



**WORKFORCE  
SERVICES**  
REHABILITATION

# 2023 Utah State **Rehabilitation Council Report**

JANUARY 2024



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UTAH STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL  
1595 WEST 500 SOUTH • SALT LAKE CITY, UT 84104



## MISSION

The mission of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), in partnership with the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation and in collaboration with disability groups, is to ensure quality vocational rehabilitation services for eligible individuals as they make informed choices to achieve employment.

We accomplish this mission by reviewing programs, analyzing service delivery processes and advising on policies and procedures.



# REHABILITATION COUNCIL MEMBERS

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## EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE:

- Selena Harris, Consumer, Chair
- Lavinia Gripenrog, Special Education Representative, Vice Chair
- Rob Ferris, Business, Industry and Labor, Secretary
- Brian Lahti, Consumer, Past Chair
- Jasi Sefcik, DSDHH Representative

## MEMBERS:

- Bianca Gonzalez, Client Assistance Program
- Jennie Dopp, Utah Parent Center
- Velma Spencer, Title 121, Navajo Nation
- Jenni Thompson, BVI Representative
- Austin Oseguera, UCAT Representative
- Heather Mousley, Department of Workforce Services
- Cheri Lachenmeier, VR Counselor Representative
- Bryn Peterson, DSPD
- Julie Beckstead, USILC Representative
- Matthew Huskinson, Consumer
- Dani Williams, Business, Industry and Labor
- Steven Phelps, VR Counselor Representative



## MESSAGE FROM THE COUNCIL CHAIR



IT HAS TRULY BEEN A PLEASURE to serve as State Rehabilitation Council Chair for the past year. I was first introduced to the unique services provided to people with disabilities through the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR) as a client in 1989. It was nothing less than life-changing. I utilized my knowledge and experience gained to support other people with a wide variety of impediments to employment to find competitive, integrated employment in partnership with USOR and other funding agencies. I have passionately been doing so for the past 33 years.

I was appointed as an SRC representative for the Utah Parent Center in 2018. In February 2020, I became the statewide director of employment services for TURN Community Services and felt strongly about continuing to serve on the council. I joined the council as a consumer. I've enjoyed all of my time serving on the SRC as a council member, executive committee member, secretary, vice chair, and chair.

This last year has been interesting as we are slowly coming back to the new normal after the worldwide pandemic. We held virtual and hybrid meetings, and the last meeting was only in person. The benefits of meeting virtually were the only good thing to come of our pandemic world, but it was wonderful to finally see each other again at my last meeting as chair.

As a person with a disability, a parent of children with disabilities, and a professional who works directly with people with disabilities to find employment, I have found that serving on the council continues to educate me about the many resources available throughout the state. I have been able to take this information directly to the people I serve, and have been able to advocate on their behalf to the SRC. I could not have filled these shoes without the amazing support provided by Aaron Thompson, assistant division director, Rob Ferris, SRC secretary, and Sylvia Gines, client service technician and doer of all things. I've appreciated their patience, guidance, and support tremendously.

Respectfully,

Selena Harris

State Rehabilitation Council Chair 2022-2023



# MESSAGE FROM THE USOR DIRECTOR



IT IS WITH GREAT PLEASURE that I share with you the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) 2023 Annual Report. The content in these pages reflects the ongoing dedication of our professional team in the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR), community rehabilitation providers, employers and SRC members in extending vital services to our clients.

As we mark the completion of another year, we persist in broadening employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Here are a few of the many highlights from 2023:

- USOR's vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors assisted 2,165 clients in achieving their individual goals for competitive, integrated employment in 2023.
- In total, USOR served 16,827 clients during 2023.
- USOR's business relations team supported 877 employers during 2023.
- USOR has broadened employer initiatives, offering training, technical assistance and recruitment support to Utah businesses hiring individuals with disabilities, prioritizing virtual service provision and rural outreach over the past year.
- USOR has expanded the ABLE Utah program, doubling active accounts to more than 600 and increasing managed assets to \$3.1 million, enabling individuals with disabilities to save without affecting benefit eligibility.
- The Career Navigator project, serving more than 600 youths, provides outreach, information, and career exploration for those with severe disabilities seeking or in subminimum wage work.

The State Rehabilitation Council and USOR work together to make the vocational rehabilitation program better. The council also guides USOR on WIOA Unified State Plan activities and checks how well VR services work. Besides this, the SRC works with other councils and connects with important groups. The council wants people with disabilities to be actively involved in the VR process, and they cooperate with USOR to make sure everyone is treated with respect and given choices.

Respectfully,

Sarah Brenna  
USOR Director

# Introduction



## THE UTAH STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

The Utah State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) is a body of citizens appointed by the Executive Director of the Department of Workforce Services under the authority of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended.

The council is composed of consumers, professionals, employers, labor representatives, family and parent advocates, and service providers who promote public awareness, support of the vocational rehabilitation program and advocate for individuals with disabilities. The majority of council membership consists of individuals with disabilities, many of whom have been involved as participants in the vocational rehabilitation process. Members of the SRC have been chosen for their interest in, specialized knowledge of, and expertise with serving the disabled community. The term of office for selected SRC members is three years.

The council provides direct communication from consumers, rehabilitation professionals, business, industry, labor, service providers and other individuals interested in improving the services provided by the VR program. Collectively, this group reviews, analyzes and advises the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation (USOR) regarding the VR program.

Over the years, the SRC has established strong community relationships among people with disabilities, local businesses, private and public agencies, service providers, community organizations and advocacy groups to promote the objectives of the organization. The SRC continues to be an active partner with the VR program to ensure the provision of quality services to eligible consumers. SRC members provide critical support to USOR and to individuals with disabilities served by the agency by communicating with legislators on both the state and national level. They promote legislation and funding requests that continue the specialized services provided by USOR.

Council members participate in various functions of the VR program. These include attending USOR statewide meetings, Golden Key employment recognition awards ceremonies, town meetings, focus groups and the Utah Rehabilitation Association annual conference.

The council has contributed to, and continues to be involved in, the development and implementation of USOR's strategic plan and the WIOA Unified State Plan. It has also identified areas of strength within USOR, acknowledged the best practices of the agency and recommended improvements to the VR program. Council members and USOR staff members agree that through appropriate communication and partnerships, vocational rehabilitation services for people with disabilities in Utah will continue to improve.



# PURPOSE: ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The responsibilities of the State Rehabilitation Council are outlined in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended in 1998, and include the following:

Review, analyze and advise the Utah State Office of Rehabilitation regarding the performance of its responsibilities, particularly those related to eligibility (including order of selection); the extent, scope and effectiveness of services provided; and the functions of the state rehabilitation agency that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities to achieve employment outcomes.

- In partnership with USOR, develop, agree to and evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program.
- Advise USOR regarding activities authorized to be carried out and assist in the preparation of the WIOA Unified State Plan, amendments to the plan, applications, reports, needs assessments and evaluations.
- Conduct a review and an analysis of the effectiveness of VR services and consumer satisfaction.
- Prepare and submit an annual report to the Department of Workforce Services and the commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) on the status of VR in the state and make the report available to the public.
- Coordinate the work of the council with the activities of other disability-related councils within the state.
- Establish working relationships between the VR program, the Statewide Independent Living Council, the Special Education Advisory Panel established under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the State Developmental Disabilities Council and the State Workforce Services Council.
- Perform additional functions that the SRC determines are appropriate and comparable to other functions performed by the council.

The SRC, in partnership with the USOR VR program, is committed to helping the people of Utah who qualify for services to obtain better jobs with a living wage, health care benefits and better career opportunities, and to become as independent as possible. The council believes that individuals with disabilities should be full and active partners in the VR process. Members of the SRC seek to work cooperatively with USOR to ensure that the activities of the VR program are carried out in a manner that is respectful of an individual's dignity and recognizes an individual's right to make informed choices.





# 2022-2023 YEAR IN REVIEW

**DIVISION DIRECTOR UPDATES:** The council received regular reports on state and national issues affecting USOR and the VR program. At the November 2022 meeting, Division Director Sarah Brenna discussed the current national budget situation and the fact that money is not being spent by the states; it is being returned to RSA. This will be an issue in the coming months for further SRC discussion. Brenna discussed the open DSDHH director position and requested recruitment assistance from the SRC. The Disability Determination Services (DDS) applications are increasing and there is a need to hire more examiners. In January 2023, Brenna talked about the completed 2022 State Rehabilitation Council report required by RSA, as well as an update on the legislative session, including no additional funding requests from VR. At the May 2023 meeting, Brenna discussed the statewide performance-based pay (PBP) plan that was approved by DHRM and the Executive Director's Office (EDO). There would be quarterly reviews with either "meets expectations" or "does not meet expectations" ratings for all staff. Staff members with an overall "meets expectations" rating would receive a 2.5% raise if all quarter expectations were met, and a 1.5% increase if at least two were met. Brenna discussed the influential work of her assistant division director, Aaron Thompson, with the PBP process at the department level. In September 2023, Brenna discussed the WIOA requirement of states putting aside 15% of all VR budget monies for Pre-ETS services (on a 2-year budget cycle). It took time to develop guidelines, and USOR was not able to spend the required money. The pandemic did not help the process. As a result, USOR received a non-compliance letter from RSA for not spending the required 15%. Following notification in May 2023 USOR submitted a corrective action plan in August 2023, to address the issue. A discussion on outreach and awareness, contracted services, fee-for-

service, and additional pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) employees being addressed, including more contracts in the spring were mentioned. The corrective action will require tracking of spending and quarterly reports to RSA, as well as the allocation of more Pre-ETS staff, review of current service rates, and enhanced monitoring of statewide service provision.

**VR PROGRAM UPDATES:** Aaron Thompson, assistant division director, provided the council monthly reports and information on a number of VR program-related topics. At the November 2022 meeting, Thompson presented on the national VR priorities (e.g., attract and retain VR staff; streamline VR processes; and increase awareness for VR). A review of the VR dashboard and a comprehensive statewide needs assessment update was given. Thompson discussed the upcoming Golden Key Awards recognition and the need for success stories from the districts that highlight the impact of the VR program. In addition, Aimee Langone, transition and supported employment coordinator, introduced the new Pre-ETS contract specialist, Elise Harward, and provided both a Pre-ETS service and Disability Career Navigator launch update. Josh Rodeback, business relations supervisor, discussed Windmills disability awareness training and the benefits in helping leaders recognize the benefits of diverse experiences and abilities; improve communication with and about people with disabilities; learn how to implement low-cost accommodations; and understand the basics of employment law. In January 2023, Thompson spoke on the key VR performance indicators including new applicants; successful closures; average days to eligibility; average days to IPE development; and MSG rate. Josh Rodeback then updated the council on upcoming Business Relations Team events (including the Workability Career Exploration and job fair events.) Jason Bennington, employment support services specialist, reported on measurable data points within

the USOR management system (AWARE) to assist with monitoring individual CRPs as well as training and service initiatives. At the March 2023 meeting, Thompson presented a VR performance dashboard update and staff update (including the introduction of three new district directors.) He provided additional information on the comprehensive statewide needs assessment (e.g., key informant interviews; data analysis of disability and employment; data comparisons from other states; and focus group involvement). Staff, client, educator, employment, CRP and parent focus groups would also be a part of the assessment. In May 2023, Thompson reviewed the performance dashboard information; new applicant trends statewide; the Pre-ETS grant solicitation; a VR policy brief; and information regarding the upcoming Golden Key scholarship and awards event at the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah. In September 2023, Thompson, in addition to the regular VR performance dashboard report, discussed common performance measures (e.g., second quarter employment; fourth quarter employment; median wages; credential attainment; measurable skill gain; and WIOA common performance measure outcomes). He discussed the VR fall focus areas (community connections; exceptional customer service; operational excellence; and employee success), as well as an update on Pre-ETS, and a new VR overview video for the division website. Thompson shared future activities of the division, including the 2023-25 VR program goals; the WIOA state plan update; the Pre-ETS action plan; the FY23 client satisfaction survey; the 2024 annual report; and new client experience stories.

**POLICY UPDATES:** The council was provided policy updates throughout the year, including new regulations, practices and processes.

### **CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEYS:**

At the November 2022 meeting, Nicole Fraedrich, USOR program evaluation coordinator, presented on the ongoing consumer satisfaction survey process. She discussed the previous approach to getting feedback from consumers of VR services, and the newly developed approach and questions for increasing both feedback and

input from clients, as well as an increased response rate. The opening wording of the consumer satisfaction survey had been changed in July 2022, and the response rate had increased significantly with the new virtual format (SurveyMonkey). The SRC unanimously supported the changes and the improvements to the survey at this meeting.

### **PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES FOR DEAFBLIND STUDENTS OVERVIEW:**

In November 2022, Utah Youth Service Coordinator Jodi Flickinger with the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC), presented on programs and services to individuals with visual impairments, blindness, and deaf/blindness. She provided a two-minute simulation and quiz for participants that mimicked blindness and deafness (e.g., blurry background and no sound), and asked questions about the images shown. There are 2.4 million Deaf and/or blind people in the United States, with visual conditions including macular degeneration, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. Flickinger discussed the mission statement of the HKNC; the services and locations of the centers, including 10 regions in the U.S. and the territories, with a central headquarters in New York. She then provided information on the role of a HKNC regional youth service coordinator, and her contact information for SRC members with questions.

### **POST-HIGH SCHOOL OUTCOMES 2022**

**SURVEY RESULTS PRESENTATION:** In January 2023, Utah State Board of Education (USBE) Transition Specialist Lavinia Gripentrog discussed how youth with disabilities who exited school with an IEP are given a 23-question survey one year after high school or post-high to measure: post-secondary education and training; competitive or other employment; adult living; agency involvement; barriers to employment and/or higher education; and positive experiences in high school. She reported on several criteria looked at as part of the survey, including: type of higher education and/or employment outcome; survey response rates over time; college attendance rates over time; competitive employment rate; percent earning minimum wage or higher; specific

youth with autism; and youth with intellectual disabilities outcomes. Gripenrog also reviewed the 2022 responses from unemployed youth (e.g., laid off, COVID, health or disability), and the current rates of youth connection with VR and Workforce Development programs through DWS. She finished by sharing several survey comments from participants with the council.

### **DSPD PILOT PROJECT “MY VISION FOR ADULTHOOD” OVERVIEW:**

At the January 2023 meeting, DSPD coordinator TeMerra Blackwater presented on the “My Vision of Adulthood,” a person-centered planning guide for students with disabilities. She clarified that this was not a program to replace the individual education plan (IEP) or the IEP team approach, but rather as a support to elevate the voice of students with disabilities in planning for their futures. Elements include: 1) creating my vision; 2) planning my vision; 3) making the vision happen; and 4) living my vision. The pilot project would be between January 2023 – May 2023, and Blackwater participant application information to the council, including availability to answer questions by contacting the Person-Centered Planning in Education Team: [PCPpilotproject@utah.gov](mailto:PCPpilotproject@utah.gov).

### **INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAM UPDATE:**

In March 2023, Independent Living Program Coordinator Noreen Roeca presented on the history of the independent living movement, including the opening of the first Center for Independent Living in 1972. Social change movements contributing to the expansion of the independent living concept included the civil rights movement; the women’s movement; consumerism; the self-help movement, and the disability rights movement. Roeca discussed the independent living philosophy tied to Title VII of the Rehabilitation Act, including the IL vs. medical social paradigm differences. She then provided information on the centers for independent living (CILs) in Utah; eligibility for IL services; the independent living plan for consumers and services received; the core services of independent living (e.g., IL skills training; information and referral; peer counseling and support systems and individual advocacy; and youth transition).

Roeca discussed the Ninja Youth Leadership Conference areas of focus; the equipment loan bank; the relationship between USOR and the centers; and the Utah Assistive Technology Fund for eligible individuals. She finished with an introduction to the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council (USILC) and the statewide plan for independent living (in coordination with the USOR).

### **UTAH STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL (USILC) NEEDS ASSESSMENT OVERVIEW:**

At the March 2023 meeting, Utah State Independent Living Council Executive Director Tylee Harmon reviewed the Utah Statewide Independent Living Council Needs assessment overview, including the nine included questions and the goals for the state plan survey to be sent out to council members for their review.

### **PRE-ETS CONTRACTOR PROGRAM OVERVIEW (SPECTRUM ACADEMY) TRAINING OVERVIEW FOR COUNSELORS PRESENTATION:**

In March 2023, special education specialist from Spectrum Academy, McDevan Carling, provided a Pre-ETS contractor overview to the council. Spectrum Academy was created by parents of students with high functioning Asperger’s/Autism, with campuses in North Salt Lake and Pleasant Grove. This is a K-12 program in its 14th year with the goal of keeping classrooms small, with more one-on-one learning. Carling discussed elements of the training at Spectrum Academy, including instruction on transportation, budgeting, and employment. Spectrum has had a Pre-ETS contract with the USOR since 2021 in terms of career exploration, pre-employment training, and resume development. Of interest to the council was the school-based business concept (a snack cart) and work-based learning opportunities in community entry-level positions. This Pre-ETS collaboration between Spectrum, VR and business has provided opportunities for several students. Student feedback was reported to be positive as well as the hands-on vs. classroom approach to community employment opportunities.

### **PROGRAM AND POLICY TEAM STRUCTURE**

**PRESENTATION:** At the May 2023 meeting, Rylee Williams, USOR training coordinator, gave a short overview of the Program and Policy Team Structure for USOR. This included training, quality assurance and business analysts. She discussed the VR training academy for new counselors; the VR supervisory training; the VR resource manual and the client service policy manual (including guidance documents); the comprehensive system for personnel development (CSPD) standards; and continuing education for certified VR counselors.

### **TURN COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**PRESENTATION:** In May 2023, TURN Director of Employment Services, and current council chair, Selena Harris, provided historical information on TURN and its mission to “TURN” dreams into reality since 1998. TURN currently supports over 800 individuals with disabilities in Utah, and is a contracted community rehabilitation provider (CRP) of Pre-ETS services through USOR, including: job exploration counseling; work-based learning; workplace readiness training; counseling on opportunities for enrollment in transition and/or post-secondary programs; and self-advocacy. TURN also assists students with STEM occupation exploration (e.g., career outlook, educational and physical requirements; wage info). Harris also discussed eligibility for TURN services for interested participants.

### **PRE-ETS PROGRAM (UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY) PRESENTATION:**

At the May 2023 meeting, Utah State University (USU) associate professor, Brian Phillips, discussed the Pre-ETS programs offered by the university, including the development of the transition readiness toolkit (TRT) to assess Pre-ETS outcomes, and collaboration efforts between USU, USOR, the contracted providers and Penn State University. A battery of assessments have been developed to measure pre/post change for each of the five core Pre-ETS services. Dr. Phillips then discussed the timeline for the USOR contract (from 2017-2023), and critical collaboration points during that time. He then provided the council with the number of youth responses to the Transition Readiness Kit; how

transition readiness toolkit (TRT) has evolved to meet demand and expand potential; new features; and the fact that the USOR was the first state to implement such a process to evaluate Pre-ETS services.

### **COMPREHENSIVE NEEDS ASSESSMENT/ STATE PLAN UPDATE PRESENTATION:**

At the September 2023 meeting, Dr. Phillips from Utah State University, made an expanded presentation of the USOR comprehensive needs assessment to the SRC. He discussed the purpose and rationale for the assessment, including extra emphasis being placed on Asian population needs within the state. Information had been gathered through secondary data research, key informant interviews, focus groups and surveys. Phillips discussed the highly positive preliminary finds from both the secondary data and the target populations, emphasizing the diversity of Utah in terms of its strengths, needs, challenges, opportunities, resilience to global challenges, and population metrics. Key findings in terms of turnover, client satisfaction, communication and youth-specific engagement were reviewed with the council. He provided information on new findings of how Asian populations are under served and this is a barrier to employment and access to USOR services. Of interest was the homeless population and access to VR services being an area of concern. Phillips then discussed the CRP perspectives on populations with challenges to employment. Finally, recommendations were reviewed, including: a focus on working alliances; the creation of turnover resistant collaborations; fine-tuning incentives to rural outreach and temporary work experiences; expanding services for homeless populations; and changing client demographics. Although there is room for improvement, Utah is effectively and efficiently providing services to individuals with disabilities (as evidenced by the needs assessment).

# ATTACHMENT 4.2 (C)

Attachment 4.2 (C): Summary of Input and Recommendations of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), Response of the Designated State Unit and Explanations for Rejection of Input or Recommendations.

In addition to the review, analysis and recommendations covered above, the SRC made recommendations to the vocational rehabilitation (VR) portion of the Unified State Plan, and as required by section 101 (a) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) of 2014.

The following is a summary of SRC recommendations made from October 2022 to September 2023 and USOR's response and actions taken regarding these recommendations:

## **SRC RECOMMENDATION 1:**

At the November 2022 meeting, Aaron Thompson, assistant division director, presented the national VR priorities to the SRC: 1) attract and retain VR staff; 2) streamline the VR process; and 3) increase awareness for VR. SRC members asked several questions in terms of targeting parent groups to get them started earlier in the VR process; as well as staff retention efforts for VR counselors following the "Great Resignation" during the pandemic. The SRC asked for an administrative response from DRS during that presentation.

## **USOR RESPONSE 1:**

USOR discussed the ongoing VR public awareness effort, including tapping into the parent groups for feedback and involvement with VR processes, as well as an expanded approach to broaden outreach to those coming into the VR profession. This would include

platforms such as LinkedIn and other social media to attract applicants for DRS positions, including quality standards for both hiring and staff retention.

## **SRC RECOMMENDATION 2:**

The DRS program evaluation coordinator (November, 2022 meeting), discussed the previous and current modes for survey administration and collection of data. The new approach followed outreach with other states and survey platforms; new questions and readability with both SRC and Disability Law Center (DLC) feedback; and the current use of SurveyMonkey that has resulted in a quicker turnaround/return rate. A review of several responses from participants, and suggestions for improvement was provided as well. The SRC asked for a response from administration in terms of the current level of household income reported by clients applying for VR services.

## **USOR RESPONSE 2:**

USOR provided information on the federal lower living standards as well as the Utah state financial needs test, specified in policy. Some services (including Pre-ETS) are exempt on the needs test. Additional information on liquid vs. non-liquid asset inclusion on required financial forms was also shared with the SRC.

## **SRC RECOMMENDATION 3:**

During the September 2023 meeting, the DRS employment support services specialist reviewed the community rehabilitation program (CRP) fee-for-service rates, including a comparison of 2020 and 2021 data on increases in work strategy and discovery assessments;

placement rate increases and a significant jump in customized employment placements. High quality indicators (e.g., work hours; wages; benefits; days to placement; STEM occupation; and rural) as incentives to CRPs providing services to VR clients. Additional information regarding CRP capacity training (e.g., ACRE, financial literacy) to provide improved client services, as well as individual CRP performance data of contracted providers was given. SRC members had questions for administration regarding whether CRP performance data was posted publicly, and whether this was a part of the USOR “transparency” goal for sharing relevant information with key stakeholders.

### **USOR RESPONSE 3:**

USOR discussed that although data was not posted publicly at that time, the goal would be to eventually publish the CRP “report card” following review by the CRPs and VR counselors. This information would be posted on the DWS provider section of the DRS website. Education for counselors and informed choices for clients would be important to service transparency as a result.

### **SRC RECOMMENDATION 4:**

During the September 2023 presentation on USOR’s corrective action plan addressing underspending of its Pre-ETS funds, it was suggested that USOR allocate a portion of these funds to bolster collaboration with local education agencies and partners. This would increase awareness of services, facilitate information sharing to reach underserved groups, and improve connections with parents.

### **USOR RESPONSE 4:**

USOR accepted the council’s feedback, and acknowledged the need to bolster both access to, and awareness of, its services and confirmed that these goals are already embedded in the action plan. The USOR has outlined the required and authorized Pre-ETS activities and is considering the use of the remaining reserved funds to promote effective transition strategies for students with disabilities. This encompasses collaboration with local education agencies, building multi-agency partnerships, and identifying ways to enhance services for underserved students.



# VR PROGRAM SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

## ACHIEVEMENTS

- The Utah State Office of Rehabilitation is achieving ongoing success in promoting and expanding the reach of the ABLE Utah program. This distinctive savings initiative is designed specifically for individuals with disabilities across the state, aiming to boost their financial stability and foster increased independence. ABLE Utah provides an opportunity for these individuals to save and invest without compromising their eligibility for benefits like Medicaid or SSI. The funds accumulated in ABLE accounts can be utilized to cover any disability-related expenses. The program has doubled its active accounts from 310 to over 600 and managed assets have increased to \$3.1 million in the past year.
- USOR has successfully initiated its career navigator project. This initiative is dedicated to offering outreach, information dissemination and career exploration services to youth with severe disabilities who are contemplating employment or are currently engaged in subminimum wage work. Since the project's inception, it has provided services to more than 600 youths to help them explore competitive, integrated employment career paths.
- USOR has effectively broadened its employer initiatives, aiming to offer enhanced assistance to more Utah businesses in hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities. USOR helps employers with training, technical assistance and vital information regarding financial incentives for employing individuals with disabilities. They also provide recruitment and placement support, and help to establish on-the-job training opportunities. Over the past year, virtual service provision and rural outreach has been a priority.

## CHALLENGES

- Over the past year, USOR's Vocational Rehabilitation program has faced some obstacles in fully deploying its reserve funding intended for the delivery of Pre-ETS. These funds are specifically reserved to provide a set of services designed to prepare students with disabilities for their transition into adulthood and careers. To counteract these challenges, USOR is committing additional financial and personnel resources to enhance service provision and extend technical assistance to its contract providers. Moreover, USOR will concentrate on boosting the visibility and awareness of its Pre-ETS programs to potential clients, parents and providers.



# COMMITTEES AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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SRC committees included the Nominating and Interviewing Committee. A summary report for this committee follows:

## NOMINATING AND INTERVIEWING COMMITTEES

Resignations and the expiration of terms for a few members created openings on the council. A few members chose to be nominated to serve a second term. Several vacancies were filled with required members as outlined in the Rehabilitation Act. The 121 Native American program for the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe SRC member position remained vacant. The representative for the Navajo Nation continued to attend the council meetings by phone. The RSA regulations require membership of at least one tribal VR program in Utah.

A nominating and interviewing committee was formed to solicit nominations, review the qualifications of nominees, conduct interviews and present the names of the individuals to the council for consideration. Names were submitted to the executive director of DWS for approval in accordance with internal policies. Highly qualified and committed individuals were appointed to the council. They bring commitment and unique expertise to the SRC.

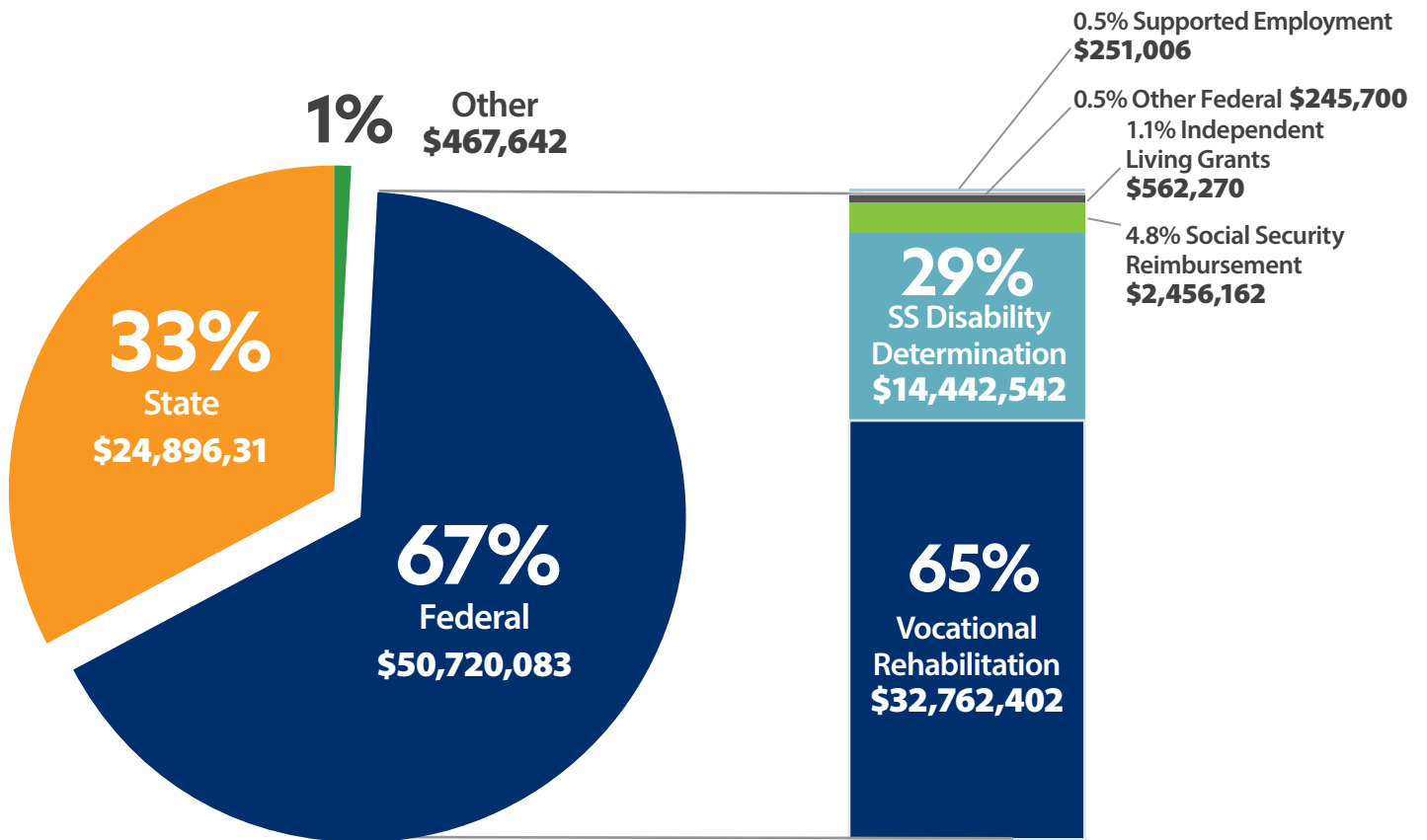
## COUNCIL OF STATE ADMINISTRATORS OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION MEETINGS

Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the past several Council of State Administrators in VR (CSAVR) meetings have been held virtually. Council members were provided information to participate in the free virtual training provided at the conference.





# USOR SFY 2023 EXPENDITURES



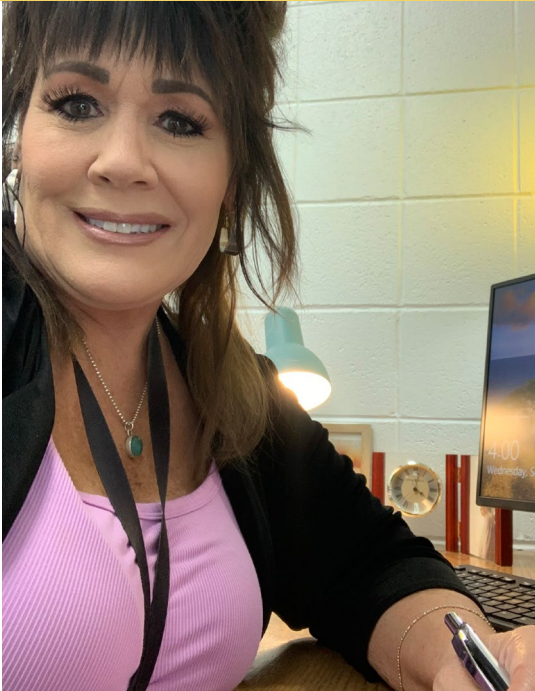


# USOR VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PERFORMANCE DASHBOARD FFY23

Performance Year	New VR Applicants
2022	5,683
2023	7,053
Performance Year	VR Clients Served
2022	15,876
2023	16,827
Performance Year	VR Clients Closed Employed
2022	2,068
2023	2,097
Performance Year	Measurable Skill Gain Rate
2022	51.3%
2023	56.9%
Performance Year	Employers Served by Business Relations
2022	682
2023	877
Performance Year	Eligible and Potentially Eligible Students Served
2022	4,895
2023	6,442
Performance Year	Clients Successfully Employed through Supported Employment
2022	228
2023	270

Performance Year	Social Security Beneficiaries Closed Employed
2022	453
2023	498
Performance Year	Clients Served by the Utah Center for Assistive Technology
2022	627
2023	697
Performance Year	Benefits Summaries presented by the Utah Work Incentives Planning Services
2022	497
2023	541

# SUCCESS STORIES



## Susan Stone



OCCUPATION:  
Substance Abuse Disorder Counselor

VR COUNSELOR:  
Cristiane Lundgreen, Central Utah District

### VR PROVIDED ASSISTANCE:

- VR Counseling and Guidance
- Individualized Plan for Employment
- Mental Health treatment
- Transportation Assistance
- Education Assistance for Utah Valley University
- Job Development and Placement

When Susan came to VR in March 2023, she was very insecure about her future. She described feeling physically that the clock on her career was ticking. But Susan had disabilities that prevented her pursuit of her vocational goal of counseling. Would she be able to compete with younger graduates? Could she complete the required coursework? How would she live while going to school? And could she control both her physical and mental health? She reported these and other questions going through her mind at the time. She applied for VR services in order to get answers to her questions.

Susan and her VR counselor Cristiane Lundgreen teamed up to develop her Individualized Employment Plan (IEP). She was able to receive assistance with counseling, medications and treatment for her disabilities as she prepared for a training program. Her VR counselor was able to explore a number of career and educational options with her, and later provide the

educational funding, a needed laptop, and prescription lenses to facilitate completion of her schooling through Utah Valley University. Susan was able to find permanent employment with the Utah Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and will obtain her Substance Use Disorder Counselor (SUDC) certification in a few months. She loves her work as a counselor in a mental health treatment environment.

Reflecting on her transformative journey with VR, Susan states, "This past year has been a roller coaster of adventures. I took a leap of faith and walked into Vocational Rehabilitation to see if there was any help available. I was introduced to my counselor, Christiane, and OH MY GOODNESS! This beautiful woman believed in me. She listened, she heard, she cared. This has been the greatest blessing ever! Everything I have experienced with VR has encouraged me forward." A little determination and a supportive VR counselor bring great dividends!



# Olivia Larson



OCCUPATION:  
**Stock Clerk**

VR COUNSELOR:  
Kelli Linarez, Davis District

## VR PROVIDED ASSISTANCE:

- Vocational Counseling and Guidance
- Job Development and Placement
- Individualized Plan for Employment
- Supported Employment Job Coaching

Olivia's journey with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services began in May 2021. With a previous stint of work under her belt and her enthusiasm to refine her social vocational skills, Olivia was eager to step into the realm of competitive employment. Olivia's VR journey was a blend of support from both VR and a Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP).

Guiding her through this phase was her dedicated VR counselor, Kelli Linarez. Kelli not only provided Olivia with essential counseling and guidance but also introduced her to the Employment-related Personal Assistance Services (EPAS) offered through Medicaid. With VR's support, Olivia undertook a Work Strategy Assessment with Beautiful Ability, a local CRP. This assessment was pivotal in aligning Olivia's strengths with her vocational aspirations. Furthermore, VR's funding for the Supported Employment pathway,

combined with Beautiful Ability's guidance, became the cornerstone of Olivia securing sustainable employment.

Olivia's enthusiasm and dedication were evident when she began her role as a Stock Clerk at Seven Times Six. Working approximately 28 hours weekly, Olivia quickly adapted to her environment. Her need for job coaching diminished rapidly, thanks to the natural support from her colleagues.

The harmonious collaboration between Olivia, Kelli, Beautiful Ability and her employer has truly made a difference. The feedback from the CRP stands as a testament: "Olivia is doing fantastic at work. She has gained a lot of confidence since her first day. Management really enjoys having her as part of their team."

Indeed, Olivia's success story is an inspiration, and her radiant smile is its most genuine testament.



# Kennedy Camarena



OCCUPATION:  
Editor-in-Chief/Weber State University

VR COUNSELOR:  
Mark Gardner, Davis District

#### VR PROVIDED ASSISTANCE:

- Counseling and Guidance
- Educational Assistance
- Individualized Plan for Employment
- Coordination of Academic Accommodations

The field of Communications offers a multitude of pathways, and for Kennedy, the journey to academic achievement and her current “dream job” has unfolded as an adventure. In 2016 when Kennedy sought VR services, she portrayed herself as a high school transition student grappling with academic challenges and uncertainties about her future. Collaborating with her VR counselor, Mark Gardner, Kennedy embarked on an exploration of potential career avenues and the requisite training. Throughout her pursuit of an Associate of Science in Communication degree at Weber State University, VR provided unwavering support. Kennedy acquired the skills to advocate for herself, securing the necessary academic accommodations to ensure her success.

More than six years have passed since she embarked on her journey in the Communications arena. Initially, she served as a photojournalist and team lead, progressing

to her current role as the Editor-in-Chief of the student newspaper, the Signpost, at Weber State University. Armed with valuable skills that enhance her prospects for success in future career and educational endeavors, she is committed to pursuing her bachelor’s degree in a closely related field. The guidance from her VR counselor and the opportunities extended by Vocational Rehabilitation have empowered Kennedy to envision the future with eager anticipation.

In her own words, “Vocational Rehab has made a great impact in my life, from helping me to plan out the next steps to take to get me into my dream career, to helping me to afford a college education in order to get that career. I truly wouldn’t be where I am today if it wasn’t for Vocational Rehab and the people who work there.” Now that makes for a good story...and a reason to pick up a copy of the Signpost newspaper! Kennedy has now accepted an internship with KSL.



# Julene Fowler



OCCUPATION:  
Low Vision Office Specialist

VR COUNSELOR:  
Lee Bingham, Provo District

## VR PROVIDED ASSISTANCE:

- Vocational Counseling and Guidance
- Individualized Plan for Employment
- Job Search and Placement
- Paid WorkAbility Internship
- Assistance with Clothing and Transportation for Employment
- Medication Management for Restoration

Julene Fowler experienced a life-altering series of traumatic vehicle accidents that led her on a remarkable journey of recovery. These accidents not only changed the trajectory of her life, but also her ability to communicate, requiring her to relearn her speech skills.

In July 2021, Julene sought assistance from VR services. Her VR counselor, Lee Bingham, stepped in to support her as she pursued her goal of returning to employment as a receptionist. Julene's strong desire to assist others in achieving their individual goals made this career choice a perfect fit.

Working closely with her VR counselor, Julene developed an individualized employment plan that outlined the services necessary to overcome her barriers and ensure her success. This plan ultimately led to an internship as a front desk receptionist at the Provo VR office, where she honed her skills. Julene's exceptional performance did not go unnoticed, with visitors

frequently praising her friendly personality and the welcoming atmosphere she created.

Throughout this time, Julene continued her journey to regain skills from her earlier life challenges, while also addressing additional health needs with assistance from her medical provider. Her VR counselor, Choose to Work Specialist Claudia Knight, and the entire VR team played pivotal roles in supporting her.

With this support, she applied for, and was hired by the Division of Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DSBVI) as a Low Vision Office Specialist. Julene loves the people she works with, including opportunities to interact with clients. Her determination to overcome obstacles has led to rewarding employment. In her own words, "As I reflect back on my experience, I really felt that the work ability intern position really helped me to get started in my future employment and I am grateful that my VR counselor encouraged me to apply."

# FY 2023-2024 MEETING SCHEDULE



LAST WEDNESDAY OF EACH MONTH

December, 2023 (No Meeting)

January 31, 2024

February, 2024 (No Meeting)

March 27, 2024

April, 2024 (No Meeting)

May 29, 2024

June 26, 2024

July, 2024 (No Meeting)

August, 2024 (No Meeting)

September 25, 2024

Note: All times subject to change due to meeting in-person or on Zoom.

Meeting location:

Judy Ann Buffmire Rehabilitation Service Center Conference Room  
1595 West 500 South, Salt Lake City, UT 84104

**For more information:**

**801-887-9505 or 866-435-7414 (toll-free)**

**<https://jobs.utah.gov/usor/vr/partners/src.html>**



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