membership.

Despite how long it takes at the Governor's office, the appointment application process itself is straightforward: persons interested in becoming a member of the SRC should reach out to the Chair or any other member. An application (from the state) will be supplied to the interested candidate along with a request for a letter or email stating a desire to join and reason for wishing to do so, as well as a resume. These items comprise the "application packet" and are forwarded to the Governor's office for consideration. Progress is tracked by the SRC until the Governor's office makes its determination and communicates with the applicant by traditional mail.

Officer Elections

Officers are elected bi-annually for a two-year term. The following officers were elected in June 2022: **Margaret Gilbride, Chair**; Gary Altman, Vice-Chair and Wayne Roorda, Treasurer. Because Wayne Roorda left the council when his appointment expired in October 2023, **Nantanee Koppstein was elected Treasurer** in August 2023. Because Gary Altman retired December 2023, and resigned from the council at that time, **Carmela Slivinski was elected Vice Chair** on May 15, 2024.

Rebecca Shulman, Past Chair, continued to serve on the executive committee.

Though the Chair's two-year term expired June 2024, she agreed to extend her service in that role to 2025 to allow the new Vice Chair time to orient. The treasurer's first term goes through June 2025 so election for both those positions will be held this year.

Committees

The SRC Chair, in conjunction with the Executive Committee, appoints committees annually to meet federally mandated activities and SRC priority areas. Each SRC member is expected to participate on a committee, and, per the by-law's revision of 2023, community participants (non-SRC appointees) are welcome to be active committee members. At the annual planning meeting (held August 2024 for this year), DVRS leadership was asked if the current committee structure met their needs; no

changes were requested. Each SRC committee is supported by DVRS through the active participation of at least one staff member. Standing committees are:

Executive Committee– Comprised of the SRC Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer, the DVRS Director, and Immediate Past Chair (ex-officio).

Evaluation and Consumer Satisfaction Committee – Activities include, but are not limited to, program evaluation activities and consumer satisfaction surveys, analyses, and data-based policy/program recommendations.

Legislative and Policy Committee – Activities include, but are not limited to, advocacy and education, policy and state plan review, administrative code review, the statewide comprehensive needs assessment, and monitoring/reacting to pending and current legislation, particularly with respect to impact on funding.

Transition from School to Work Committee – Responsible for initiatives related to providing pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS), transition services, and services to youth with disabilities as outlined in WIOA.

Ad Hoc Committees, Task Forces, and Study Groups – Are created on an as needed basis by the SRC Chair. Non-Council members may serve on these groups, but the Chair of the group must be an SRC member. Ad Hoc Committees include:

By-Laws Review Committee – Is appointed by the SRC Chair to review and make recommendations to the full Council for needed revision.

Membership Committee – Is charged with developing plans to bring membership into compliance with RSA mandates.

Resource Plan

The following DVRS staff provides support, attends, and participates in the activities of the Rehabilitation Council:

- DVRS Director attends all meetings and provides staff support to the executive committee

- Assistant Directors provide staff support to the legislative/policy and transition services committees
- DVRS staff participate on the evaluation and consumer satisfaction committee
- DVRS staff at the direction of the director provide logistical support for meetings, prepare folders for all available handouts, and perform varied duties necessary for for SRC meetings and public forums
- Other DVRS staff members are assigned as needed to support the SRC and to share as appropriate according to their area of expertise.

For the period of 10/1/23 – 9/30/24, a \$46,500 budget was established for SRC operating expenses. The budget covered: quarterly and special meeting costs, the annual planning day, member expenses to attend and participate in meetings and training, accommodations at national council meetings, Survey Monkey account for customer satisfaction surveys, ASL interpreters and CART service providers, printing and other outreach costs, fiscal agent budget administration and other expenses required to support council activities. The annual budget for 2025 was presented and approved by vote at the September 2024 meeting.



Meetings, Trainings and Forums

The council promotes inclusion at all sponsored meetings for members and other participants by providing, as needed, personal care attendant services, transportation services, ASL interpreter services and computer assisted real-time transcription (CART) and assistive listening devices. A Zoom link is made available to accommodate persons who have difficulty traveling, or who reside in rural or remote areas. In addition, all documents reviewed during an SRC meeting are received electronically, before or after the meeting, as appropriate.

Regular New Jersey SRC Meetings

The SRC conducts quarterly meetings. Meetings days were November 1, 2023, February 14, 2024, May 15, 2024, and September 18, 2024. The annual planning meeting for 2025 was August 14, 2024. All meetings were held from 9:30am-3:00 pm. Full council business was conducted in the morning, following any public comments, and at the end of the day following committee reports. Committees met and did their work during lunch and through early afternoon. Additionally, committees met virtually between the quarterly meetings as needed.

All regular meetings were hybrid (in-person and virtual via Zoom) and open to the public and interested stakeholders. Meeting dates and times were broadly advertised, including through flyers, stakeholder social media avenues, and web posting. Members of the public were also welcome to join and participate in one of the standing committees. The August planning meeting was closed, in-person, and comprised of SRC members and DVRS leadership only.

The meeting dates selected for 2025 are: November 13, February 12th, May 14th, and September 17th. To accommodate members who are PWD or parents of PWD, 2025 meetings will be held from 10:00am-3:30pm at the New Jersey Law Center at One Constitution Square, New Brunswick. The virtual option will only be available for the SRC business parts of the meeting and not for the committee meetings as logistically it did not work well this past year. The planning meeting for 2026 will be August 13th and again be closed, in-person, and comprised of SRC members and DVRS leadership only.

SRC Members participate in the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) and the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) and two members again represented New Jersey at the spring and fall CSAVR national meetings. Those representatives attend the two-day track devoted to SRC leadership that is offered prior to the general CSAVR meeting and report to the whole council on the current, critical information gained.

It should be noted that the two NJSRC members who attend the national meetings are also active members of the NCSRC Board and assist with training sessions at the spring and fall meetings including how to best on-board new SRC members. They regularly update the Power Points, scripts and accompany handouts for state use.

2024 Public Forums

Three public forums were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform. An evening forum was added this year and three separate days of the week, three different weeks, in hope of increasing attendance and participation on the part of PWD and advocates. The forums were held Tuesday April 30th 6:30-7:30 pm, Wednesday May 1st 3:00-4:00pm, and Monday May 9 10:00-1:00am.

Advertisement of the forums was wide-spread through DVRS and SRC website and email distribution lists as well as email lists and social media of such partners as NJAPSE, SILCs, DRNJ, SPAN, NJCDD, NJDOE-OSE projects, vendors, etc. An explanatory flyer was designed and distributed through these media inviting the public to share comments, concerns, reflections on DVRS lived experience (positive or negative) about which they wanted the SRC and DVRS leadership to know.

At each forum Margaret Gilbride, SRC Chair provided introductory remarks, shared write-in comments received before-hand and invited the public to speak. Her email address was shared several times in the chat function of the Zoom platform and the public was invited to send comments after each forum as well.

Based on a decision made at the annual planning event for 2024, and reaffirmed prior to advertising the forums, there was no primary topic about which the SRC was soliciting feedback this year. There were also no “guiding questions” provided ahead of time for people to rely on in formulating comments. This was a conscious decision made in hope of not limiting the feedback the public would feel invited to share; but in

hindsight it was agreed the lack of specificity/guidance had the opposite result of that which was intended. Instead of freeing people, it appears to have stifled them, and spoken remarks received were fewer than in past years. Comments from the sessions to take under consideration in planning 2025 included:

- Requests DVRS schedule, broadly advertise, and host multiple information sessions for members of the public to provide information on DVRS services (including information on post-secondary educational services) as people expressed need for the information and opportunity to ask questions.
- Observations about the barriers Social Security issues present that are “bigger than” needing to know about the student exclusion and the answer to “how do I keep my benefits.” The complexity of maintaining records and communications with SSA is a HUGE parental burden and detriment to disability employment.
- Concerns people in some parts of the state are still being told “you can’t get DVR services until you are older”
- NJAPSE requested/recommended DVRS training on pre-ETS.
- Disconnections between DVRS and schools; schools and DVRS; DVRS and providers.
- DVRCs need to effectively communicate that pre-ETS services can be provided to students without SS#
- Issues with timeliness of contract payments
- Difficulties of navigating the DVRS website

Dates	Venue	Attendance (Total)	Interpreters Provided	#SRC/DVR Attendees	Written Testimony Provided
April 30 6:30pm	ZOOM	101	Yes, and CART	15	Yes
May 1 3:00pm	ZOOM	71	Yes, and CART	23	Yes
May 9 10:00am	ZOOM	139	Yes, and CART	48	Yes

The SRC, in its analysis of the forums determined, that the following “worked” and “did not work” in 2024:

WORKED	DID NOT WORK
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising more (the Flyer!) • The good amount of advanced notice • The evening timeslot • Having the ASL Interpreter and CART • Virtual format • Attempts to make the participants comfortable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of public comments • Our attempts to clarify the “this is a public forum” language-many still expected a presentation • The wording on the DOL/DVRS website about the forum (new language was only on the registration page) • The lack of target questions or a topic the SRC is specifically soliciting input regarding • Not having either a session for Spanish speakers or CC/CART that is multilingual

Based on this analysis, The SRC and DVRS leadership will work to ensure the planning, advertising and facilitation of the 2025 public forums keep those dimensions that worked well in 2024 and improves upon as many that did not work well as feasible through elimination, adaptation or addition of elements this year.

Activities and Accomplishments

Eligible Consumers Served in 2024

In FFY’ 2024, DVRS served all categories of eligible consumers. The agency currently has the financial resources to serve all categories; DVRS continues to monitor the continuing realignment of federal funds emphasizing Pre-Employment Transition Services for students and youth.

Successful Employment Outcomes

In FFY’24, there were 1,857 Rehabilitation closures, compared to 1,838 Rehabilitation closures in FFY’23, and 2,335 Rehabilitation closures in FFY’22. In FFY’24, the percentage of Rehabilitation closures relative to all closures was 31.89%, which is a

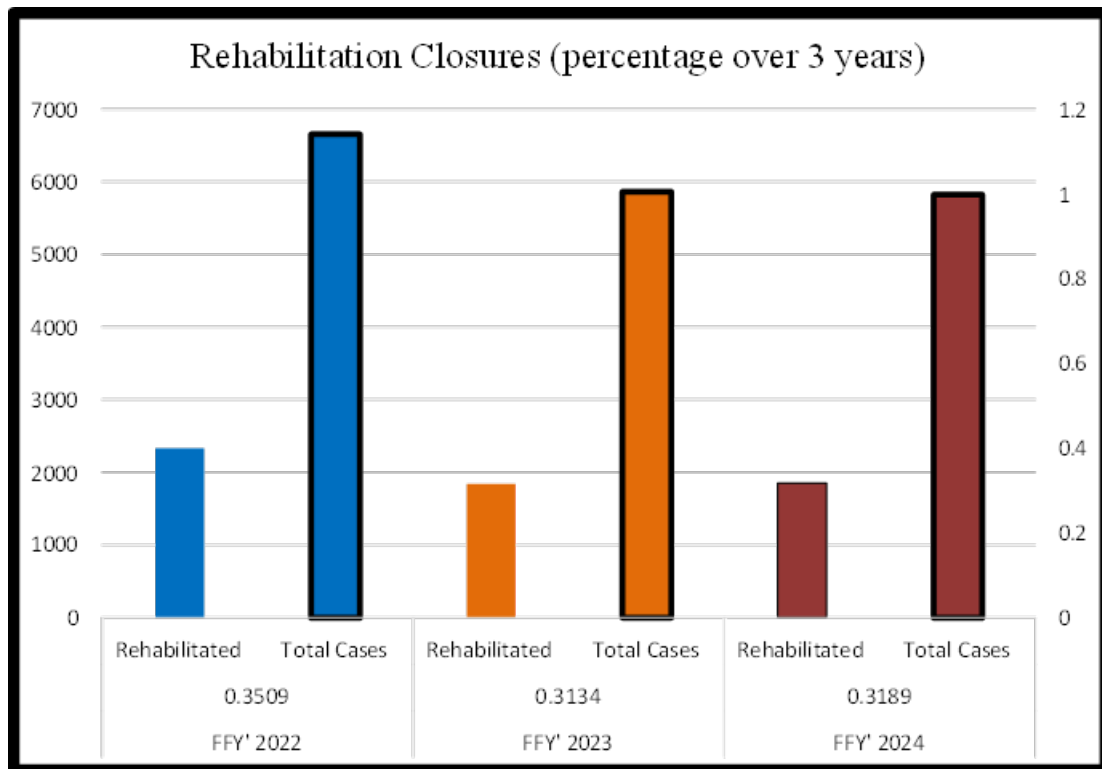
slight increase when compared to the FFY'23 results of 31.35%, In FFY'22 the percentage was 35.09%.

FFY24 DVRS REFERRALS

DVRS closed 6,655 cases in FY'22, in FFY'23 DVRS closed 5,865 cases, and in FFY' 2024, there were 5,824 closed cases.

Rehabilitated Closures/Total Cases

FFY' 2022		FFY' 2023		FFY' 2024	
38.09%		31.34%		31.89%	
Rehabilitated	Total Cases	Rehabilitated	Total Cases	Rehabilitated	Total Cases
2,135	6,655	1,838	5,865	1,857	5,824



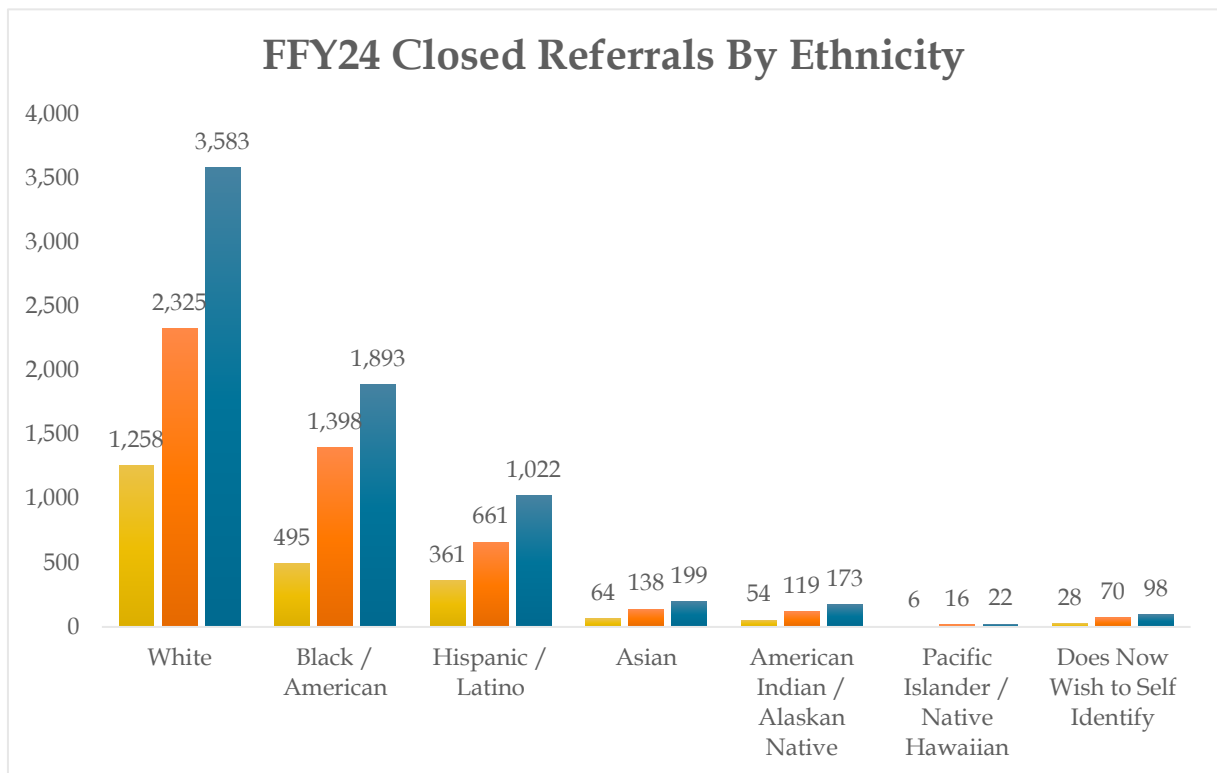
FFY'24 Minority Closures/Rehabilitation Closures - Minority Identification

There were 5824** closed cases in FFY'24. DVRS served all these individuals and closed their cases for other reasons or as successful rehabilitations. The table in the next page summarizes FFY 2024 outcomes by total cases and identifier group.

****Please note. Consumers can choose 2 or more minority identifiers on their applications or wish to not identify.**

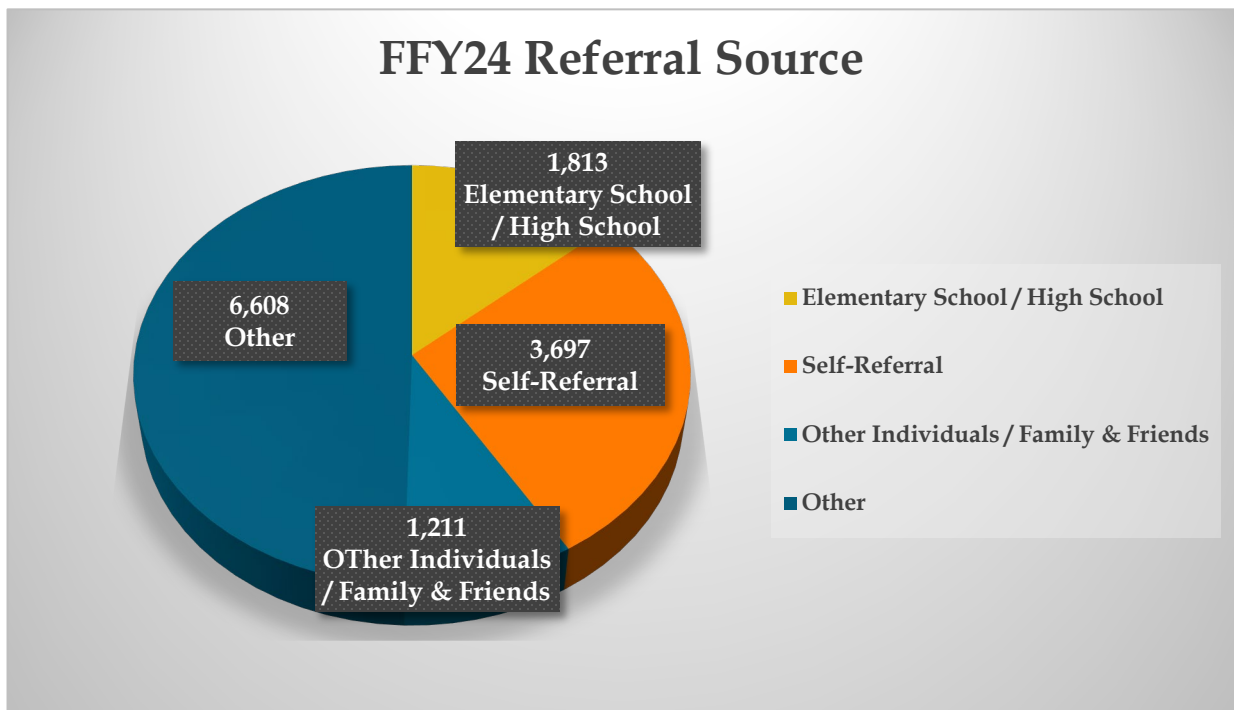
FFY'24 Total Closures vs. Rehab Closures, Identifier Group

FFY24 CLOSED REFERRALS BY ETHNICITY			
Ethnicity	# Closed Rehab	# Closed Other	# Total Closed
White	1,258	2,325	3,583
Black / American	495	1,398	1,893
Hispanic / Latino	361	661	1,022
Asian	64	138	199
American Indian / Alaskan Native	54	119	173
Pacific Islander / Native Hawaiian	6	16	22
Does Now Wish to Self-Identify	28	70	98
TOTALS	2,266	4,724	6,990

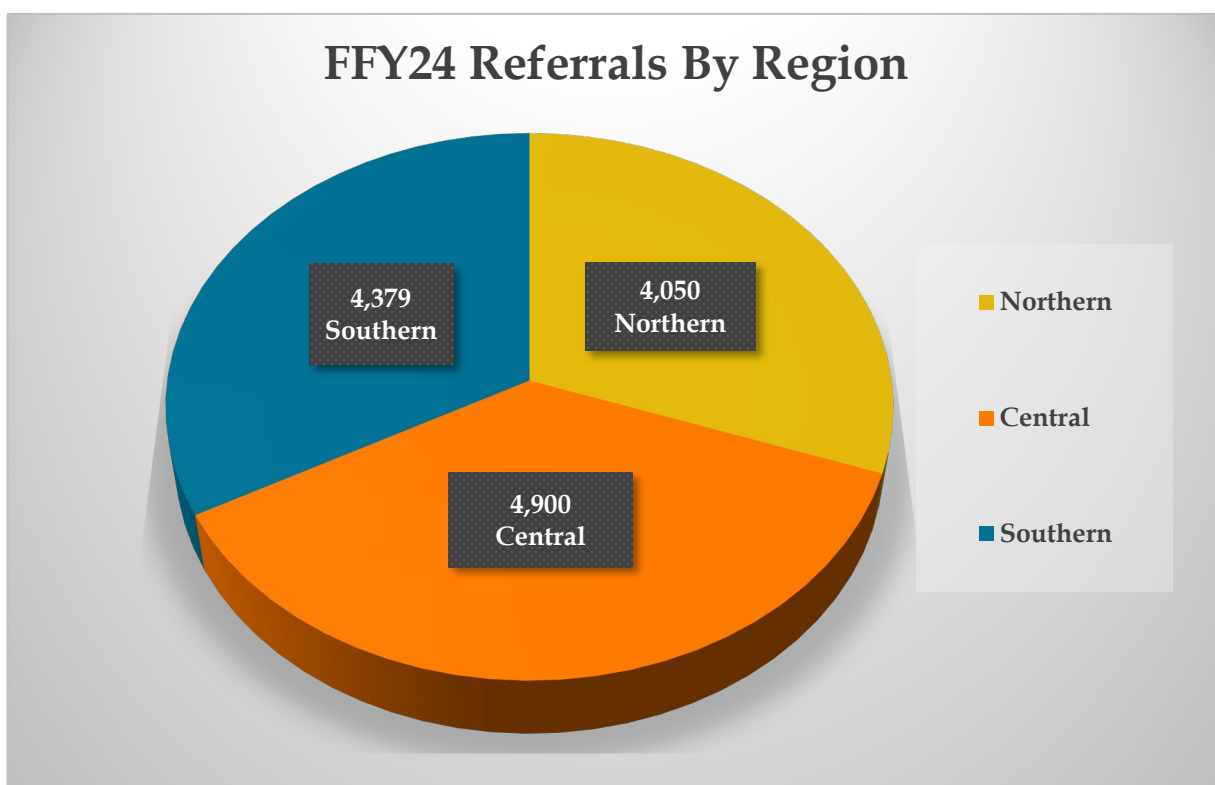


DVRS received a total of 13,329 Referrals during FFY'24. The following referrals sources were the highest: Self Referrals, Elementary/High School, Other Individuals and Other. Some of the "Other" referral sources include CRP's, medical professionals, One-Stop Career Centers, Social Security Administration, employers, family and friends, welfare, etc.

FFY24 REFERRAL SOURCE	
Referral Source	# of Referrals
Elementary School / High School	1,813
Self-Referral	3,697
Other Individuals / Family & Friends	1,211
Other	6,608
OTAL	13,329



FFY24 REFERRALS BY REGION			
Northern	Central	Southern	TOTAL
4,050	4,900	4,379	13,329



WIOA and DOL/SETC (State Employment Training Commission) Combined State Plan

Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. WIOA was created to provide state and local areas the flexibility to collaborate across systems to better address the employment and skills needs of current employees, jobseekers, and employers. WIOA requires a single, unified state plan that includes all the core programs under it. It established core measures for all four titles that are designed to measure the effectiveness and continuous improvement of the One-Stop and Youth service delivery systems.

Title IV of WIOA included many key changes for the vocational rehabilitation program to include an enhanced focus on Employer engagement. WIOA identified that businesses and employers that hire individuals with disabilities are a dual customer of the public VR program. To meet the needs of the business community in New Jersey, DVRS continues to operate a Business Outreach Team (BOT). The BOT has program planning development specialists who are assigned regionally. These BOT staff work with employers and the local DVRS offices to identify competitive integrated employment and career exploration opportunities for DVRS consumers.

The Act also included an emphasis for services to students with disabilities. Pre-employment transition services are a requirement in the Act, and DVRS has 20 dedicated counselors who continue to take on the role of providing pre-employment transition services throughout the New Jersey. Since FFY2017 DVRS has continued to provide pre-employment transition services through a fee-for-service model as well as contracts for paid internship programs. The number of Pre-employment providers have also increased over this past year for both fee for service and contracted services.

The WIOA amendments added section 511 to the Act that pertains to individuals working under a special wage certificate issued to an employer under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) that authorizes payment of subminimum wages under certain conditions. Section 511 applies to all entities holding a certificate under section 14(c) and employ individuals with disabilities at a subminimum wage.

To meet the requirements under section 511, DVRS needed to re-develop a strategy to work with the providers who employ individuals with disabilities in subminimum wages who are known to the division. DVRS Counselors from local offices continue to provide career counseling services to individuals in all the extended employment facilities funded

by DOL and provide counseling services to for consumers served by other extended employment programs as requested.

Benefits Counseling

DVRS currently has a state-wide benefits counseling program. Through a collaborative effort with the Social Security Administration, Virginia Commonwealth University, and Maximus, DVRS implemented a fee for service model to address consumer needs in New Jersey.

Services are currently provided by ten DVRS vendors whose staff have been deemed as certified benefits counselors. This service is provided in a range of service delivery that included basic benefits counseling and more comprehensive services that can be delivered over a period throughout the consumer's case with DVRS. Services are available for youth receiving pre-ETS services as well as for consumers receiving vocational rehabilitation services through DVRS. This program was developed to alleviate the fears that can be associated with the loss of health benefits when obtaining employment.

Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)

The implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in 2014, as amended by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, made significant changes to the DVRS responsibility for transition services. Specifically, the law requires that the public (Vocational Rehabilitation) VR program provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS) to all students with disabilities. DVRS identified strategies to ensure that all transition students with disabilities can receive these services. DVRS has allowed for students seeking Pre-Employment Transition Services to obtain these services without undue delay by allowing an "expedited" method of service delivery for Pre-Employment Transition Services. DVRS awarded 20 contracts to vendors to provide pre-ETS paid internships under work-based learning experiences. In addition, there are 40 Fee for Service vendors who provide pre-ETS covering all counties. Pre-Employment Transition Services offer students with disabilities an early start at career exploration and preparation for adult life. Beginning at age 14, students with disabilities can connect with DVRS for pre-ETS. DVRS works with students, their families, their schools, and community partners to enrich transition planning and support students with gaining knowledge and experiences necessary so they may make informed decisions about their future. Topics covered through pre-ETS include career exploration; work-based learning experiences;

exploration of education and training programs for after high school; workplace readiness training to develop social and independent living skills; and self-advocacy.

DVRS provided another year of paid internship experience, to in-school youth. DVRS awarded 20 vendors contracts for a three-year period to provide Pre-ETS Paid Internship, serving all 21 counties statewide.

DVRS has dedicated Pre-Employment Transition Counselors in each of the 18 DVRS Offices. Counselors have spearheaded outreach presenting at events, to other state agencies and organizations. Counselors collaborate at a local level with the NJ Department of Education, Office of Special Education, at Transition Coordinator Network meetings, Community of Practices, and other conferences.

DVRS Counselors work alongside state education representatives to initiate and organize the most appropriate services for students with disabilities in order that the students' transition from secondary to post-secondary life is centered around choice and the ability to engage in meaningful competitive-integrated employment.

WIOA requires state Vocational Rehabilitation Agencies and state education agency to enter into a formal interagency agreement to facilitate and coordinate services needed by students with disabilities to successfully transition to employment or other post-secondary activities leading to employment. These services include Pre-Employment Transition Services, Vocational Rehabilitation Services (VR), and VR Transition Services. The Interagency Agreement is between the Department of Education and the State's two Vocational Rehabilitation agencies, Division of Vocational and Rehabilitation Services and Commission for Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI).

Out of School Youth Employment Services (OYES)

Out of School Youth Employment Services are youth services to assist 16 to 24-year old's who are out-of-school and at-risk. OYES recognizes that, when a youth or young adult is both not in school and not employed, a dangerous disconnection can develop. These services focus on ensuring out-of-school youth get back on the path to self-sufficiency, the development of job skills and career pathway planning. Topics covered through OYES include career exploration; work-based learning experiences; exploration of education and training programs for after high school; workplace readiness training to develop social and independent living skills; and self-advocacy. There are currently 21 vendors providing OYES and ongoing vetting of additional vendors.

Master's Degree Programs Collaborate with the DVRS

The School of Health-Related Professions at Rutgers University has a master's degree program in Rehabilitation Counseling, and DVRS reports the following collaborative activities:

- The DVRS regularly provides practicum and internship placements in our local offices. DVRS, in accordance with the guidance of the SRC, has recently (Fall of 2024) initiated a paid internship program (as a paid DVRS temporary employee) for interested Rutgers's students during their practicum/internship periods. The SRC and DVRS view this program as a pipeline for employment for the graduates of this program.
- The DVRS and the SRC members have provided letters of support for grant applications for rehabilitation education program students at both the graduate and undergraduate level. The school has an excellent record for receiving these grants.
- The DVRS staff and the SRC members provide classroom lectures, mentor students, assist with case conferences and provide knowledge of current practices in the field.
- The SRC members take part in focus group activities of this program that helps forge new initiatives for the program. Several members of the SRC are active members of the Rutgers University, School of Health-Related Professions Rehabilitation Counseling Program Advisory Council.

Staff Development and Training

Although DVRS no longer has specific training funding dollars, staff continues to pursue professional development and CRC credits. Staff attended virtual rehabilitation specific presentations, virtual conferences, trainings, and webinars. Training provided to staff included:

- Outreach: Wednesday, 04/17/2024 from 10am – 12pm EST and repeating the same session on Thursday, 04/25/2024 from 1pm – 3pm EST.
- African American Outreach: Thursday, 04/18/2024 from 1pm – 3pm EST and repeating the same session on Wednesday, 04/24/2024 from 10am – 12pm EST
- San Diego State University (SDSU) Interwork Institute- Rapid Engagement training, June 2024. VRTAC-QM Rapid Engagement three sessions, one for the managers and supervisors, one of counselors with repeat sessions in May and June, 2024.
- George Washington University customized training for counselors (website access- indefinite period)
- Multiple trainings from the DVRS Community Rehabilitation Program unit on Competitive Integrated Employment
- Facing the Future Conferences for counselors in October of 2024
- GSETA; Garden State Employment and Training Conference in October of 2024
- Other mandatory training provided by Civil Services and DOL. e.g. AI training, ethical training, cyber security etc.
- Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM) provided comprehensive Vocational Rehabilitation Training Modules for all the new counselors (mandatory) and counselors (optional) in September and October 2024.
- Staff were also trained for various leadership and career advancement programs including trainings such as: Supervisory Training Empowering Performance (STEP)

for supervisors, Certified Public Manager (CPM) for managers, Certified Rehabilitation Leaders Cohort 2 and other college credits through NJDOL tuition reimbursements program.

DVRS has utilized the training and consultation provided by the RSA (Rehabilitation Services Administration) sponsored VR Technical Assistance Centers to include:

- National Technical Assistance Center on Transition (NTACT), (DVRS works collaboratively with CBVI and the New Jersey Department of Education on the development and implementation of transition services and implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding.)
- The Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE)- DVRS staff have participated in training modules offered by the VRTAC-QE as well as receiving targeted technical assistance.
- DVRS staff are also involved the Technical Assistant Center's community of practices for supported employment and quality assurance.

New Jersey Project SEARCH

The Project SEARCH High School Transition Program is a unique, business led, one-year school-to-work program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Total workplace immersion facilitates a seamless combination of classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training through worksite rotations.

Program Philosophy

"People with disabilities have the right to choose a path toward education and employment. However, while freedom of choice is given, the right to work is earned. Earning the right to work is dependent upon the student's preparation."

~Stephen Simon, ADA Quarterly, Fall 1998

Brief History – Project SEARCH

This program began in 1996 at Cincinnati, Ohio Children's Hospital developed to:

- Meet entry level employment needs at CCHMC,
- Support a Diversity Hiring Initiative, and
- Partner with schools and community services agencies

Project SEARCH has grown from one original program site at Cincinnati Children's Hospital to **783 Programs, 48 USA States, 10 Countries, and 48,458 individuals served.**

Key Points – Project SEARCH

- The High School Transition Program is a one-year internship program for students with disabilities, in their last year of high school.
- It is targeted for students whose goal is competitive employment.
- The program takes place in a healthcare, government, or business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates the teaching and learning process as well as the acquisition of employability and marketable work skills.
- Students participate in three internships to explore a variety of career paths.
- The students work with a team that includes their family, a special education teacher and Rehabilitation Services Administration to create an employment goal and support the student during this important transition from school to work.

Project SEARCH - Partners

- Education: Local School District, Career Technical School, Educational Service Center, Several School Districts, etc.
- NJ Vocational Rehabilitation.
- Community Rehabilitation Partner (provider of job coaching and job development).
- Developmental Disabilities Agency or Mental Health Provider (for follow along services).
- Host Program – Business or Hospital.
- NJ Travel Independence Program (NJTIP) – Travel Training.
- Other Partners as recommended by the Steering Committee

New Jersey Project SEARCH – Overview

There are Fifteen (15) ongoing Project SEARCH Programs in different areas of New Jersey

- Overlook (Atlantic Health System) Medical Center Project SEARCH (**High School Program**) - Summit, Union County – **2016**
- Holy Name Medical Center Project SEARCH (**High School Program**) - Teaneck, Bergen County – **2016**.
- New Bridge Medical Center Project SEARCH, Paramus – Bergen County (**Fall, 2021**)
- Jefferson Health Project SEARCH (**High School Program**) – Cherry Hill, Camden County – **2016**.
- Jefferson Health Project SEARCH – Stratford, Camden County (**Fall, 2021**)
- TD Bank Project SEARCH (**High School Program**) – Mount Laurel, Burlington County – **2017**.
- Jersey City Medical Center Project SEARCH (**High School Program**) – Jersey City, Hudson County - **2018**
- Hudson County Project SEARCH (**Adult Program**) Jersey City - **2020**

- Hudson County Community College, North Campus in Union City (18-21 Young Adults Ineligible for DDD due to age requirement) - **2022**
- Newton Medical Center Project SEARCH (**Hybrid/Blended Program**) Newton, Sussex County – **2019**.
- Monmouth Medical Center Project SEARCH (**Hybrid/Blended Program**) Long Branch, Monmouth County – **2019**.
- Jefferson Washington Township Hospital Project SEARCH, Washington Township, Gloucester County - **Fall, 2022**.
- Hackettstown Medical Center Project SEARCH, Warren County **2023**
- Novo Nordisk Project SEARCH, Mercer County - **2024**
- Community Medical Center Project SEARCH, Ocean County - **2024**

Potential Project SEARCH 2024- Anticipated sites for 2025

- Somerset County Project SEARCH
- Atlantic County Project SEARCH
- Essex County Project SEARCH

The goal is to have the unique Project SEARCH program in all the twenty-one (21) counties in the State of New Jersey. Currently, there are Project SEARCH programs in eleven (11) counties.

Project SEARCH National Awards:

NJ DVRS sent Project SEARCH State Liaison Solo Okonkwo to the 2024 Project SEARCH National Conference in Albuquerque New Mexico. The conference was a great opportunity for NJ Project SEARCH to network and continue to develop the program with other programs across the country and across the globe.

2024 Project SEARCH Employment Outcomes Awards:

100% Outcomes Award:

- Holy Name Medical Center PS
- Overlook Medical Center PS

Excellent Outcomes Award

- Jersey City Medical Center PS
- Newton Medical Center PS

New Jersey Project SEARCH by the numbers

- Average graduate wages: \$16.56
- Average hours per week: 21.26

- Industry placements: Retail, Childcare, Courier/Deli/very, Food Service, Grounds Crew, Patient Care/Transport, Reception, Materials Management, Financial Industry, etc. DVRS continues to explore ways to expand Project SEARCH through innovative funding avenues.

Benefits to the Students:

- Gain increased independence, confidence, and self-esteem.
- Obtain work based individualized coaching, instruction, and feedback.
- Develop linkages to Vocational Rehabilitation and other adult service agencies.
- Participate in a variety of internships within the host hospital/business.
- Acquire competitive, transferable, and marketable job skills.

Benefits to the Business:

- Access to a new, diverse, talent stream with skills that match labor needs.
- Experience increased regional and national recognition through marketing of this unique program.
- Access to a demographic of the economy with intense buying power: people with disabilities represent one of the fastest growing market segments in the United States.
- Gain interns/employees with disabilities who serve as a role model for customers.
- Performance and retention in some high-turnover, entry-level positions increase dramatically.

Comments

“Project SEARCH breaks down stereotypes by increasing the public’s expectations about people with significant disabilities. The Project SEARCH Program provides young people with significant disabilities the opportunity to contribute to their communities and to society at large by providing the necessary supports to work and receive minimum or prevailing wage. We are proud here at DOL to be the first Federal agency to embrace this program. We will hire several Project SEARCH graduates at above minimum wage.”

-Kathleen Martinez, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP), Department of Labor, Washington, DC.

The New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) has maintained exceptional Leadership in the stability of Project SEARCH Programs. Two Program Planning Development Specialists are assigned as NJ State Project SEARCH Liaisons.

Business Outreach Team (BOT)- Employer Engagement

Members of the BOT continue to support DVRS local offices through facilitation of employment outcomes including competitive integrated employment, internships, and positions funded with on-the-job training contracts. The BOT unit also shares labor market information, resources and relevant job leads with DVRS field staff.

In FY 2024, the BOT engaged with the following businesses from various industry sectors and offered a variety of services:

22nd Century Technologies, ABCO Credit Union – Willingboro Customer Service Center, ACE Plumbing, All Staffing Warehousing, Allied Universal, Amazon NJ Southern Node, American Dream, American Water, A-Plus-Consulting, A-Plus Apprentice and A-Plus Naturals, Aramark, Aspire Bakeries, Associated Fire Protection, AT&T, Atha Recruitment Best Works, Bethel Industries, BrightView Landscaping, Carrier Clinic, Citizens Bank, Clean Harbors, CLF Property Management, Collands Contracting Group, Community Food Bank of NJ, Cooper Hospital, County Welding Supply, Cowley Pest Field, Crum & Forster, Cutting Edge Textiles, Eastern Solar Glass, Echtman and Etkind, Eisai Pharmaceutical, Estes Express Lines, Fed Ex, Friendly Connections, Greenman-Pedersen, HMFA, NJ Housing & Mortgage Finance Agency, IRS, Johnson and Johnson, Kearfott Corporation, Kearny Bank, Kessler Foundation, Kumar Organic, Liscio's Bakery, Magyar Bank, METALUS Group, Navient, NJ Department of Corrections, NJ Transit, NJEDA, Novo Nordisk, Omnium Circus, On Point Staffing, Optum, Pennsauken Food Bank, PNC Bank, Port Authority, Primo Water, Prutech, PSEG, Raising Cane's, Raritan Valley YMCA, Safe & Secure Transportation, LLC, SAS, Sayreville Borough, Sodexo, South Jersey Bakery, Springpoint Senior Living, SSA, St. Peter's University Hospital, Stryker, Sunrise Systems Inc., Sussex Rural Electric Cooperative, TD Bank HR, TerrAscend, Trinity Solar, US MINT, US Tech Solutions, V R Manjunathan, Vertical Screen, Wakefern ShopRite , Wegmans, Where Trades Go, and Whippany Actuation Systems LLC

Events & Special Projects

The Business Outreach Team once again partnered with the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) to sponsor the third annual Targeted Hiring Event for individuals with disabilities and veterans with service-connected disabilities on June 12th, 2024. This year, the event was in person with onsite interviews and information sessions. Members of the BOT also collaborated with OFCCP on three mega projects that are set to begin: Penn Station Access, Hudson Tunnel Project, and Route 7 Drainage. The team will continue to work with OFCCP and the unions hiring for these projects.

Other activities throughout the year:

Three BOT consultants served as contract managers for the five Employment First Innovation and Expansion Grants, marketing these services to the field and sharing job leads with the contract staff. Members of the BOT conducted Competitive Integrated Employment evaluations for job postings at Inspired Threads and Popcorn for the People.

Employer incentives were leveraged to improve employment outcomes, including a Paid Internship with the Haddonfield United Methodist Church and an On the Job Training (OJT) contract for a welding position at Omega. Targeted hiring events included the Arc of Atlantic County, OFCCP, and Justice Impacted Job Fairs in Camden, Cape May and Mercer Counties. The team regularly attended Project SEARCH Steering committees and Business Advisory Council meetings throughout the state.

The BOT team attended the Employment Symposium in October of 2024. This symposium was held in Albany, New York this year.

BOT 2024 Presentations

BOT consultant Marc Schweitzer appeared as a guest lecturer for Dr. Brittany Stone, Rutgers Rehabilitation Counseling program. The class was Career Counseling and Consultation, one of the core courses in the Rehabilitation Counseling, Clinical Mental Health Counseling program.

Other Disability Etiquette Presentations included: NJDOL DEI Employee Resource Group, Council for Airport Opportunity, Hudson County Project Search job fair, Pennsauken Food Bank, NAIP & Apprenticeship Committee (for employers interested in obtaining Apprenticeship grants and collaborating with DVR to obtain talent).

BOT Success Story

The Sayreville Borough Police Department hired a Deaf job seeker from the New Brunswick area for the position of records clerk. He has made tremendous progress in gaining skills and continues to go above and beyond his duties, consistently making a positive difference in the workplace. Being the first Deaf employee of the department, this has opened doors for other job seekers with disabilities to work within the department.

Disability Employment Awareness Month (DEAM) Events:

The NJDVRS Business Outreach Team was assigned to manage Innovation and Expansion-Employment First Contracts issued by NJDVRS. The BOT Unit managed the contracts so that all counties in New Jersey could be covered. One area of focus was for the vendors who were issued contracts to conduct DEAM events. DEAM events that occurred in 2024 took place throughout the state at various venues in honor of this year's National DEAM theme "Access to Good Jobs for All". A Disability Employment Awareness Month event was held in each county in the month of October, some included combined hiring events and Job Fairs. DVRS Central Office had a statewide hybrid in person and virtual event. Presenters

at the various events included the NJDOL Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and the Assistant Commissioner of Employment Accessibility Services, local Executive Directors from the Workforce Development Board(s) and Guest speaker, Kirk Lew from the US Office of Disability Employment Policy from Washington D.C.

All five of the Innovation and Expansion Contracts recognized the contributions of an Employment Specialist from a DVRS Supported Employment vendor and recognized consumers who had overcome many obstacles and obtained and/or maintained competitive integrated employment.

The I & E Contract was reissued for the second year and will be managed by the Program Unit. Review of the contract deliverables resulted in minor adjustments to deliverables. Reporting and documentations forms were revised , Roundtable meetings with providers and all DVRS Field offices transpired to increase communication and collaboration.

Centers for Independent Living

Centers for Independent Living (CIL's) are community-based, cross-disability, non-profit organizations that are designed and operated by people with disabilities. CILs are unique in that they operate according to a strict philosophy of consumer control, wherein people with all types of disabilities directly govern and staff the organization.

The CIL centers help their clients to lead fulfilling lives, make decisions that lead to self-determination and integrate into mainstream American society.

Each of New Jersey's CIL's for Independent Living provides the following five core services:

- Individual and Systems Advocacy
- Independent Living Skills Training
- Peer Support
- Transition Services
- Information and Referral

NJDVRS continues to be the designated state entity (DSE) for the Centers for Independent Living and assigns a Planning Program Development Specialist (PPDS) as the official liaison for the program.

DVRS continues to collaborate with the CIL Centers to increase their ability to provide services under a fee-for-service opportunity. DVRS also worked with the CIL Centers to develop opportunities for pre-ETS services.

The CIL Centers and DVRS have worked collaboratively and partners in the following:

- Interested CIL's Centers were awarded pre-ETS Contracts to address issues in underserved schools.
- Providing Technical Assistance to CIL's Centers in operational advancement and self-sustaining of their programs.
- Conducted and completed Center for Independent Living of South Jersey audit.
- Worked in completing the annual performance report for CILs (704 report).
- Participated in drafting Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) Policy Manual.
- DVRS presence and active participation in the SILC Monthly Meeting.
- Will continue to monitor SPIL (State Plan for Independent Living)

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services

Regional Career Centers for Individuals who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

DVRS funds three Regional Career Centers who serve individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, late deafened, or have cochlear implants. The purpose of the Regional Career Centers (RCC) for Individuals who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing contract is to provide comprehensive vocational rehabilitation services to consumers of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS). Each center offers a variety of services which are listed below:

- Vocational Assessments to identify career options and goals based on the consumer's interests, capabilities, and abilities as well as the job market trends.
- Job Readiness Services to prepare the consumers for employment by providing such things as resume assistance, mock job interviews as well as training in self-advocacy, communication needs and work-place general rules and culture.
- Job Placement Assistance that will offer help in finding job openings and securing job placement.
- Job Coaching Assistance that will offer training on the job.
- Assistive Technology Center houses various assistive technology devices for individuals with hearing loss on display and to be demonstrated by staff. This will provide awareness that may benefit the individual in the workplace.
- Pre-Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS) provides students aged 14-21 with five services in the areas of job exploration, post-secondary guidance and counseling, self-advocacy training, work readiness skills, and work-based learning experiences.

Out of School Youth Employment Services (OSYES) provides youth 16-24 who are not in school and not employed with job exploration, post-secondary guidance and counseling, self-advocacy training, work readiness skills, and work-based learning experiences.

- Two new services have been added to the Regional Career Center (RCC) for Individuals who are Hard of Hearing contract.
 - American Sign Language Instruction for DVRS consumers from other countries who need to learn ASL and for those who are oral and believe they could benefit from learning sign language to support their communication.
 - Driver Education Support assists participants prepare for the Knowledge/written portion of the MVC test, provide interpreting services for a private driving school training and offer Behind the Wheel (BTW) instruction through a driving school.

All services in 2024 were provided statewide. Each RCC covers 7 counties and is operated by Easterseals NJ's Career Pathway Connections.

- North RCC is located in Maplewood, NJ
- Central RCC is located in East Brunswick, NJ
- South RCC is located in Woodbury, NJ

All staff are knowledgeable as to the needs of people who are Deaf and hard of hearing and are fluent in American Sign Language (ASL).

American Sign Language Supported Employment Skills Building Group

DVRS introduced a new American Sign Language (ASL) Supported Employment Skills Building Group in FFY'21.

This group, led by Tanya Onsongo, the NJ DVRS State Coordinator for the Deaf (SCD), was established in March 2021. The purpose of this capacity group is to provide all NJ DVRS approved ASL Employment Specialists from various CRP agencies, the opportunity to learn, share ideas, and support one another. The SCD coordinates presenters to provide relevant information. In addition, the group discovers common challenges and needs of DVRS deaf and hard of hearing consumers and discusses ways to resolve them.

National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes (NDC)

Engage for Change| New Jersey State Team

The National Deaf Center seeks to engage with stakeholders to create change at multiple levels of the system: local, state, and national. NDC uses different approaches at each level to engage with local communities, state leaders, and national experts. Under the guidance

and collaboration with National Deaf Center's state model, New Jersey State team, co-led by SCD Tanya Fowler and Coordinator of Deaf Education, Wendy Eufemia and the team of various stakeholders, their goal is to promote higher expectations for students in NJ who are Deaf or hard of hearing as they prepare for adult life. The team coordinated the second successful annual We Can! Career Day was held in December 2023. In 2024, the team coordinated a successful 1st in-person Pre ETS-self-advocacy day, hosted at the Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf in West Trenton, NJ on September 26th, 2024.

The NDC NJ team consists of 10 stakeholders who helped make this day a success! We had two presenters, who presented on their experiences as a deaf or hard of hearing individual and offered advice to the students. Students broke out into rotating self-advocacy discussion groups and activities led by Hudson Community Enterprises, Easterseals NJ and the Department of Human Services, NJ Division of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DDHH) and resource tables including Sorenson Relay Service, ZVRS/Purple Relay Service, New Jersey Association of the Deaf, Hearing Loss Association of America NJ Chapter, and our very own, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, staffed by Deaf Language Specialist, Arnold Peterson of Mercer County DVRS.

Approximately 82 deaf and hard of hearing students were bussed in from various schools across NJ for the event.

Significant Issues

Appointments

The DVRS and the SRC worked with the Governor's appointment office to ensure that there is a full and diverse membership on the SRC. Though the SRC submitted 11 complete application packets, there were 0 new members officially appointed to the SRC during this past year. And despite 7 members of the SRC submitting letters of intent to seek reappointment, along with their updated resumes, 0 were reappointed (including the Treasurer). One (1) person whose application has been submitted is still being vetted after 17 months. The amount of time it takes for appointments to be made is a huge issue faced by the SRC.

In addition to the 7 members whose terms already expired and are seeking reappointment, this year 12 of the 13 remaining members will have their terms expire (including the Chair and Vice Chair). It is unknown how many of these will seek reappointment. The lack of Governor appointments to the SRC is now moving to a critical level that could jeopardize the functioning of NJSRC.

Outreach

The SRC discussed the drop in traditional rehabilitation populations since the embrace of WIOA and would like to explore ways it can support DVRS in reaching non-youth-based referral sources across the state.

SRC Presence/Publicity

The DVRS website, managed through DOL, is outdated in terms of how it describes the SRC and its role. Additionally, the SRC would like to have all its minutes advertised and notes/handouts available to the public for download. The SRC would like to explore what it would take to get more flexibility for DVRS staff to upload items.

Combined State Plan Modification and Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA)

Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) amended the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. WIOA was created to provide state and local areas the flexibility to collaborate across systems to better address the employment and skills needs of current employees, jobseekers, and employers.

New Jersey's Combined State Plan provides an outline of workforce development systems efforts to help residents get into high-quality jobs and careers and assist employers to hire and retain skilled workers.

New Jersey submits a Combined State Plan every four years to the US Department of Labor and Department of Education. Updates to the plan are required after two years. The current (2024-2027) Combined State Plan encompasses the work of eight core programs:

- Adult Program
- Dislocated Worker Program
- Youth (Title I)
- Wagner-Peyser Act (Title III)
- Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II)
- **Vocational Rehabilitation (Title IV)**
- Jobs for Veterans State Grants Program
- Senior Community Service Employment Program

The New Jersey Combined State Plan establishes core measures that are designed to determine the effectiveness and continuous improvement of delivery systems. The Program sections of the plan provide an overview of priorities, the status of new initiatives, and next steps moving forward.

Vocational Rehabilitation's (VR) section to the current plan includes 13 key sections:

- A. State Rehabilitation Council (SRC)
- B. Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA)
- C. Goals, Priorities and Strategies
- D. Evaluation and Reports of Progress
- E. Supported Employment Services, Distribution of Title VI Funds and Arrangements and Cooperative Agreements for the Provision of Supported Employment Services
- F. Annual Estimates
- G. Order of Selection
- H. Waiver of State wideness
- I. Comprehensive System of Personnel Development
- J. Coordination with Education Officials
- K. Coordination with Employers
- L. Interagency Cooperation with Other Agencies
- M. Assurances

Additionally, Title IV of WIOA included key changes for the VR Program to include an enhanced focus on Employer Engagement. WIOA identifies those employers that recruit, hire, train and maintain employees with disabilities in competitive integrated employment (CIE) positions as a dual customer of the public VR Program. DVRS continues to support Employer Engagement through the Business Outreach Team (BOT). The BOT (under Field Services) is comprised of Program Planning Development Specialists (PPDS) who are assigned regionally. Business outreach staff work with employers and local DVRS offices to identify CIE and career exploration opportunities for DVRS consumers. For more information about the BOT, see the section titled Business Outreach Team (BOT) – Employer Engagement.

WIOA also included an emphasis on services to students with disabilities. Pre-Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS) are provided to students with disabilities who are eligible or potentially eligible for VR services. The intent of pre-ETS is to:

- improve the transition of students with disabilities from school to post-secondary education or to try an employment outcome
- increase opportunities for students with disabilities to practice and improve workplace readiness skills, through work-based learning experiences in a competitive, integrated work setting and
- increase opportunities for students with disabilities to explore post-secondary training options, leading to more industry recognized credentials, and meaningful post-secondary employment

DVRS has 22 dedicated counselors who coordinate and lead pre-ETS throughout the New Jersey. DVRS continues to provide pre-ETS mostly through a fee-for-service model, and

contracts for paid internship programs. Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors can also directly provide pre-ETS when appropriate.

DVRS has 42 fee-for-service pre-ETS providers and 22 contracted pre-ETS providers covering all 21 counties in the state. There are also specialty providers for the deaf and hard of hearing. DVRS collaborates with the Commission for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CBVI) to ensure that VR services are inclusive for students with all disabilities throughout the state. For more information about pre-ETS and Youth Employment services, see Sections Titled Pre-Employment Transition Services (pre-ETS) and Out of School Youth Employment Services (OSYES). The WIOA amendments added Section 511 to the Act that pertains to individuals working under a special wage certificate issued to an employer under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) that authorizes payment of subminimum wages under certain conditions. Section 511 applies to all entities holding a certificate under section 14(c) and employ individuals with disabilities at a subminimum wage.

Section 511 emphasizes that individuals with disabilities, including youth with disabilities, including those with most significant disabilities, can achieve a CIE outcome if provided the necessary supports and services.

To meet the requirements under section 511, DVRS (as a designated State unit) works closely with known employers that pay individuals with disabilities subminimum wages to satisfy certain service-related requirements for DVRS consumers to start or maintain, as applicable, subminimum wage employment. DVRS Counselors provide career counseling services to all individuals with disabilities in the extended employment facilities (funded by DOL) and provide counseling services to for consumers served by other extended employment programs as requested.

The NJ Combined State Plan was accepted in 2024.

The next Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) is scheduled for 2026, reviewing Program Years 2023-2025. The CSNA evaluates the extent to which the VR Program is meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities and needs related to establishing, developing, or improving community rehabilitation programs within the state.

The WIOA amendments added Section 511 to the Act that pertains to individuals working under a special wage certificate issued to an employer under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) that authorizes payment of subminimum wages under certain conditions. Section 511 applies to all entities holding a certificate under section 14(c) and employ individuals with disabilities at a subminimum wage.

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Conclusion

- DVRS will continue to utilize the Quality Assurance and Monitoring Unit to assist in compliance with WIOA performance metrics as well as strategic planning for the agency.
- Performance Metrics- DVRS has performed well regarding key WIOA performance metrics outlined in this report. However, there remains a need to increase all activities to pre-pandemic levels including the number of referrals made to DVRS and the number of consumers who achieve successful employment outcomes.
- Strategic Outreach- Efforts need to continue as to how to identify methods to increase referrals to local DVRS offices and provide effective outreach to the community.
- Staff succession-applications for job vacancies for key entry level and promotional opportunities need to increase to ensure adequate staffing.

Planned Activities for FY 2024

Meetings

- Continue quarterly Council meetings in a hybrid format to allow greater participation of members with disabilities and/or those for whom travel is a challenge, with a one-day annual planning summit.
- Change the meeting times to 10:00 – 3:30 to accommodate morning preparation and travel time for PWD and advocates.

- Add a second opportunity, at the end of the SRC's morning business meeting, for members of the public to comment.
- Conduct at least three virtual public forums, including an evening option, to facilitate broad participation and input from constituents statewide and request input on specific topics identified by the SRC.
- Participate in quarterly meetings with DVRS leadership, NJ Association of People Supporting Employment First (NJAPSE) leadership and ACCSESNJ leadership to collaboratively identify and problem solve challenges in community integrated employment services; and
- Keep abreast of the goals in the New Jersey combined state plan and support the outcomes identified in the comprehensive statewide needs assessment.

Committees

Transition Committee

- Work in collaboration with DVRS staff, develop a template that DVRS staff will use for documenting pre-ETS that students with disabilities will receive from DVRS and other information such as the vendor of services, duration of services, etc. and sharing this information with students, their families, vendors and school staff.
- Examine and provide feedback to DVRS on the referral processes for pre-ETS and traditional VR services to improve this experience for students, their parents, and educators so that students can receive needed services and supports from DVRS to achieve competitive integrated employment in the community;
- Examine and provide feedback to DVRS on the collaboration with partners and stakeholders, and the education and outreach efforts, to promote DVRS services for individuals ages 14 to 24 years old; and,
- Work with DVRS staff, identify and document best practices for interagency collaboration between local DVRS offices and local school districts, and promote these practices statewide.

Evaluation and Consumer Satisfaction Committee

- Review surveys in advance of quarterly SRC meetings; at meetings identify areas of strength and those needing attention. Forward findings to DVR Director (via SRC Chair) for response within DVR Director's report at the next subsequent SRC meeting.
- Report survey findings to SRC twice a year: a presentation and analysis of the full FY 25 data trends at the February meeting and of the half year (Q1 and Q2) at the September meeting.

- Monitor for trends in issues that arise in the Client Assistance Program (CAP) shared with the SRC by Disability Rights NJ and suggest action steps for DVRS consideration; and,
- Work closely with new DVRS Quality Assurance team to determine the best way to distribute, collect, analyze, and report customer satisfaction feedback moving forward.

Policy/Legislative Committee Goals

- Provide training to SRC members based on survey results.
- Review upcoming policy changes on college and changes to financial needs tests.
- Review and comment on, if needed, Technical Assistance Circulars (TACs) from RSA.
- Continue to review data reports on the State as a Model Employer program (SAME).
- Review the NJ administrative code sections pertaining to NJDVRS to see if they need updating to ensure compliance with current Federal legislation.
- Monitor Civil Service revisions of educational requirements for hiring DVRS counselors.
- Continue to coordinate with other agencies and groups that share an interest in legislation and regulations relating to vocational rehabilitation services for people who have disabilities, as legislation/regulations impacting these individuals is introduced.
- Set up SRC member presentations at local DVRS offices to discuss SRC roles & responsibilities (virtually or in person). A PowerPoint will be developed for these presentations; and,
- Invite DVRS office managers and supervisors to future SRC meetings.

SRC Membership

- Suspend all recruitment activities until appointments and reappointments have been made;
- Submit inquiries to the Governor's office every two weeks; and
- Explore with other disability groups having difficulty getting appointments from the Governor's office working together to advocate for timeliness with the help of Disability Rights New Jersey.

Advocacy

- Continue to advocate for funding which will provide support to the DVRS for staffing, programs, staff development and vocational rehabilitation services as mandated by the RSA and the demands of NJ's population.

- Advocate for funding to support the DVRS' efforts to expand services through grants and other means as appropriate to support a full range of services to individuals, including those in transition.
- Explore avenues for vendor training in high demand DVR services and/or services for which approved vendors are lacking in the state.
- Advocate for funding to support the RSA's requirements for state match, including third- party cooperative agreements; and
- Provide support to the DVRS in applying for grants that enhance successful employment outcomes for persons with disabilities.

Collaboration

- Support the DVRS' efforts to develop opportunities for paid internships.
- Participate in development of goals and work plan to enhance services to consumers who are the most significantly disabled.
- Continue active involvement with the CSAVR National Employment Network (The NET) and partner with the DVRS in the development of new goals; and
- Leverage partnerships with NJAPSE, NJSOE-OSE, CBVI, DDD, ACCSES NJ, and others in identifying systemic barriers to employment first implementation and problem-solving effective cross-entity solutions.

Communication

- Continue use of Zoom platform to enhance access for SRC Members and members of the public to engage in SRC meetings and public forums.

Summary

During FY'24, the Rehabilitation Council continued to work cohesively and productively, partially because of a renewed emphasis on the tools at hand, fully embracing the updated committee structure, and staff and member dedication to marshal a strong, hybridized plan to support people with disabilities in achieving maximum employment outcomes. Members worked closely with each other, the DVRS staff, Department of Labor and Workforce Development personnel, other state agency directors, and most importantly with the constituency it is mandated to serve. It made recommendations on topics of importance to the Federal and State governments and supported the participation of the DVRS in local initiatives. Members of the SRC, DVRS and DOL were instrumental in the planning to bring P.L. 2021, Chapter 465 and P.L. 2021, Chapter 466, requiring the Division of EEO/AA to develop and implement a State as Model Employer of People with Disabilities (SAME) program. The law was effective May 1, 2022, and is currently implemented.

The Rehabilitation Council has benefited from the support and cooperation of the New Jersey Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services in myriad ways, most markedly in the

redesign of the system for solicitation, collection, and analysis of consumer satisfaction. The Council looks forward to another year of meaningful collaboration around shared our shared vision of increased community integrated employment outcomes for New Jerseyans with disabilities who seek employment and ancillary services through their state's DVRS.

DVRS FIELD OFFICE CONTACT LIST – September 2024

BRIDGETON (Cumberland, Salem/62) - Region #3 40 E. Broad Street, Suite 204, 08302-2881 JODY CLASSEN, Manager KATIE CZAJKOWSKI, Supervisor 856-453-3888, 856-453-3909/FAX 856-497-0075/VP DVR.Bridgeton@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Raj Venkatraman	NEW BRUNSWICK (Middlesex/31) - Region #3 550 Jersey Avenue, 08903 ELIZABETH CONTE, Manager AMY HOEHMAN, Supervisor LEILA MOLAIE, Supervisor 732-937-6300, 732-937-6358/FAX 732-393-8056/VP DVR.NewBrunswick@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Raj Venkatraman	RIO GRANDE (Cape May/63) - Region #3 3801 Rt. 9 South, Unit 3, 08242 CANDACE TITANSKI, Manager NORMA CORDEIRO, Supervisor 609-224-2010, 609-224-2047/FAX 609-277-2298/VP DVR.RioGrande@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Raj Venkatraman
CHERRY HILL (Camden/51) - Region #3 101 Woodcrest Road, Suite 127, 08003-3620 JEFFERY DEITZ, Manager JEFFREY CLARK, Supervisor ELIZABETH GUZMAN, Supervisor VACANT, Supervisor 856-549-0600 (Option 3), 856-795-4782/FAX 856-831-7599/VP DVR.Camden@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Raj Venkatraman	NEWARK (Essex/21) - Region #1 990 Broad Street, 2nd Floor, 07102 MAUREEN RITCHIE, Manager CARREL COREUS, Supervisor MIKKI FULLER, Supervisor VACANT, Supervisor 973-648-3494, 862-772-7166/VP DVR.Newark@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Antony Smith	SEWELL (Gloucester/52) - Region #2 1480 Tanyard Rd, Suite A, 08080 STACEY SMITH, Manager KRISTA LOPE, Supervisor 856-384-3730, 856-384-3777/FAX 856-497-0075/VP DVR.Sewell@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: William Schulz
ELIZABETH (Union/32) - Region #1 Address for Mail use only 200 West 2nd Street, Suite 2 Plainfield, NJ 07060 VALERIE KERRIGAN, Manager PAT WILLIAMS, Supervisor 908-882-5101, 908-965-3940, 908-965-2976/FAX 908-242-3563/VP DVR.Elizabeth@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Antony Smith	PATERSON (Passaic/01) - Region #2 200 Memorial Drive, 1st Floor, 07505 HELENE SIMMS, Manager JEAN-MARIE LARACUENTE, Supervisor 973-742-9226/Option 3 973-279-5895/FAX 973-968-6556/VP DVR.Paterson@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: William Schulz	SOMERVILLE (Somerset, Hunterdon/33) Region #1 75 Veterans Memorial Drive East, Suite 101 08876-2952 DANIELLE KWAN, Manager JAZLIS PEREZ, Supervisor 908-704-3030, 908-704-3476/FAX 732-393-8056/VP DVR.Somerville@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Antony Smith
HACKENSACK (Bergen/11) - Region #2 60 State Street, 2nd Floor Office 203, 07601-5471 JORGE DELGADO, Manager JESSICA COLE, Supervisor 201-996-8970, 201-996-8880/FAX 973-968-6556/VP DVR.Hackensack@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: William Schulz	PHILLIPSBURG (Sussex, Warren/04) - Region #1 445 Marshall Street 08865 REENA GEORGE, Manager VACANT, Supervisor 908-329-9190 (Option 2) Fax: 908-454-8334 973-607-2034/VP DVR.Phillipsburg@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Antony Smith	TOMS RIVER (Ocean/43) - Region #2 1433 Hooper Ave., Suite 214 08753-2200 KATHLEEN SPACE, Manager TADD MAFFUCCI, Supervisor 732-505-2310, 732-505-2317/FAX 732-606-4961/VP DVR.TomsRiver@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: William Schulz
JERSEY CITY (Hudson/12) - Region #2 438 Summit Avenue, 6th Floor, Suite 604, 07306-3187 VACANT, Manager GILDA ESCOBAR, Supervisor 201-217-7180, 201-217-7287/FAX 908-242-3563/VP DVR.JerseyCity@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: William Schulz	PLEASANTVILLE (Atlantic/61) - Region #3 2 South Main St., 1st Fl. Suite 2, 08232 CANDACE TITANSKI, Manager JULIE BOYLE, Supervisor 609-813-3933, 609-813-3959/FAX 609-277-2298/VP DVR.Pleasantville@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Raj Venkatraman	TRENTON (Mercer/41) - Region #3 Labor Station Plaza, P.O. Box 959 28 Yard Avenue, 08625-0959 LESLEY JACK, Manager SONALI KARAJGIKAR, Supervisor 609-292-2940, 609-984-3553/FAX 609-498-7011/VP DVR.Trenton@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Raj Venkatraman

NEPTUNE (Monmouth/42) - Region #2 60 Taylor Avenue, 07753-4844 CHERYL VAIL, Manager JENNIFER JOHNSON, Supervisor 732-481-6300 (Option 2), 732-481-6302/FAX 732-606-4961/VP DVR.Neptune@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: William Schulz	RANDOLPH (Morris/02) - Region #1 13 Emery Avenue, 2nd Floor, 07869 SCOTT MCGILL, Manager VACANT, Supervisor 862-397-5600 (Option 4), 973-895-6420/FAX 973-607-2034/VP DVR.Randolph@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Antony Smith	WESTAMPTON(Burlington/53) - Region #1 795 Woodlane Road, 2nd Floor, 08060 JENNIFER VENEZIANI, Manager LINDSEY AQUINO, Supervisor 609-518-3948, 609-518-3956/FX 856-831-7599VP DVR.Westampton@dol.nj.gov CHIEF: Antony Smith
TRENTON (Central) John Fitch Plaza – 12th Floor P.O. Box 398, 08625-0398 609-292-5987, 609-292-8347/FAX 609-292-2919/TTY, 609-498-6221/VP dvradmin@dol.nj.gov http://lwd.dol.state.nj.us/labor/dvrsDVRIndex.html	CHARYL YARBROUGH, (INTERIM) Director HELEN LIU, Asst. Director Field Services FELICIA HOPSON, Asst. Director Admin. Services MARYANN TIESLER, Chief Programs Unit DEBORAH VAUGHN, Chief CRP Unit TINA BRAND, Chief QA Unit JENNIFER SOSDORF, Chief Contracts Unit DEANNA O'CONNOR, Suprvg., Admin. Analyst, MIS IT Unit	RAJ VENKATRAMAN, Chief- Field ANTONEY SMITH, Chief -Field WILLIAM SCHULZ, Chief- Field

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DVRS Central/Administrative Office: NJDOL, John Fitch Plaza, P. O. Box 398, Trenton, NJ 08625-0398

Telephone: (609) 292-5987, Email: dvradmin@dol.nj.gov