



Town Hall Response 2025



COMMENT: I would like to express my appreciation for the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program and counselors here in Great Falls. I think they do a great job. We work collaboratively with them quite a lot in helping people to achieve their goals of a more independent lifestyle and I appreciate that collaborative cooperation. They are one of our strongest community partners.

Response: Thank you for sharing your thoughts on the VR program and counselors in Great Falls. It's wonderful to hear how dedicated and effective they are in supporting individuals on their journey to greater independence. Their commitment, coupled with strong community collaboration, makes a meaningful difference in the lives of many. We deeply value the partnership and cooperative spirit that allows us to work hand in hand toward the common goal of empowering individuals. Recognizing the impact of their work is important, and we are grateful for their continued efforts in fostering positive change in our community.

COMMENT: I really would not be as independent as I am without the Disability Employment and Transition Division (DETD). DETD staff past and present have been in my life for most of my adult life actually and most of my working life, and I really hope that we would be an employment first state and community for our citizens and our people because without employment and a home, community living doesn't happen quite as often and as well.

Response: Thank you for your comment. We appreciate your acknowledgment of the value of DETD programs and the positive impact DETD staff has had on your independence and employment journey.

We concur with your assessment regarding the significance of becoming an Employment First state. We recognize that employment and housing are critical foundations for meaningful community living, and we reaffirm our commitment to pursuing an Employment First framework. Your personal experience highlights the importance of this objective.



COMMENT: I understand that there are a lot of questions about Order of Selection (OOS) and the various things talked about earlier in the Town Hall broadcast, but I really hope that the programs that we have started and that we are working on include competitive integrated employment, Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), and other things can be available for all those possible.

Response: We want to assure you that the OOS will not impact Pre-ETS. These foundational services will continue to be available.

Furthermore, management is committed to maintaining programming that effectively promotes competitive integrated employment for all individuals we serve. We are actively working to strategically manage our allocated resources to ensure the continuation of these vital supports and services.

COMMENT: I really also hope that we don't overlook our people who are middle aged and may not always know that a disability happened in their life because when they come to Independent Living (IL) or VR, they are seeking services for themselves.

Response: We want to assure you that VR services are for individuals of all age groups, and we are committed to ensuring that no one is overlooked.

We understand that disabilities can manifest at any point in a person's life, and individuals seeking support from IL or VR may be navigating these changes for the first time. Our focus is on providing individualized services based on a person's needs, regardless of their age or when their disability occurred.

COMMENT: I want to give a shout out to the VR people in Miles City. We absolutely love working with them. They are super easy to work with.

Response: Thank you for highlighting the VR team in Miles City! It's always great to hear about strong partnerships that make a real difference. Their dedication and collaborative approach clearly have a positive impact, and we truly appreciate their commitment to making the process smooth and effective. Working with such an engaged and supportive team is invaluable, and we look forward to continuing this great collaboration.



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COMMENT: As an employee of a Center for Independent Living (CIL), I am very appreciative of the work my colleagues and I continue to do every day at the four CILs. The five core services mean community living is a bed rock. We hope that those that carry our message forward to Washington and other places will understand. I believe that all of our services, including the ones that I work with in advocacy, peer support, and back up services with transportation, Medicaid and housing, are highly influential in community living. I hope the DETD can expand our outreach to all of those communities because there are going to be a lot of federal changes good and bad. I truly thank you for the work that you do and will continue to do. And I'm happy to be a small part of the community. Thank you very much.

Response: Thank you for your comment and for sharing your perspective as a CIL employee. We deeply appreciate the dedication and hard work that you and your colleagues at the four CILs provide every day.

We recognize the foundational importance of the five core services in fostering community living, and we understand the critical role that advocacy, peer support, transportation assistance, and support navigating Medicaid and housing play in achieving this goal. We will certainly take your message about the influence of these services to heart as we engage with stakeholders at all levels.

We also acknowledge your point about the potential for both positive and negative federal changes and the importance of expanding our outreach to all communities. We are committed to exploring ways to strengthen our partnerships with the CILs and enhance our collective ability to support individuals in achieving community living. Thank you for your dedication and for being a valued part of this community.

COMMENT: Does the VR state plan have a section or address counselor training or is that in state policy if it's not in the VR plan, is there room to add such a section in the future?

Response: The VR state plan addresses counselor training requirements. The current state plan outlines the requirement for counselors to either have a master's degree in rehabilitation counseling and be eligible to sit for certification. Counseling staff who do not yet meet these qualifications enter a training assignment to obtain the necessary education and certification. As updates to counselor qualifications occur, the state plan will be revised to reflect these requirements.

COMMENT: The proposed cuts from VR going onto OOS are obviously going to affect those that are in the workforce, but not only that, those that will be in the workforce very soon. We are disappointed about that, but we understand there isn't a lot that VR can do on this level. We just want to state for the record that people with disabilities very much want to work and are disappointed with the OOS news.

Response: We understand your concerns about the potential impact on individuals currently in the workforce or preparing to enter it.



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We want to assure you that we share your commitment to supporting people with disabilities in achieving their employment goals. We strive to provide high-quality services to all eligible individuals. The decision to implement the OOS was made due to limited resources, and it is a measure we are taking to ensure responsible fiscal management and prevent overspending, allowing us to continue serving as many individuals as possible within our allocated budget. We recognize that this is not an ideal situation, and we continuously advocate for increased resources to minimize the need for such measures. Your feedback is valuable and reinforces the importance of our mission to maximize employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

COMMENT: I've been struggling with being able to afford the place that I'm living in currently. I am living independently in Hamilton, and it's just been quite a struggle to make ends meet and pay not only for my rent but also for my electricity. I did get Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) so that did help for these couple of months, but it's been really hard recently. I can vouch for VR because they have done amazing with me, and I always feel very seen and very heard whenever I talk to my counselor.

Response: We recognize the challenges you're facing with housing costs and utilities in Hamilton, and we appreciate you bringing this to our attention. We are glad that the LIHEAP has provided some temporary relief, and we understand that ongoing affordability remains a significant concern.

We are especially grateful for your kind words about VR and your counselor. It's truly rewarding to hear that you feel seen and heard. We strive to provide supportive and effective services, and positive feedback like yours validates the dedication of our team.

COMMENT: I'm new to VR as I was in an accident that just kind of turned my life upside down. I am a quadriplegic that just was able to get my driver's license back, and I've been having issues with my van not being reliable. I was told to contact VR to see if there is anything that they could help with for transportation, and when I called the office and told them that I had a job, but that my vehicle was not performing or reliable, they just kind of turned me away, and not knowing everything that was involved in my situation. Yes, I do have a job, but it's only part time, ten hours a week, and not being able to get to work without a modified vehicle has just put me in a hard position. So sadly, I was just kind of pushed away because I do have a job. However, with no transportation, it is very hard to keep a job.

Response: We understand the significant challenges you are facing with unreliable transportation as a new VR client and a quadriplegic who recently regained their driver's license. It is concerning to hear that you felt turned away when you contacted our office, especially given the crucial role of reliable transportation in maintaining your part-time employment.



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While having a job is a factor in determining eligibility and services, the need for transportation to maintain that employment is certainly something we consider. We apologize if you did not feel heard or fully understood when you initially contacted us.

We would like to encourage you to reach out to a member of our management team to discuss your specific scenario in more detail. They can help explore the options available to support you in obtaining reliable transportation, which is essential for you to continue working. Please contact Allyson Talaska, VR Chief of Field Services at Allyson.Talaska@mt.gov or 406-329-1436, and they will be happy to speak with you further and explore how VR might be able to assist you.

COMMENT: With most of the Pre-ETS money going to schools, I'm wondering, how that is working? Are there any plans to change that in the future or continue the status quo?

Response: We remain committed to our current approach of delivering Pre-ETS through strong partnerships with schools, as this has proven to be an effective way to reach a large number of students with disabilities. However, we also recognize the importance of continuously refining and improving these services to maximize their impact. As part of this commitment, we are implementing pre- and post-surveys to ensure students receive high-quality, meaningful services. Additionally, we will continue offering individualized Pre-ETS through our Pre-ETS Specialists, as well as maintaining our collaboration with Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and other providers. Our Pre-ETS camps, particularly in rural and underserved areas, will remain a key focus to ensure equitable access to Pre-ETS.

COMMENT: I don't believe that simply having a job would make someone who would otherwise be eligible for VR services ineligible especially when they may need certain things to maintain employment.

Response: You are correct in that simply having a job does not automatically make someone ineligible for VR services, especially if they require support to maintain that employment or to advance in their career.

Our focus is on helping individuals with disabilities achieve and maintain competitive integrated employment. This includes providing services and supports that enable individuals to retain their current jobs, address any barriers to continued employment, or explore opportunities for career advancement. If someone is employed but needs VR assistance to keep their job or move forward in their employment, they may still be eligible for our services. We encourage individuals in this situation to reach out to discuss their specific needs.



COMMENT: The statewide plan for independent living (SPIL) is fairly new so I think it's a great document.

Response: Thank you for your positive feedback. The SPIL will be an important document to guide IL services in the State for the next three years.

COMMENT: I appreciate everybody who works both through the VR system and through the IL system. There is a lot of work to do and hopefully we can create plans that will survive the test of time.

Response: We deeply appreciate your recognition of the hard work and dedication of everyone involved in both VR and IL systems. We agree that there is significant work to be done, and we share your hope in developing sustainable plans that will continue to support individuals long into the future. Your perspective is valuable as we strive to build lasting and effective systems.

COMMENT: It seems like there is still a need for increasing transportation opportunities in rural communities for employment because what we are seeing is, for example, I had a client that was commuting from Roundup to Billings every day to come to work and the gas part just got too expensive. It would be nice to have some transit systems where individuals can commute to a community where there are more jobs because Roundup doesn't have a lot of job opportunities for folks.

Response: Thank you for highlighting the ongoing need for increased transportation opportunities in rural communities to support employment. The situation you described with your client commuting from Roundup to Billings and the prohibitive cost of gas clearly illustrates the challenges many individuals in rural Montana face.

We recognize that the lack of accessible and affordable transportation options can be a significant barrier to employment for individuals living in areas with limited job opportunities. We want to inform you that the Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), of which VR is a part, has a dedicated Transportation Coordinator who works on addressing these systemic transportation issues across the state. This individual collaborates with various stakeholders to explore and develop solutions for improving transportation access, particularly in rural areas. Your example from Roundup underscores the importance of this work, and we will certainly share this feedback with our Transportation Coordinator. We are committed to continuing to explore all avenues to enhance transportation options for individuals with disabilities seeking employment throughout Montana.



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COMMENT: I wanted to give kudos to the CIL because they have been setting up different kinds of fairs. There is going to be an Americans with Disability Act (ADA) resource fair coming up. We are going to be in the eastern part of the state and I think that will be fantastic to be able to get resources up to folks that don't know about services that might be available to them.

Response: Thank you, sharing information on the services available to all Montanans living in all areas of Montana. It is vitally important to the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) to disseminate this information. Resource Fairs are an excellent way to facilitate information sharing. We will continue to advocate for and share information for those with disabilities across the state.

COMMENT: I think it is important to do some soft skills training with VR Counselors on working with individuals with mental health disabilities. I feel that sometimes maybe the counselors don't understand certain disabilities and how to best help their client and hear their clients' needs.

Response: Thank you for raising this important point about the need for ongoing soft skills training for VR Counselors, specifically in working with individuals with behavioral health disabilities. We absolutely agree that it is crucial for our counselors to have a strong understanding of various disabilities and possess the interpersonal skills necessary to effectively listen to and address the unique needs of each client.

We are committed to providing continual education and professional development opportunities for our counselors on a variety of topics, including best practices for working with individuals with behavioral health disabilities. This includes training on understanding different conditions, effective communication techniques, and strategies for providing person-centered support. We have an expectation that all our counselors employ modern and empathetic practices to ensure they are truly hearing their clients and tailoring their support to individual circumstances and needs. Your feedback reinforces the importance of this ongoing training and our commitment to ensuring our counselors are well-equipped to serve all individuals effectively.

COMMENT: I'm concerned about that piece that VR is paying for job coaching and the job coaching is not really helping the client too much.

Response: We understand the importance of job coaching services being effective and truly beneficial for our clients. It is concerning to hear that in some instances, the job coaching being provided may not be meeting the needs of the individuals we serve.

We expect job coaching to be a valuable and impactful support that helps individuals with disabilities learn and master the skills necessary to successfully perform their job duties and integrate into their workplace. We will be looking into this issue to ensure that the job coaching services we fund are providing meaningful and targeted support that leads to positive employment



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outcomes for our clients. It's crucial that these resources are utilized effectively to help individuals achieve and maintain successful employment.

COMMENT: A lot of clients get referred to CRPs by VR counselors. I hear a lot from the clients is they went and found their own job and the CRP didn't help them. Clients have expressed they don't see the importance of the CRP because they are not really sitting down to look at the job search and help them find the jobs. Clients are expecting the person to come back with the jobs that they found so they are not seeing the reason why to even go to a CRP if they are not going to help. I have heard that comment a lot this past year with clients across Montana.

Response: Thank you for bringing this important feedback to our attention. We understand the concerns you've heard from clients across Montana regarding their experiences with CRPs. It's valuable for us to know that some individuals who have found their own employment are questioning the role and support they are receiving from CRPs.

We want to emphasize that the expectation is for CRPs to actively engage in the job search process with clients, providing tailored support and guidance. This includes working collaboratively to identify job opportunities, develop job search skills, and offer assistance throughout the employment process. Clients should feel that their CRP is a valuable partner in achieving their employment goals.

We will be reviewing these concerns and reinforcing expectations and accountability measures with our network of CRPs to ensure they are effectively meeting the needs and expectations of the individuals we serve. It's crucial that clients understand the purpose and benefit of working with a CRP and that they receive the support they need to achieve successful employment outcomes.

COMMENT: How is VR coming along with tribal college partnerships?

Response: This is an area of ongoing focus and continuous improvement for us. We recognize the vital role that tribal colleges play in serving their communities and the importance of establishing strong partnerships to expand opportunities for individuals with disabilities within those communities.

We are actively working to build and strengthen these relationships. This includes exploring collaborative agreements, identifying shared goals, and developing culturally relevant services and supports. While progress is being made, we understand there is always room to grow and deepen these connections.



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COMMENT: I would like to recognize VR and all of its programs for the great job they do on thinking outside the box. They do have a great crew. I do a lot of transition services with students with disabilities, and it is so refreshing to see the dedication of the staff towards the jobs that they have. Pre-ETS has all kinds of summer opportunities that they do across the state. They support a lot of the youth advocacy and leadership trainings including the transition conference that happens every year and rotates around the state.

Response: It's truly rewarding to hear your positive feedback, especially regarding our work in transition services with students with disabilities. We deeply appreciate you acknowledging the dedication of our staff.

We take pride in our commitment to thinking outside the box and developing innovative practices to best serve Montanans with disabilities. We believe this approach is particularly crucial in our Pre-ETS initiatives, and we are thrilled that you've noticed the variety of summer opportunities and our support for youth advocacy and leadership trainings, including the annual Transition Conference. We strive to be a national leader in this area, and your observations validate the hard work and passion of our entire team.

COMMENT: I have an adult son with a disability, and we navigated through both Pre-ETS and VR services. Sometimes it's unique situations and job opportunities that exist that work the best for the individuals with disabilities VR serves. Our son has a unique job opportunity and are grateful he has been successfully employed. While in high school, we couldn't get him to work more than about a two-hour shift, and through the processes and the supports of VR and the CRPs provided through VR, he is now able to work a ten hour day. That doesn't happen all of the time, but he can do way more than was ever expected of him in the beginning. This is in part because of encouragement through VR and the CRPs.

Response: Thank you for sharing your son's journey with us. It's wonderful to hear about his success and the significant progress he has made, from working a two-hour shift in high school to now managing a ten-hour workday.

We truly appreciate you highlighting the value of both Pre-ETS and VR services, as well as the crucial role that CRPs play in supporting individuals with disabilities. Your son's unique job opportunity and the tailored support he received demonstrate the importance of individualized approaches and the power of encouragement in helping people exceed expectations.



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COMMENT: I also wanted to plug that there will be resource fairs happening in Sydney, Miles City and Hardin, next week. Check out the Montana SILC Facebook page to find more information on those. Thank you again, VR and CILs for all you do.

Response: Thank you, sharing information on the services available to all Montanans living in all areas of Montana. It is vitally important to the SILC to disseminate this information. Resource Fairs are an excellent way to facilitate information sharing. We will continue to advocate for and share information for those with disabilities across the state.

COMMENT: Up in Havre, the VR office covers a gigantic area of the State. I cannot imagine what it takes to offer job coaching and short-term job supports to each of the individual clients in these areas. I don't know if the answer is to add more counselors within VR or what that answer is, but up here it's a huge area and I give the VR counselors and the support staff up here props for their work. It's a humongous job.

Response: Thank you for highlighting the significant geographical area covered by the VR office in Havre and for recognizing the dedication and hard work of the VR counselors and support staff serving that region. We understand the challenges inherent in providing comprehensive employment supports across such a vast territory.

Your acknowledgment of their efforts is greatly appreciated. We are aware of the demands placed on the Havre team and are continually evaluating our service delivery models to ensure effective support for all individuals across the state. Exploring potential solutions, such as optimizing counselor caseloads and leveraging technology or community partnerships, are ongoing considerations as we strive to best serve the diverse needs of Montana's residents. Your feedback reinforces the importance of these discussions.

COMMENT: Housing is a big issue right now. I know that VR has helped a blind student with housing when they were going to school. I think it would be great for conversations around housing and transportation for disabled people in the state to continue.

Response: We acknowledge the significant issue of housing and appreciate you highlighting the support VR provided to a blind student with housing during their education. We also recognize the importance of ongoing conversations regarding housing and transportation for individuals with disabilities in Montana.

COMMENT: When I moved back to Helena in 2018 it was so nice that the CIL had a van that they operated with the City of Helena. They had dollar rides for nights and weekends. The rides have gone up to \$5 one way here in Helena, and that's just really a big cost for disabled people to shoulder. It would be ideal if the CIL could return to operating their van and charging \$1 per ride. That has since the



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\$1 rides have gone away and I would encourage more transportation options to be available in Helena. Given it is the capital, to not have public transportation available at night or on weekends at any time is really makes it difficult as a disabled person to navigate life without transportation and a modified vehicle.

Response: Thank you for sharing your experience with transportation in Helena. We understand your concerns about the increase in ride costs and the limitations in public transportation availability, particularly during nights and weekends.

We acknowledge the challenges you face navigating life in the capital city without consistent and affordable transportation options outside of standard weekday hours. We will certainly take your feedback regarding the need for expanded and more affordable transportation options in Helena under consideration as we continue to collaborate with the CIL and the city on ways to improve accessibility for all residents.

COMMENT: I just want to acknowledge how instrumental VR was in providing education and transportation supports when I was first injured 30 some years ago. I'm hoping that VR recognizes how difficult transportation is in the State of Montana, and how much it affects the daily life of an individual with a disability to be without transportation.

Response: Thank you for sharing your experience and acknowledging the instrumental role VR played in providing education and transportation supports for you many years ago. We appreciate you highlighting the critical importance of transportation for individuals with disabilities in Montana.

We absolutely recognize the significant challenges that the vast distances and limited public transportation options across our state pose for people with disabilities and how profoundly it can impact their daily lives, including access to employment, healthcare, and community engagement.

Addressing transportation barriers remains a key priority in our efforts to support independence and full participation for all Montanans with disabilities. We continuously explore and advocate for solutions to improve transportation accessibility statewide.

COMMENT: I know we are all really stressed and unsure of what's happening in the future, but I also work at the national level with national organizations, and I know I bring this up every now and then, but I wanted to make sure everybody knows how much Montana is unique in the way we have such a vast square footage and small population in comparison to other states. Another way in which we are unique is how we work so well together to get the services to the consumers and to the people that need it most. That really is unique and it's very special. I just wanted to just really remind us of that, and to say that it doesn't happen without incredible people doing the work, and that we can collaborate always.



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Response: Thank you for sharing that important perspective. It's a valuable reminder of the unique landscape of Montana, both geographically and in the spirit of collaboration that exists within our service systems. You're absolutely right – the vast distances and smaller population present distinct challenges, but the way our system and partner organizations work together to reach individuals in need is truly special and not something seen everywhere.

Your recognition of the dedication and hard work of the people within these systems is deeply appreciated. It's through that collaborative spirit and the commitment of incredible individuals that we are able to deliver services effectively across our state. As we navigate the uncertainties of the future, remembering this strength and our ability to collaborate will be essential.

COMMENT: I work out of Sanders, Valley, and Missoula County, and want to express my appreciation to the CIL and my colleagues around the state as well as Summit because Summit made an incredibly major impact on my life 30 years ago. Summit directed me to VR after I sustained a traumatic brain injury back in the mid-90s. The Kalispell VR office was just wonderful and helped me get to the point that I went onto a very successful career in higher education for many years, in Montana and Alaska.

Response: Thank you for sharing your powerful story and for your kind words. Your journey is a testament to the effectiveness of these services and the dedication of the professionals within them. We deeply appreciate you acknowledging the work of the CILs, your colleagues, and the lasting impact of VR in empowering individuals to achieve their goals.

COMMENT: Nationally, Montana is looked at as unique. We are seen as creators, and we are looked to for how we do our waiver services and how we collaborate so well together to provide such incredible services in every corner of the state. Every Montana county has services. There are other states where the CILs don't even talk to each other let alone have an equalization funding mechanism, for example.

Response: Thank you for sharing that perspective on Montana's national reputation. It's truly gratifying to hear that our state is recognized for its innovative approach to waiver services and the high degree of collaboration that exists in delivering services across every county.

We take pride in the strong working relationships among our partners, including the CILs, and the commitment to ensuring services are accessible throughout Montana. Knowing that our collaborative model and initiatives like the equalization funding mechanism are seen as unique and exemplary on a national level is a testament to the dedication and shared vision of everyone involved. We appreciate you highlighting this significant strength of our service network.



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COMMENT: I want to shout out to the other CIL directors and our SILC and how well we do work with each other, and we support each other and we do amazing services, above and beyond what our core services are what we are mandated to provide, and it's amazing. It really is something to stand back and pat ourselves on the back for what a great job we do. I appreciate everybody at the state level and the other CIL directors and everybody that we collaborate with.

Response: Thank you so much for highlighting the strong collaborative spirit and dedication among the CIL directors and the SILC. It's truly commendable that you all work so well together, supporting each other and going above and beyond your mandated core services.

It speaks volumes about the commitment and passion within the independent living network in Montana. We at the state level also deeply value this collaboration and appreciate the incredible work you and your fellow CIL directors do to empower individuals with disabilities.

COMMENT: I appreciate the partners at the other CILs and the SILC and our VR partners.

Response: Thank you for acknowledging the valuable partnerships with the CILs, the SILC, and our VR partners. We appreciate these collaborations as well. The recognition of the dedication and hard work of the people within these systems is deeply appreciated.

COMMENT: I would also like to thank the current VR counselors in our area. The staff and I make referrals to VR every week, and we work with wonderful VR counselors. Thank you!

Response: Thank you for your kind words and ongoing support for VR counselors in your area. We deeply appreciate the collaboration and referrals that help connect individuals to valuable resources and opportunities. The dedication of VR counselors, along with the commitment of community members like you, plays a vital role in empowering individuals to achieve their goals. We look forward to continuing this partnership and working together to support those who rely on these services.

COMMENT: I would also like to say the CRPs in Sanders and Ravalli Counties have been great to work with. We work well with them and I know several of them personally. We have a great relationship. They work well with our consumers, and I hear good messages back about the services the consumers receive. As such, it is important to me to make the statement thanking VR for their services entirely including in the communities as well as to the CILs.

Response: Thank you for recognizing the outstanding work of CRPs in Sanders and Ravalli Counties. Strong partnerships between CRPs, VR, and the CILs are essential in ensuring individuals receive the support and services they need. We deeply appreciate the collaboration and dedication of all involved in creating positive outcomes for consumers. Your statement reinforces the



importance of ongoing community connections, and we look forward to continuing these valuable relationships to best serve individuals throughout Montana.

COMMENT: I want to encourage VR to continue looking at moving billing into the Well Sky/Madison platform that we currently utilize for Extended Employment. I think one of the challenges for CRPs is the administrative burden with the billing process. I'm hearing that that's difficult for many VR staff also. I'm hopeful we can move into a more streamlined billing system that will allow CRP staff and VR staff to spend more time with the individuals that we serve.

Response: Since 2024, VR has been working toward expanding CRP access to Madison, allowing CRP staff to interact with key VR-generated documents and communications. This initiative will enable CRP staff to view Purchase Orders, Service Deliveries (payments), VR referrals, and correspondence within the client's case record. Additionally, it will facilitate document sharing, including invoices and billing notes. By streamlining these processes, this effort is expected to significantly reduce administrative burdens for both VR and CRPs.

Written Public Comment:

COMMENT: I am concerned that the strides that have been made over the last few biennia may be lost because DETD will be placed or has sent paperwork to place the VR program back into OOS. I understand the OOS process may be necessary given the impact to VR staff and the agency, however as Montana seeks to be an Employment First state, where all people who have disabilities that desire to work and need work or educational accommodations should have access to them, how will Montana leverage its resources in the employment for disabilities realm to serve as many citizens as possible?

Response: Thank you for sharing your concerns. Montana remains committed to serving individuals with the most significant disabilities through the VR program, even while operating under an OOS. We recognize the importance of maintaining access to employment opportunities and accommodations for those who need them, and our Employment First efforts are specifically focused on this population.

Employment First is gaining momentum across Montana, reinforcing the principle that all individuals who want to work should have the opportunity to do so with the necessary supports. We are excited about the collaborations and initiatives that are strengthening employment pathways, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can achieve meaningful work and economic independence. While OOS may be necessary, we are dedicated to strategically leveraging available



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resources to maximize the impact of VR services and uphold Montana's vision of inclusive employment.

COMMENT: What innovative policies will VR pursue if OOS lasts longer than a short period of time?

Response: VR remains committed to ensuring individuals with disabilities receive the support they need, even if the OOS extends longer than anticipated. If this happens, we will actively explore innovative policies to maximize service accessibility and efficiency. Potential approaches may include expanding partnerships with community organizations to supplement services and streamlining processes to ensure those with the most urgent needs receive timely assistance. Additionally, we will continue engaging with stakeholders to assess emerging needs and develop forward-thinking solutions that prioritize equitable access to vocational services.

VR is committed to navigating challenges collaboratively, ensuring that individuals remain empowered to achieve their employment and independence goals. We welcome ongoing conversations and community input to shape effective strategies for the future.

COMMENT: Montana's 14C and 511 efforts have made positive gains in our workforce system.

Response: It's encouraging to see the progress we've made in Montana, and a key indicator of this success is the reduction in the number of employers paying subminimum wage. This demonstrates the effectiveness of these efforts in promoting fair and equitable employment for individuals with disabilities. We are committed to building upon this momentum and continuing to advance inclusive employment practices across the state.

COMMENT: I thank DETD for advancing programs for the older blind and those with mental health issues during the 69th legislative session particularly the decision packages to create an adjustment to blindness program and the additional VR counselors specializing in IPS.

Response: Thank you for acknowledging the advancements made during the 69th legislative session. We particularly appreciate you recognizing the decision packages that led to the creation of the Adjustment to Blindness Program and the addition of Vocational Rehabilitation counselors specializing in Individual Placement and Support (IPS).

These initiatives reflect our commitment within the DETD to address the unique needs of these populations and expand access to specialized and effective services. We are optimistic about the positive impact these programs will have in empowering individuals to achieve greater independence and employment success here in Montana.



COMMENT: Montana's Pre-ETS system has advanced opportunities to explore work for students. Our state is also exploring opportunities for those with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) to continue independent living and college experience, which is very important. I believe that the statewide DETD needs to implement or organize statewide infrastructure around employment opportunities which truly are consumer led and focused.

Response: DETD is committed to ensuring that individuals with IDD have access to meaningful opportunities for independent living, college experiences, and employment. Our focus on employment is deeply rooted in consumer choice, as evidenced by the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE), which ensures that individuals guide their own career paths and decision-making. By prioritizing person-centered planning, we empower individuals to make informed choices that align with their strengths, interests, and long-term goals. Through Pre-ETS, students with disabilities receive instruction in self-advocacy, equipping them with the tools to effectively communicate their needs, preferences, and goals. This ensures their voice is heard throughout their transition into higher education, independent living, and the workforce.

COMMENT: I believe if the civil rights opportunities for enforcement go away or are dramatically changed, we may have to as a state network explore Civil Rights enforcement opportunities between state agencies such as DETD and Office of Public Instruction (OPI) among others that will allow Montana to advance reasonable accommodation, and competitive integrated employment.

Response: Thank you for your comment and for raising the potential need to explore alternative civil rights enforcement opportunities within state agencies like DETD and OPI. We acknowledge your perspective on the importance of advancing reasonable accommodation and competitive integrated employment and will keep this suggestion in mind as we continue to evaluate strategies to support these critical goals in Montana.

COMMENT: Montana also needs to explore opportunities in creative fields, including self-employment, and those opportunities that may require more support than may be traditionally offered. Montana must not forget our middle-aged career changers with disabilities because often those disabilities were not accommodated in schools or in a traditional setting.

Response: Thank you for your comment and for highlighting the importance of exploring diverse employment opportunities, including those in creative fields and self-employment, as well as opportunities that may require more intensive support. We also acknowledge the critical need to support middle-aged career changers with disabilities, recognizing that their experiences and accommodation needs may differ from those who have navigated the system from an earlier age. We will certainly consider these important factors as we continue to develop and refine our services



and explore innovative approaches to promote competitive integrated employment for all Montanans with disabilities.

COMMENT: I would like to see us advocate for a transition to freedom fund.

Response: Thank you for your comment and for bringing the idea of advocating for a transition to a freedom fund to our attention. We acknowledge your suggestion and will take it into consideration as we continue to explore various avenues to support individuals in our community.

COMMENT: Regarding IL services in Montana, I truly enjoyed my work at a CIL and hope that my efforts have helped north-central Montana advance community accessibility and community living opportunities forward through my employment. Montana has been a recognized leader in many facets of IL throughout our region as well as National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) and Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (APRIL) networks. I really hope that Montana CILs can continue and grow Montana benefits planning networks and the statewide Olmstead effort as well as the efforts to support Montana Youth Leadership Forum (MYLF) and the Montana Youth Transition (MYT) conference.

Response: Thank you for your comment and for highlighting the hard work, time, and effort the Montana CILs have done in advancing community accessibility and community living opportunities. We acknowledge the importance to grow Montana benefits planning networks, the statewide Olmstead effort, the efforts to support MYLF, and the MYT conference. We will take this suggestion into consideration in the State's future planning.

COMMENT: I appreciate the efforts of all Montana IL task forces to grow knowledge of advocacy, community living and employment efforts in their respective issue areas. If our federal and state opportunities change in a negative way, Montana CILs may need to explore how to keep our efforts on going through mutual aid as well as other efforts. The State of Montana and the CILs need to keep focusing on community living and ADA transition planning as well as CIL planning for a time when opportunities for assistance in our core service and other service areas may not be as plentiful or forthcoming.

Response: Thank you for acknowledging the important role the CILs and the Task Forces play in advocating for IL across the State. If Federal and State opportunities change negatively, we acknowledge that the importance of focusing on the ADA and Community Living in alternative and innovative ways so assistance in the core services stays a priority.



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COMMENT: Montana's disability community is resilient and the CILs have done amazing work in advocacy applying for and keeping Montana citizens on benefits, diverting people from homelessness, housing individuals throughout our state and so much more.

Response: Thank you for your comment, and the SILC agrees. We appreciate our partnership and the advocacy that the CILs have provided to Montana citizens on benefits, homelessness, and housing individuals throughout our state and so much more.

COMMENT: I do recommend that those leaders that are going to NCIL and APRIL conferences advocate for a national Social Security Task force. Thank you for the time and opportunity to submit these comments on both Montana's VR Program as well as Montana's IL Program.

Response: Important point, and the SILC will share with those attending the NCIL and APRIL Conferences your suggestions for a National Social Security Task Force. We appreciate your submitting comments, the SILC welcome suggestions that explore various methods that support individuals in our community.



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