



STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL



Montana Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services promotes opportunities for Montanans with disabilities to have rewarding careers and achieve maximum personal potential.

The State Rehabilitation Council advises Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services to improve policies, programs, and delivery of services through a collaborative effort with other agencies.

MONTANA'S STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL



Lacey Keller
SRC Chair
Disability Advocacy
Representative



Celina Cline
VRBS Counselor, Ex-
Officio



Jennifer Owen
State Workforce
Innovation Board
(SWIB) Representative



Gabrielle Broere
SRC Co-Chair
Current Client



Doug McElroy
Community
Rehabilitation
Program (CRP)
Representative



Chanda Hermanson
VRBS Director, Ex-
Officio



Kendra Lewis
SRC Functionary
Business, Industry, &
Labor Representative



Corinne Moore
Business, Industry, &
Labor Representative



Tommy Roberts
Current Client



June Hermanson
State Independent
Living Council (SILC)
Representative



Brian Tocher
Disability Advocacy
Representative



Shandra Bell
Former Client



Heidi Gibson
Parent Training &
Information (PTI)
Representative



Joleen Weatherwax
Section 121 Project
Representative



Eva Belatski
Client Assistance
Program (CAP)
Representative



Desiree Johnson
Office of Public
Instruction (OPI)
Representative



VRBS DATA & LETTER FROM THE CHAIR

4683

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED
BY VRBS

On behalf of the Montana State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), I am honored to present this year's highlights and accomplishments as part of the annual report on Vocational Rehabilitation and Blind Services (VRBS). This past year has been one of collaboration, growth, and meaningful progress in our mission to advise VRBS to improve policies, programs, and delivery of services.

2952

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY PRE-
EMPLOYMENT
TRANSITIONS
SERVICES

In May, the SRC partnered with the State Independent Living Council (SILC) for a joint meeting in Missoula. Together, we reviewed the progress of the Work Incentives Planning and Assistance contract, a vital program empowering individuals to navigate employment opportunities confidently. This collaborative approach enriched our understanding of the challenges and successes in fostering workforce participation for people with disabilities.

This year, the SRC welcomed two new members, Desiree Johnson and Heidi Gibson. Their diverse perspectives and expertise will strengthen our council's ability to advocate effectively for Montanans with disabilities. Recruitment and engagement were further enhanced through the revamp of our SRC orientation process, ensuring new members are well-prepared to contribute meaningfully to our mission.

In alignment with our commitment to transparency and accountability, the SRC Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment committee submitted a Request for Proposal to outsource the management of our consumer satisfaction survey. By January 2025, we anticipate selecting a contractor to provide unbiased, comprehensive feedback to guide program improvements.

198

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY
EXTENDED
EMPLOYMENT

Highlighting the transformative impact of VRBS programs remains a priority. This year, the council reviewed 41 case stories and selected four compelling narratives to showcase in this report. These stories illustrate the positive outcomes VRBS programs have on the lives of Montanans with disabilities.

During our third quarterly meeting in Dillon, we toured the Youth Challenge program, gaining valuable insights into this initiative's contributions to the community. Additionally, the SRC engaged local service providers and stakeholders in community roundtables at each of our quarterly meetings, fostering dialogue and strengthening partnerships statewide.

1351

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY
INDEPENDENT
LIVING

The SRC also expanded its capacity for advocacy by establishing a legislative committee. This new initiative aims to educate and train members in effectively engaging with the legislative process, ensuring we remain a voice for the needs of Montanans with disabilities.

Finally, the SRC reviewed VR budgets and program goals, contributing to the ongoing oversight and alignment of resources with the strategic objectives of VRBS.

It has been a privilege to work alongside the dedicated members of the SRC and our community partners. Together, we continue to support greater independence, inclusion, and opportunity for Montanans with disabilities.

Respectfully,



2024 SRC Chair

VRBS
SUCCESSFULLY
PLACED

296

INDIVIDUALS
IN
JOBS

364

INDIVIDUALS
SERVED BY
OLDER BLIND
PROGRAM

VRBS SUCCESS STORIES

Brent, an individual with Retinal Pigmentosa, applied in August 2020 while he was working as an Independent Living Specialist for LIFTT. He enjoyed his job but wanted to advance in employment. Due to his visual impairment, Brent cannot drive and was having issues with his computer screen-reading software. While on the VR waitlist, Brent participated in the Older-Blind Program where he received community-based Orientation and Mobility Training. In April 2023, Brent shared personal experiences with mental health and addiction and explained he committed himself to making a presence as a mental health advocate. While discussing career goals, his VR Counselor was admittedly confused as to why someone with such a background would need help finding employment.



Brent initially completed a low vision assessment with a Vision Rehabilitation Therapist and was provided with a CCTV and solar shades to prevent glare as well as JAWS, Zoomtext, and Fusion software. He spent many sessions getting the necessary computer and software training both in the office and in his home.

Brent's confidence grew with the improved technology and learning how to effectively use the equipment to meet his needs. He still expressed some anxiety and confidence issues during guidance and counseling sessions with his VR Counselor regarding advancing in his employment. His VR Counselor listened and reminded him of all he had already accomplished. Eventually, Brent was approached to apply for a state job. He consulted with his VR Counselor about whether or not he should apply and his VR Counselor enthusiastically encouraged him to apply.

In the summer of 2023, Brent was hired by the State of Montana Prevention Bureau as a Program Officer. He overcame the barriers originally thought impossible and has done exactly what he set out to do.

Mason initially came to vocational rehabilitation when he was 19 years old with interests of attending Flathead Valley Community College (FVCC) and becoming a special education teacher or a music teacher. He attended one semester at FVCC but had dropped out because he was overwhelmed. As a result of his autism, Mason experiences tactile and verbal sensory issues. He sometimes becomes agitated with loud noises. To avoid shutting down, Mason rocks to self-soothe.

While Mason was on VRBS' waiting list, he joined the Job Corp where he remained active with VRBS by attending his quarterly meetings until he graduated from the Job Corp in 2021, with his certification in heavy diesel mechanics. Mason then began aggressively applying for jobs that would utilize his credential with assistance of his job coach through Career Connections. In March of 2022, He was offered a full-time position at Western States Cat as a Heavy Equipment Mechanic being paid \$19.50/hr.



Initially, things were going well for Mason, and we discussed closure after a few months.

He did end up needing some additional interventions from his job coach however before his case could be successfully exited. The job coach worked closely with the employer, Mason's mom, and the HR department to ensure Mason had the needed accommodations for him to be successful. Mason was exited with a High-Quality outcome in September of 2023 making \$21/hour and working 40 hrs/week.

VRBS SUCCESS STORIES



Emma started receiving Pre-Employment Transitions Services (Pre-ETS) through Hellgate High's contract in 2020. At Hellgate, Emma completed numerous interest inventories through Career Scope and Montana Career Information System as well as utilized Virtual Job Shadow to further explore her interests. Emma was introduced to Pre-ETS Specialist, Andrew, during her junior year and explained that she was interested in learning more about careers in Politics. Andrew shared information about Pre-ETS and what services were available to Emma. She expressed interest in participating in all Pre-ETS services and activities that were available to her. Andrew then connected Emma with a Pre-ETS summer camp, as well as Montana Youth Leadership Forum (MYLF) Step I. Through the summer camp Emma participated in numerous job shadows, informational interviews, and job exploration activities as well as mock interviews and resume writing activities. These activities helped increase Emma's confidence in speaking with others and with feeling more prepared for work. At MYLF Step I Emma was fully engaged in all the activities offered, and through MYLF she developed a

greater interest in advocacy and disability rights. When Emma returned from MYLF Step I, she expressed interest in learning more about careers in public administration and politics. Andrew referred her to a local Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) to assist with coordinating job shadows and informational interviews with professionals working in those fields. Through the CRP, Emma was able to participate in informational interviews with local politicians, state level politicians, and was able to participate in campaigning activities for a political candidate. The CRP also assisted Emma with gaining work experience during high school by coordinating a paid Work Based Learning Experience with a local business.

Andrew additionally assisted Emma with obtaining an internship with the City-County Health Department, working on an action research project that looked at needs of young people after being impacted by the COVID 19 Pandemic and recommended her for the State Independent Living Council (SILC). Emma was selected for the SILC and attended the National Council for Independent Living Conference in Washington DC, where she learned a lot about advocacy, disability rights, and political processes on behalf of SILC. After graduating high school, Emma completed MYLF Step II, was staff for MYLF Step I, attended the Montana Youth Transitions (MYT) Conference, started college, got a part time job, and is actively participating in a Vocational Rehab.

Through participation in pre-ETS and Vocational Rehab services, Emma has gained more confidence, has better self-advocacy skills, and has developed the tools and resources needed to successfully reach her future employment goals.



A People of Vision

Daniel applied for services in March 2017. He was invited off the waitlist for services in 2020. While he waited, he applied for Tribal VR and began to go to school for computer work at the Missoula College. While in school, he used Office of Disability Equity services including interpreting and transcription services. When Daniel was in his final semester of school, job search assistance was added to help him find an internship site that was needed to finish his degree. Despite the best efforts to find a place for Daniel to do his internship, one was not found in Missoula.

Employers thought they would need to have a full-time interpreter on staff in order to communicate with Daniel even after being shown other, effective methods that were free. Daniel moved back home to Dixon as he was not able to afford living in Missoula. Daniel was able to find an internship with the Tribe. He successfully completed this and earned his degree. The Tribe was so impressed with his computer skills they extended the internship for several months while they redid their budget to fund a permanent, full-time position for Daniel. On October 4, 2022, Daniel was hired on as an employee. While Daniel was an intern, he hit a deer totaling his car. Because of his employment he has been able to purchase a new car that he uses daily to go to work.

STATISTICS FROM: Montana Department of LABOR & INDUSTRY

The Montana Department of Labor & Industry has provided a summary of Montana’s population with disabilities, including labor force participation, employment, and earnings. Data is from the American Community Survey 1-year estimates, with the most recent year available being 2023. This memo focuses on the population aged 18-64 due to data availability.

Montanans with disabilities are less likely to work full-time year-round than Montanans without disabilities, at 56% compared with 67% respectively. Fewer hours worked explains some of the difference in income levels between the two groups. Median earnings for people with a disability was \$30,892. Median earnings for people without a disability was \$41,278.[1]

[1] Median earnings include people age 16+ with earnings in the past 12-months.

In 2023, there were 81,629 Montanans with disabilities aged 18-64. Of this population, 45,066 were employed, 1,862 were unemployed, and the other 34,701 were not in the labor force. The share of Montanans participating in the labor force has improved over the last few years, increasing from 50% in 2021 to 57% in 2023. This labor force participation rate is higher than the U.S. average, at 51%. However, labor force participation for Montanans with disabilities remains lower than for Montanans without disabilities, at 83%. **Figure 1** shows three years of labor force participation rates for Montanans with and without disabilities.

Since 2021, earnings increased fastest for Montanans with disabilities, by a total of 38% compared with 15% for Montanans without disabilities. Part of the fast growth in earnings is an increase in hours worked. More Montanans with disabilities are working full-time year-round than they were in past years (about 50% in 2021 and 2022). **Figure 3** shows annual earnings over the last three years.

Figure 1: Labor Force Participation Rates ages 18-64
Source: 2021-23 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates

	Montanans with disabilities	Montanans without disabilities
2021	50%	82%
2022	56%	83%
2023	57%	83%

FIGURE 3: MEDIAN EARNINGS FOR MONTANA WORKERS 16 AND OVER BY DISABILITY STATUS

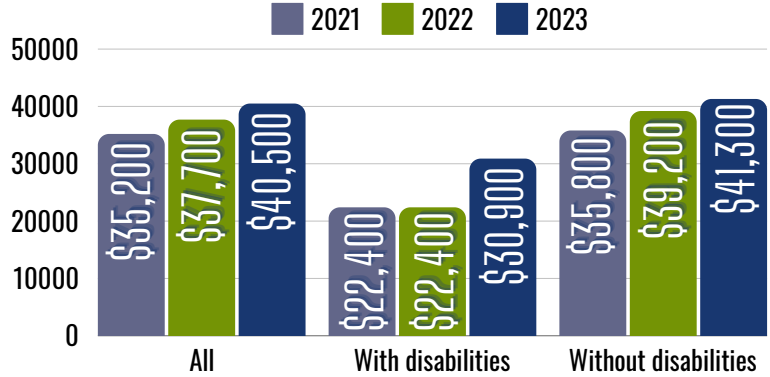


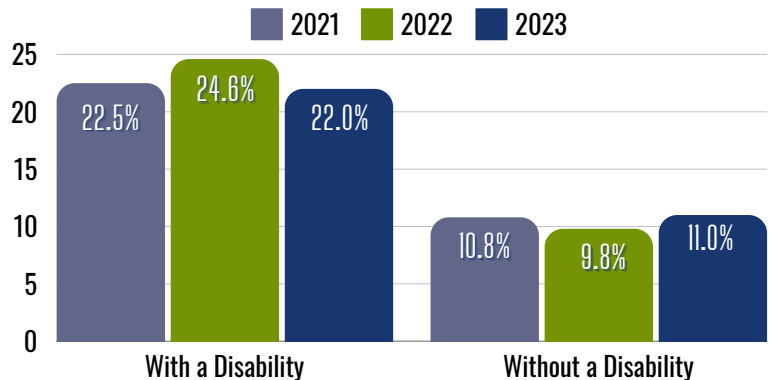
Figure 2 shows the unemployment rate for Montanans with disabilities at 4.0%. This rate has improved over the last few years, from 10.2% in 2021 and 6.7% in 2022. The unemployment rates for Montanans with disabilities is lower than the U.S. average of 9.3%, but it remains higher than the rate for Montanans without disabilities, at 2.6%.

In 2023, about 22% of Montanans with disabilities (17,800 people) had income at or below the poverty level, compared to 11% for Montanans without disabilities. This represents double the rate of poverty for Montanans with disabilities. As such, the population with disabilities makes up about 22% of the population at or below poverty levels, despite representing 13% of the population aged 18 to 64. **Figure 4** shows the percent of Montanans below the poverty level by disability status, for 2021 through 2023.

Figure 2: Unemployment Rates ages 18-64
Source: 2021-23 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates

	Montanans with disabilities	Montanans without disabilities
2021	10.2%	3.3%
2022	6.7%	2.6%
2023	4.0%	2.6%

FIGURE 4: PERCENT OF MONTANANS BELOW THE POVERTY LINE BY DISABILITY STATUS



Report Completed by Emily Trautman, Senior Economist



SRC RECOMMENDATIONS TO VRBS

GOAL 1: ALL MONTANANS WITH DISABILITIES CAN ACCESS HIGH-QUALITY COMPETITIVE INTEGRATED EMPLOYMENT.

- Explore self-directed service provision through Centers for Independent Living (CILs) to provide employment services.
- Continue to work on advancing competitive integrated employment opportunities for individuals with the most significant disabilities through the existing partnership with the Harkin Institute and advocating for Employment First policy.

GOAL 2: MONTANA YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES ARE EFFECTIVELY ENGAGED IN VOCATIONAL EXPLORATION AND WORK READINESS TRAINING.

- Leverage supports in the communities, including schools and partners in the foster care system, to target students right at age 14 for early engagement in Pre-ETS.

GOAL 3: MONTANA'S WORKFORCE SYSTEM IS COORDINATED TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR EMPLOYERS.

- Improve communication with WIOA partners and work towards developing data sharing agreements to improve co-enrollment numbers.
- Actively collaborate with State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB) on their strategic initiative to reduce the “out of the labor force” population which includes a large percentage of individuals with illnesses and disabilities.
- Provide more targeted and direct engagement and education/training with employers by leveraging WIOA Core Partners particularly Department of Labor (DLI).

GOAL 4: VRBS IS A STABLE, SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION.

- Continue to support VRBS Support Staff & Technicians to obtain the required training to advance into VRBS Counselor positions.
- Focus on staff retention for all positions by providing meaningful training opportunities, appropriate recognition, and piloting innovative ways to promote more intentional interaction with clients.
- Implement an employee engagement survey for the purposes of identifying levels of staff retention and areas of improvement.
- Pursue hiring a marketing agency to assist with rebranding Montana VRBS.

DISABILITY MENTORING WEEK

To celebrate National Disability Employment Awareness Month, DPHHS hosted Disability Mentoring Week activities from October 14-18. This event served as an ideal opportunity for Montana businesses and professionals to partner with DPHHS to provide career exploration and mentoring opportunities to youth with disabilities. Approximately 174 students signed up to take part this year. They come from communities throughout Montana, including Alberton, Baker, Belt, Butte, East Helena, Frenchtown, Great Falls, Helena, Hamilton, Lockwood, and Missoula.



Dir. Brereton and Layla Riggs pose for a photo with Governor Gianforte during job shadow on October 15th.



1) Tirzah participating in an informational interview with Jeff Ewelt from Zoo Montana in Billings; 2) Anjle bathing a golden retriever during a work-based learning experience at Paw Paw's Dog Grooming in Frenchtown; 3) Anjle grooming a dog at Paw Paw's Dog Grooming in Frenchtown; 4) Shay job shadowing a small animal surgery during all-day job shadow at Polson Animal Clinic; 5) Clayton participating in a job shadow with Non-Stop Local in Billings with their chief engineer Paul Holzwarth; 6) Alex King completing an informational interview and job shadow with Computer Repairman at Montana Technical Solutions.