

d. Evaluation and Reports of Progress: VR and Supported Employment Goals

For the most recently completed program year, provide an evaluation and report of progress for the goals or priorities, including progress on the strategies under each goal or priority, applicable to that program year. Sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to describe—

1. Progress in achieving the goals and priorities identified for the VR and Supported Employment Programs;

List the goals/priorities and discuss the progress or completion of each goal/priority and related strategies

The following description includes progress in the achievement of the goals for the West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services (WVDRS).

WVDRS Goal 1 – Provide integrated vocational rehabilitation (VR) services to West Virginians with disabilities to enable them to attain a high school education or greater.

WVDRS continued to assist its consumers with obtaining secondary and postsecondary credentials. During PY 2024, WVDRS' consumers earned over 1,800 credentials, including over 850 consumers earning a high school diploma, over 225 earning a Bachelor's Degree, and more than 250 graduate degrees and recognized postsecondary credentials.

Close relationships with the WV Adult Education Program (Adult Ed) and the WV Higher Education Policy Commission, as well as State and Local Education Agencies, will help the agency to continue to close West Virginia's education gaps, including a 10+ percentage point difference between the state and national average Bachelor's Degree attainment rate (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/WV/EDU635223>).

WVDRS has worked hard to strengthen its relationship with State and Local Education Agencies and has sought to increase its service capacity to students with disabilities statewide. This includes formal agreements and Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), the provision of Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) in and outside of school settings, the continuation of WVDRS' Student Transition to Employment Program (STEP) and coordinated training with Special Education teachers statewide.

WVDRS monitored the educational achievement of all of its consumers, especially those in the transition youth (TY) population. WVDRS worked closely and diligently with State and Local Education Agencies to ensure that its TY population receives the services that it needs, including pre-employment transition services for high school students with disabilities. WVDRS assigned a counselor to each high school in WV to enhance the service provision of students with disabilities. A greater emphasis is now being placed for counselors to do outreach with these students and their parents/guardians during their sophomore year (rather than their junior year, as was formerly practiced) in order to maximize the counseling opportunities.

WVDRS counselors took part in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) development of students with disabilities when invited to do so. Counselors stayed in contact with educators to

discuss and resolve educational difficulties as needed. WVDRS also worked closely with WV Adult Education, referring consumers as needed, to ensure that individuals with disabilities have an adequate opportunity to obtain a completed high school level education. WVDRS will continue to conduct these activities as part of its progress toward achievement of this goal.

WVDRS Goal 2 – Provide Pre-ETS to students with disabilities.

WVDRS has demonstrated considerable commitment to providing Pre-ETS to students with disabilities statewide since the implementation of WIOA. WVDRS established, and regularly enhances, the Pathways to the Future website (www.pathwayswv.org), designed to operate as a self-service one-stop for students, parents, and educators in the provision of Pre-ETS that can be accessed at any time. The site provides extensive information and resources regarding career planning, education planning, independent living skills, self-determination, and work-based learning.

Beyond this self-service portal, WVDRS has been active, both within and outside of school settings to ensure that students with disabilities statewide receive the Pre-ETS needed to promote a more well-informed student base regarding employment, career pathways, independent living and soft skills, and self-advocacy. Numerous initiatives and activities, provided by WVDRS staff, Education staff, and Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs), have been delivered to thousands of students across the state in all 55 counties. In doing so, WVDRS has consistently been able to successfully reserve and spend the WIOA-mandated 15% earmark of federal funds on Pre-ETS. Some of the activities conducted by the agency include:

- Career Exploration Opportunities (CEOs) – provides participants with information about career planning and preparation, self-assessments, completing job applications, interviewing skills, how to dress for employment, work ethic, cell phone and Internet safety, and self-advocacy. The service is a total of 24 hours, typically completed in 4 days with 6 hours of service each day. The service is provided in a group setting (maximum of 25 participants) and can be completed in person or virtually.
- Instruction in Self-Advocacy programs (ISAs) – provides participants with information about self-awareness, IDEA, Section 504, ADA, IEPs, centers for independent living, college accessibility offices, accommodations, and communication skills. The service is a total of 24 hours, typically completed in 4 days with 6 hours of service each day. The service is provided in a group setting (maximum of 25 participants) and can be completed in person or virtually.
- Postsecondary Education Opportunities (PSEOs) – provides participants with counseling on post-secondary educational opportunities by coordinating structured day visits (up to 8 hours) to campuses of Colleges and Universities, Career and Technical Education, or other Vocational/Adult Educational Facilities.
- Positive Outcomes Within Education and Rehabilitation (POWER) program – WVDRS' job shadowing program. POWER offers WVDRS transition students who are interested in professional careers an opportunity to spend a few hours or a day with a skilled worker in

the student's vocational field of interest, allowing the student to explore a specific career of interest by observing an employee perform his or her work duties at his or her place of employment. The experience should provide realistic career information that will aid the student in making career choices.

- Work-Based Learning Experiences – Provided in conjunction with CRPs to pair students with disabilities with local employers willing to provide short-term work experiences to assist in developing an understanding of the demands of paid work, improvement of soft skills needed to be successful in any employment setting and assist in better understanding of career choices. Students complete the experience after a maximum of 40 work hours, over the course of 60 days, earning no less than minimum wage. The CRPs are paid to arrange and monitor the experience, as well as pay the students.

The 2024 comprehensive statewide needs assessment (CSNA) indicated that job exploration counseling continues to be the most frequently reported pre-employment transition service need. In accordance with this, and per the requirements of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), WVDRS counselors in high schools provided, through purchased and direct services, Pre-ETS to students with disabilities, especially job exploration counseling, in order to give students with disabilities and their parents/guardians a better understanding of labor market conditions, current and emerging career opportunities, and the necessary education and training requirements related to those opportunities. In PY 2024, WVDRS provided Pre-ETS to over 4,000 students with disabilities.

Throughout the academic year, WVDRS Employment Specialists also provided Pre-ETS in virtual and in person formats. The Employment Specialists conducted mock interviewing, career exploration, and other employment related topics. The POWER program provides students an opportunity to job shadow careers that they are interested in. The Employment Specialists have worked to identify a vast array of employers located throughout the State.

WVDRS' "Pathways to the Future" website (www.pathwayswv.org), serves as a self-service resource for students with disabilities statewide to receive Pre-ETS. The website provides valuable information and tools regarding career planning, education planning, independent living, self-determination, and work-based learning. The website was bolstered by banners that were placed in high schools in all 55 counties of the state. Additionally, several pages of the College Foundation of West Virginia's website (www.cfwv.com) have links to the Pathways website. These banners and links directed students with disabilities to the website and its resources.

WVDRS Goal 3 – Provide integrated vocational rehabilitation services to West Virginians with disabilities to enable them to obtain competitive employment, especially in occupations and careers within emerging industries statewide.

With the passage of WIOA, WVDRS has made several adjustments to its service provision model, including a greater emphasis toward youth and students with disabilities. In Program Year (PY) 2024, WVDRS served 13,304 participants, including 7,439 youth with disabilities, while enabling 2,105 job seekers with disabilities to obtain or retain employment.

Collaboration with WorkForce WV and Local Workforce Development Boards

WVDRS has maintained regular communication with WorkForce WV to stay abreast of trends in employment, including changes in education and training requirements. This has been accomplished through regular meetings of the Workforce Development System (WDS), written communications, teleconferences, and other media. WVDRS, particularly through its Employment Specialists, stayed informed of emerging careers and occupations via WorkForce WV's Labor Market Information website. WVDRS Employment Specialists have also continuously collected employment information from their business contacts. This information is shared within the WDS. WVDRS registers its job-ready consumers with WorkForce WV in order to better serve employers by providing them with a base of potential employees.

WVDRS maintained and continues to maintain a presence with each of West Virginia's seven Local Workforce Development Boards (WDBs): Region 1 WDB; Region 2 – South Western WV WDB, Inc.; Region 3 – WDB of Kanawha County, Inc.; Region 4 Mid-Ohio Valley WDB; Region 5 – Northern Panhandle WDB; Region 6 WDB, and Region 7 WDB. WVDRS has signed MOUs and Infrastructure Funding Agreements (IFAs) with each board. Each Local WDB has a WVDRS representative who is active in the Board's activities and decision-making process.

Use of WVDRS Employment Specialists

WVDRS used its Employment Specialists to gather information regarding employers at the local level, including information regarding job placements for individuals with disabilities and regarding current and expected employer needs.

WVDRS has an in-house Employer Services Section that specializes in providing employers with disability-related information, services, and pre-screened job seekers. The WVDRS Employer Services Section has nine Employment Specialists that cover all 55 counties in West Virginia. Each Employment Specialist has a unique understanding of local labor market information (LMI) including what jobs are available, what jobs are in demand or decline, and employer networks.

WVDRS' team of Employment Specialists provided business owners and employers with critical business options and assistance in staffing, employee retention strategies, education on disability-related issues, job accommodations, and information about financial incentives for employers who hire individuals with disabilities.

Direct contact with employers is a key strategy to identify competitive integrated employment and career exploration opportunities for VR consumers, including students with disabilities.

Employment Specialists therefore contact employers directly to identify current and future job openings. To facilitate this, WVDRS utilizes labor market information provided by WorkForce WV to identify the top employers in each county; contact is always made with the top ten employers in each county. When meeting with employers, Employment Specialists provide valuable information, including the WVDRS Employer Resource Guide. The resource guide provides information regarding staffing services, training programs and incentives for hiring people with disabilities, financial incentives, accessibility assessments, accommodating employees with disabilities, basic disability etiquette, attitudinal barriers, the Americans with Disabilities Act, locating a WVDRS

office, and where to find additional resources. In 2024, WVDRS Employment Specialists provided over 1,100 services to 699 employers.

The Employer Services Section maintains a database of each WVDRS-employer interaction with VR employment specialists. The information collected includes the business name, contact person, and current job openings by occupation. If needed, a referral to the WVDRS Rehabilitation Technology Unit is made to address workplace accommodations. This list is distributed to Counselors to potentially match a job-ready VR consumer with a current job opening. A partnership with WORK 4 WV provides a diverse list of current state government job openings and this information is distributed to field staff weekly to potentially match a job-ready VR consumer with an opening with the State of WV. Employment Specialists have developed positive working relationships with a wide array of employers, including public and private industry which are some of the largest in the state. Several of these employers send job postings directly to WVDRS' Employer Services Unit.

The Employer Services Section also worked with employers to better serve transitioning youth with disabilities, including providing career exploration opportunities for students with disabilities through the POWER program. POWER is a job shadowing program that offers transitioning students, who may be having a difficult time choosing a career path, the opportunity to experience an occupation by spending time with a professional working in the students' vocational goal/career field of interest. The POWER program allows the student the opportunity to experience an occupation prior to committing to training. It guides the student to take a serious, realistic look at the occupation, allowing the student to make a more informed choice. Currently, there are 85 employers statewide that participate in the POWER program.

Assistive Technology (AT)

WVDRS will continue to provide rehabilitation technology and AT solutions to individuals with disabilities, as needed, so those individuals can participate in training programs in addition to gaining or maintaining competitive, integrated employment. These services are provided directly by WVDRS staff as well as purchased from various service providers.

WVDRS' Rehabilitation Technology Unit provides AT consultations and solutions to eligible VR consumers with AT needs statewide. WVDRS is working on maintaining its own supply of commonly used AT equipment to have on-hand when needed by a consumer. This will enable consumers (especially students with disabilities) to continue towards successfully completing their individualized plans for education, training and/or employment without interruption. WVDRS will maintain this AT equipment supply at different strategic locations in the state.

WVDRS has developed working relationships and agreements for the coordination of activities with the West Virginia Assistive Technology System (WVATS) of the West Virginia University Center for Excellence in Disabilities to maximize available resources. WVATS' role is to provide access to and help with the acquisition of assistive technology (AT) devices and services for individuals with disabilities. WVATS also provides device demonstrations, device loans, training, AT information, and technical assistance.

WVDRS Goal 4 – Improve access and availability of transportation options at the community level for WVDRS consumers who need transportation assistance to achieve or maintain competitive, integrated employment.

WVDRS continues to work toward finding individualized transportation solutions for West Virginians with disabilities as needed for their employment goals. In Program Year (PY) 2024, WVDRS expended \$1,372,487 on transportation services for 1,489 consumers. In recent years, the agency has provided more comprehensive individualized transportation solutions, including the purchase of pre-owned vehicles and vehicle modifications, when appropriate. While this has increased the average cost per consumer, due to the rural nature of the state, these individualized solutions are critical to ensuring VR consumers obtaining and/or maintaining competitive integrated employment.

Transportation is an ongoing issue for West Virginians with disabilities, due to the rural nature of the state. A large proportion of the State's inhabitants live far away from jobs, agency offices, and other resources. WVDRS continued its commitment to reduce transportation barriers for consumers with disabilities and focused on Individual Transportation Solutions (ITS) to satisfy immediate transportation needs. To help reduce these barriers, WVDRS counselors encouraged planning for transportation needs early in the development of a consumer's rehabilitation program. At application, counselors identified transportation issues and focused on finding solutions to include in the consumer's Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE). This ensured that the ability of consumers to reach their vocational goal was not impeded by preventable transportation barriers. Transportation issues were also addressed by the standard instrument prescribed for routine use by supervisors and quality assurance staff in case reviews. Beyond ITS, WVDRS continued to assign responsibility to a staff member in each branch office to maintain a list and working knowledge of local transportation options and continued to participate in local and state initiatives to coordinate and expand transportation resources. These activities will be ongoing as WVDRS strives to accomplish transportation access for all of its consumers in need.

WVDRS Goal 5 – Continue to build collaborative relationships with community providers (including CRPs, Independent Living, and other community providers) to enhance the availability of services to WVDRS consumers.

A comparison of findings from the 2021 CSNA and the 2024 CSNA indicates that there is still a need to continue to improve collaborative relationships with community providers. A smaller percentage of CRP survey respondents acknowledged that a WVDRS liaison counselor was in contact on a regular basis (i.e., 71.4% in 2021 vs. 57.4% in 2024). However, there was an increase in the percentage of CRP survey respondents who rated their communication with WVDRS to be good or better (87.5% in 2021 vs. 95.1% in 2024).

2021 - Forty out of the 42 CRPs provided a rating of their communication with WVDRS. Options ranged from excellent to very poor. No CRP gave a rating of very poor and 35 of the 40 CRPs (87.5%) gave a response of good or better. When asked whether a WVDRS liaison counselor was in contact on a regular basis, 30 of 42 CRPs responded yes, while 10 CRPs responded no (71.4% and 23.8%, respectively). Two CRPs did not respond to this question.

2024 – All 61 CRP respondents provided a rating of their communication with WVDRS. Options ranged from excellent to very poor. No CRP gave a rating of very poor and 58 of the 61 CRPs (95.1%) gave a response of good or better. When asked whether a WVDRS liaison counselor was in contact on a regular basis, 35 of 61 CRPs responded *yes*, while 26 CRPs responded *no* (57.4% and 42.6%, respectively). All respondents answered this question.

WVDRS continues to utilize CRPs to provide services to its consumers. In PY 2024, WVDRS authorized over \$2,000,000 in CRP services.

WVDRS continued to educate field staff, especially new counselors, about CRPs and their services. Use of the new 'CRP Locator' tool (a web-based, user-friendly, vendor guide) and counselor CRP site visits increased awareness of available service options, which helped to maintain collaborative relationships with CRPs and enhance the availability of services to WVDRS consumers. WVDRS continued to maintain regular communications with community providers in each district and at the state level. Progress on communication will continue to be made as the Division acquires more understanding of the issues and barriers facing the CRP and WVDRS staff members in their service provision to persons with significant disabilities in WV.

Ongoing communication activities with CRPs also includes:

1. An email listserv with all current vendors that is updated periodically and utilized to send out training opportunities, policy changes, and general updates when needed.
2. WVDRS counselors in each district continue to be assigned as liaisons to each CRP and continue to be required to complete a monthly update regarding the CRP. They collect this information by visits and/or phone calls. Having CRP liaisons that regularly discuss service-related issues specific to the local service area(s) aids in maintaining collaborative working relationships and enhancing the availability of services to consumers.
3. Two Rehabilitation Specialists covering all districts in the state provide technical assistance to CRPs and WVDRS staff. They make site visits to CRP and WVDRS district and branch offices to ensure that community providers continue to meet WVDRS standards and requirements. During these visits, they provide technical assistance and schedule training and other meetings that need to occur. They serve as a communication link when issues arise and make themselves available to attend communication meetings and transition team meetings.

Additionally, the agency works to:

- Increase the service provision of acknowledged vendors and work with community providers to expand their service areas to enhance the availability of community services within needed areas.
- Conduct Transition Team meetings at the district level with WVDRS, WV Department of Education, and CRP staff members. The meetings are held to promote interagency collaboration by allowing staff from each agency/CRP to become familiar with the different eligibility requirements and service definitions across agencies.

- Conduct cross training and face-to-face meetings with community partners at the local level.
- Assign liaison responsibilities to staff members and provide guidance about the purpose of WVDRS participation in community events.
- Monitor the WVDRS counselors/supervisors/managers' perception of the quality of CRP services through a survey instrument; and
- Monitor and assess the impact of the Quality Assurance unit on the counselor's case management practices by using data generated from the quality assurance specialists' review of cases.

In Program Year 2024, WVDRS authorized \$ 375,500 in CRP Supported Employment (SE) services for 87 consumers with the most significant disabilities.

As previously addressed in the discussion of WVDRS Goal 5, WVDRS continued to build collaborative relationships with community providers (including CRPs, Independent Living, and other community providers) to enhance the availability of services to WVDRS consumers. A comparison of findings from the 2021 CSNA and the 2024 CSNA indicates that there is still a need to continue to improve collaborative relationships with community providers. A smaller percentage of CRP survey respondents acknowledged that a WVDRS liaison counselor was in contact on a regular basis (i.e., 71.4% in 2021 vs. 57.4% in 2024) and an increase in the percentage of CRP survey respondents rated their communication with WVDRS to be Good or better (87.5% in 2021 vs. 95.1% in 2024).

2. Performance on the performance accountability indicators under Section 116 of WIOA for the most recently completed program year, reflecting actual and negotiated levels of performance. Explain any discrepancies in the actual and negotiated levels; and

As WVDRS moves forward in its task to place individuals with disabilities into competitive, integrated employment in PY 2026, it will continue to collect and monitor participant data in order to generate reports on:

- The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.
- The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program.
- The median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.
- The percentage of program participants who obtain a recognized postsecondary credential, or a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, during participation in or within 1 year after exit from the program.
- The percentage of program participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measurable skill gains toward such a credential or employment; and

- The indicators of effectiveness in serving employers.

For PY 2024, WVDRS achieved the following performance on the performance accountability indicators under section 116 of WIOA:

- The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program – 69.6%
- The median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program – \$7,800
- The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program – 67.6%
- The percentage of program participants who obtain a recognized postsecondary credential, or a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent, during participation in or within 1 year after exit from the program – 25.0%
- The indicators of effectiveness in serving employers – N/A (baseline data collection is still ongoing)

3. The use of funds reserved for innovation and expansion activities (Sections 101(a)(18) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act) (e.g., SRC, SILC).

WVDRS fully embraces the Congressional intent that individuals with disabilities and their advocates are full partners in the state rehabilitation program. Therefore, WVDRS has established a goal to improve its service delivery system through involvement of consumers and their advocates to increase the ease of access to, timeliness of, and quality of rehabilitation services and ultimately to improve employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The Division's concentration of I&E efforts on consumer partnerships demonstrates its commitment to enhanced consumer involvement.

Success in working with consumers and their advocates is fundamentally important in developing and using innovative approaches to achieve long-term success in expanding and improving rehabilitation services, including supported employment. WVDRS pursues that work primarily through partnership initiatives with the West Virginia State Rehabilitation Council (WV SRC) and the West Virginia Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC).

WVDRS believes that the activities of these councils provide a promising foundation for the kind of partnership envisioned by the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998. If that partnership is to achieve its full potential, however, it must receive the necessary support.

Therefore, WVDRS annually allocates I&E funds to support general operations of the WV SRC and the SILC.

Program Year (PY) 2024 highlights for each appear below. WEST VIRGINIA STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

I&E funds support operations and activities undertaken by members of the WV SRC, as mandated by WIOA. WVDRS allocated \$154,356 for WV SRC in PY 2024.

As required by the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1998, WV SRC assists WVDRS by conducting a survey of consumer satisfaction for WVDRS consumers whose VR cases have been closed. Surveys were emailed to approximately 4,754 individuals in PY 2024. WV SRC uses I&E funds to share costs of contracting an independent consultant to compile a report of survey results.

I&E funding assists WV SRC to prepare, publish, and distribute its annual report.

WV SRC also participates in development and establishment of WVDRS goals and priorities outlined in this state plan. I&E funds are used for travel costs as necessary.

WEST VIRGINIA STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL

In combination with Title VII money, I&E funds help support operations and activities undertaken by the SILC. WVDRS allocated \$306,250 for the SILC in PY 2024.

The SILC, in partnership with WVDRS, jointly develops and submits the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL), as appropriate. The SILC continues to monitor and evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the SPIL. In conjunction with WVDRS, the SILC prepares and submits the 704 Report for West Virginia.

SILC members and/or employees collaborate with and/or participate in activities of the WV Centers for Independent Living (WVCIL), WV Developmental Disabilities Council, WV SRC, WV Olmstead Council, WV Mental Health Consumers Association, WV American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), Medley Hartley Advocacy Project Advisory Council, WV Transportation Alliance, and the Fair Shake Network. Training for service providers on sexual victimization of individuals with disabilities has been scheduled.

The SILC conducts a survey of consumer satisfaction for consumers who received independent living services. The SILC uses I&E funds to share costs with WVDRS and WVCIL for distribution of the survey and contracting an independent consultant to compile survey results and prepare an annual report of findings.

The SILC ensures that all meetings are open to the public and provides notice through the WV Secretary of State's Office as well as through statewide media at least two weeks prior to the meetings.