

COMMENT: I am a client and I have an open case now through the older blind program. I am also doing some work through the "I can connect program" which is the program that makes available equipment available to those who are deaf or blind or hard of hearing and blind. I have had very good results from both programs. As far as the way my VRBS case has been handled, I am very grateful that we have a full office staff at this time because it makes it much easier to get the help and assistance that I need. I am very pleased with the teaching that I have been receiving in learning how to use a new piece of equipment, an iPad and pleased with how Blind and Low Vision is doing here in Great Falls.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for your feedback. We are proud of our staff and the high-quality services we can offer.

COMMENT: I would like to see the rest of the state offices fully staffed, because it is much easier to get clients the things that they need when there's a full staff and we don't have to send other people from other areas to do that. It takes time to get services delivered.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for your feedback. Hiring and retaining qualified staff is a priority for VRBS.

COMMENT: I'd like to see a VRBS rate increase for both the job development and job coaching services provided by contracted community rehabilitation providers. Providers just went through a rate survey for our DD services and that study recognized the need for an increase. So, I think that we know that there might be a potential rate survey for VR, separate from the DD rate survey. Providers would love to see an increase as part of that outcome.

- **RESPONSE:** DET is currently conducting a rate study and results are forthcoming.

COMMENT: I agree with the need for a rate survey to explore a rate increase for VR services.

- **RESPONSE:** Same as above.

COMMENT: I'm really pleased about working with the Bozeman office, with Darin Heitt-Rennie and all of his folks there. They really do a great job.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for your comment. We appreciate hearing positive feedback about our field staff and the great work they do. VRBS leadership is proud of the services our staff provide to Montanans with disabilities.

COMMENT: I am a OIB consumer out of the Billings office and I'd like to say that the services I received were very good. The people there were good at thinking outside the box and navigating different resources to fulfill my needs.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for your feedback. We are proud of our staff and the high-quality services we are able to offer.

COMMENT: I support individuals in residential rehabilitation programs in the Butte and Bozeman areas. We do have some folks that are working in each of the communities. Most recently we have been working with the local VR office and trying to get a couple of our folks who have been in supported employment back into services. However, we were told they could only accept one of our referrals at a time. It's going very slowly. I'm not sure how to advocate for the clients at this point.

- **RESPONSE:** Please contact your local VR office to coordinate scheduling a new application appointment with the clients you are working with

COMMENT: I am a CRP in Havre, and we are coordinating to serve those individuals coming off the wait list. The Havre VR office typically covers a large area and so we're happy to provide the employment assistance.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for becoming a CRP in the Havre area. We appreciate that you are willing to cover a large coverage area providing services to clients.

COMMENT: Recently, our employees attended the MAR Conference as well as the Employment Training Institute. I'd like to say that we really appreciated the Employment Training Institute and we felt that it was really useful with great information to keep us moving on the path of being able to serve. We look forward to continued trainings.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for sharing your feedback. We look forward to inviting the Employment Training Institute to do further trainings with VRBS staff and providers.

COMMENT: We represent a provider in Helena. Our biggest issue right now is that VR seems to be kind of short staffed. At this point cases are getting farmed out all over the State. The VR staff are doing their jobs and doing well, but it's just a struggle when folks are being told, "hey, you need to give this person a call over in Missoula." There just seems to be some uncertainty, especially with the Pre-ETS Specialist person having recently left here in Helena. There is just a little bit of uncertainty as far as moving forward with some of this stuff. We just want a little clarity and ability here as far as getting the POs lined up and making sure that these clients are being taken care of.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for sharing your concerns. We agree that assigning cases to counselors in other towns is not ideal. As new staff are hired into those vacant positions, cases will be transferred back to the community in which the client resides.

COMMENT: I appreciate so much the staff that are here in Helena and everyone from VR that is working across the board. I have a Helena client working with a VR counselor in Miles City and that is a difficult situation. It's just difficult to do so I just wanted to say that we are understanding that there is lots of turnover, but we're just hopeful that we can get set up and solid in Helena and keep going.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for your understanding.

COMMENT: I am on the SRC and a member of the Planning and Review committee on the SRC. On that committee, we review VR case stories for inclusion in the Governor's Report for the year. What I am seeing in those stories is: there's a shortage of workers and I know it's difficult to get people in and trained appropriately. So, it also seems that clients are getting jobs with the same employer, placing multiple people in service industry or similar-type jobs. My question is whether that's a quality outcome or if the client chose to be in the industry or was it just easy? So those are kind of some things that the SRC and I are looking at when we are reading these cases. What is considered a quality outcome with worker shortages? I'm hoping that clients are really striving to do what they want, that VR is supporting that, and that the quality of that outcome shows.

- **RESPONSE:** Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors work closely with our clients to determine an employment goal and then identify and arrange high-quality services that lead to meaningful careers. The principle of informed choice guides work goal identification and services a person receives while harmonizing with an individual's strengths, resources, interests, and capabilities. VRBS believes in our mission which promotes opportunities for Montanans with disabilities to have rewarding careers and achieve maximum personal potential. VRBS also believes in our core value that promotes informed choice. Our staff provides guidance, and the people we serve decide on their chosen work goals.

COMMENT: One thing that we're all aware of is the staffing shortage that we are all dealing with, including us CRPs, and also this wage rate that's been occurring since covid kind of took hold. I think what we're up against is, same as everyone else is, how do we continue to provide a quality service to individuals while trying to compete with the rest of the service industry for staff? In my mind the only way that that happens, that we can attract quality staff to this line of work, is if the VR rate for services increases so we can pay individuals more to provide these types of services. Not to be too doom and gloom, but otherwise I just don't see much positive impact occurring. I think we were optimistic over the last year that we'd see some change and recruitment of individuals, but if anything, that's gotten worse, so I think we're in the same boat as everyone else. We want to provide a quality service to our clients, and to do that we need quality staff.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for continuing to provide quality services to clients. A provider rate study is underway, and results are forthcoming

QUESTION: I'm wondering about other resources that could be developed or provided around effective delivery of Pre-ETS or effective delivery of strategies for accessing remote work, or those kinds of things that really focus on people living in rural communities?

- **ANSWER:** VRBS has recently partnered with MT Business Assistance Connection/MBAC & Class by Teleworks USA to provide training on remote work opportunities. If you are interested in learning more about those opportunities, please contact your local VRBS office. VRBS is also developing Pre-ETS camps for students with disabilities in rural areas with limited services. A team from the Rural Institute met with the Youth Services Team recently to share ideas and gather feedback about developing a Pre-ETS curriculum for Montana teachers. Montana was chosen to participate in a grant project with Utah State University to develop tools to assess the effectiveness of Pre-ETS services.

COMMENT: I have an out of the box idea, what about contacting the high schools that have programs for students interested in pursuing medical careers and developing a mentoring program with it. Also, contacting the police departments to see if they would be interested in developing a mentoring program.

- **RESPONSE:** Thank you for sharing your idea, we will explore partnering with local law enforcement and public health agencies to develop opportunities for job shadowing, work site tours, and discuss career pathways to build Montana's workforce to meet these demands.

I think passion drives the quality of work. If you want to show up and help somebody, you're passionate about it.

- **RESPONSE:** VRBS agrees with this statement and that our staff are passionate about helping people with disabilities.