

# ANNUAL REPORT

MINNESOTA STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL - GENERAL





# WELCOME

## BY ANNE REDETZKE

Welcome to the State Rehabilitation Council – General’s 2017 annual report on Minnesota’s Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program. The State Rehabilitation Council is appointed by the governor to partner with and advise Minnesota’s Vocational Rehabilitation program. Each year we report to the governor and the people of Minnesota on Vocational Rehabilitation’s status and performance.

This past year has been one of continued change as the VR program continues to implement the new federal regulations under the

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Nonetheless, the program continues to gather momentum during this time and has shown an increase in employment outcomes, provided information and consultation regarding WIOA requirements, and worked with more youth and adults with significant disabilities throughout the state. There has also been an emphasis on Customized Employment strategies as well as beginning the implementation of “Person-Centered Planning and Thinking” trainings for all VR staff.

The VR Program has also continued to strengthen existing partnerships and collaborations with the U.S. departments of education and labor, as well as with state agencies (education, human services, and others), Minnesota’s eight Centers for Independent Living, disability advocacy organizations, and a broad coalition of community service providers.

In addition to these partnerships, the VR program completed focus groups and telephone surveys this past year to gather information from current and former VR participants in order to strengthen the services being provided. This will then enable Minnesotans with disabilities to be successful with their employment goals.

I hope you will find the information, data, and stories in this report to be interesting, informative, and useful.

“... PROGRAM CONTINUES TO GATHER MOMENTUM DURING THIS TIME AND HAS SHOWN AN INCREASE IN EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES...”

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*Anne Redetzke is chair of the State Rehabilitation Council. A disability rights advocate, she works for Independent Lifestyles, Inc.*

# MARYBETH WINKELMAN

**If there's one thing that Marybeth Winkelman wants the world to understand, it's this: "Autism isn't a cookie-cutter. There are levels, and levels within levels. We're not all the same."** This

insight came as a surprise to the 24-year-old student; it's something she had to learn before she understood it. Another thing she's learned: "you can't give us all a fidget spinner and think it'll all be good."

Sitting in a classroom on the campus of St. Cloud Technical and Community College, Marybeth says she has begun to learn how to make a place for herself in a world that often seems to be defined by stress, anxiety, and depression. "I'm learning to hold in my insanity, and my stress, and my panic."

All of this learning suggests that Marybeth is making progress. But progress toward what? Here's her story.

In September 2014, a few years after graduating from Apollo High School, she enrolled in the Community Options 2 program (CO2), a transition program for area students, 18-21, with developmental or cognitive disabilities or autism spectrum disorders. That's when she met and began working with Kathy Fischer, a VR counselor in the St. Cloud office.

Together they began to explore career goals and post-secondary options, and to develop self-advocacy and independent living skills. When Marybeth was ready to graduate from CO2, Kathy referred her to Independent Lifestyles, a center for independent living in the St. Cloud area. There she learned about transportation options, worked on social skills, practiced good grooming and hygiene, and continued to grow in self-confidence.

"I wasn't ready," Marybeth now recalls. "It was a personal issue for me. I just was not really ready for

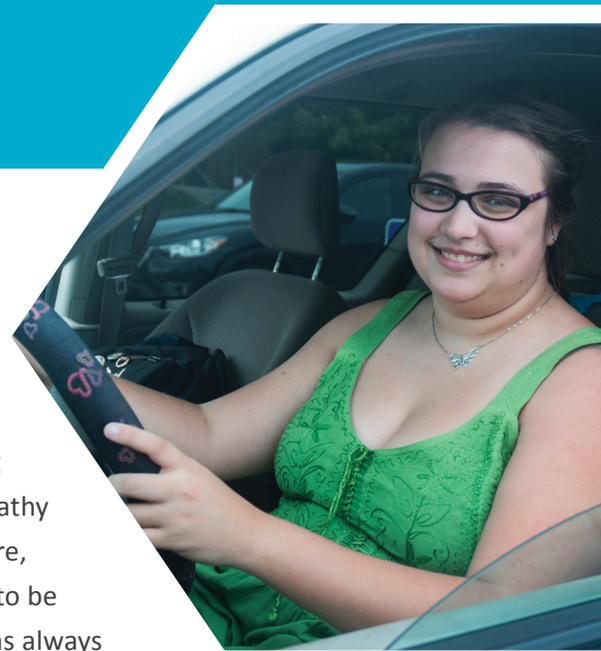
college. I wanted to go home and take a little time off before deciding anything. But Kathy was always there, waiting for me to be ready. Kathy was always the person to go to."

Marybeth took the summer off before deciding to attend college. A big part of her hesitancy, as it turns out, was that she didn't drive and was afraid to learn. She lives with her family on the outskirts of St. Cloud, with no public transportation options for getting to school. After

Kathy referred her to Courage Kenny Rehabilitation Institute for driving evaluation and lessons, Marybeth got her license – and that was a very big deal. It gave her the independence and confidence she needed to move ahead with decisions about school and her long-term future.

In the fall of 2016 she enrolled at SCTCC, where she is working on a two-year degree in accounting. She received a scholarship last year, makes the dean's list each semester, and her instructors ask her to mentor other students struggling in classes. She even has her own "office" hours in the hallway; she tells other students, "I'll be here every morning, at this spot, if you need tutoring."

Marybeth plans to graduate in the fall of 2018, and then perhaps take a short break before looking for work in accounting, auditing, or bookkeeping. That's the goal she's working toward, and she's definitely making progress.



“ ... MARYBETH GOT HER LICENSE – AND THAT WAS A VERY BIG DEAL. ”

# VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES – 2017 PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION SURVEY & FOCUS GROUPS

In 2017, DEED administered a randomized statewide participant satisfaction survey of Vocational Rehabilitation Services participants who had completed an individualized employment plan as part of their program activities. The survey team conducted 343 interviews, yielding a 55 percent response rate and statistically significant results.

The overall results found that VRS participants feel high levels of comfort, satisfaction, and support in their current work with VRS counselors and staff.

**They identified the following as the most helpful services they received:**



**HELP FINDING OR SEARCHING FOR A JOB**



**COMMUNICATING AND MEETING WITH VRS COUNSELOR OR STAFF**



**ASSISTANCE PLANNING OR COORDINATING SERVICES**



**ASSISTANCE WITH GOAL SETTING**



**HELP WITH EDUCATION**

Participants did note some areas where staff services could be improved, especially in the area of communication. Participants needed more communication and timely follow-up from their counselors.

This represents the first time since 2011 that VRS engaged in a wide-scale survey to measure baseline participant satisfaction.

## Focus Groups

DEED also contracted with Orman Guidance, a consumer insights firm, who took a mixed methods approach to a VRS participant satisfaction study with the objective of exploring the quality, timeliness, and effectiveness of VRS.

In total, 42 VR participants shared their experiences across six focus groups and yielded the following key discoveries:

- ✓ Counselor-participant relationship is key for success and satisfaction.
- ✓ Satisfaction with services are tied to a participant's increased quality of life and sense of personal independence.
- ✓ Barriers exist for participants to disengage from VRS.
- ✓ Participants have fears and need guidance on losing key benefits, like SSDI.
- ✓ VRS participants have a desire to be valued in the economy.
- ✓ Success comes in the form of education and employment.

The researchers also used customers' insights to investigate the quality, timeliness, and effectiveness of VRS. Based on feedback, the following recommendations were suggested:

- ✓ Modify processes for engaging the participant and creating a plan.
- ✓ Create and gather benefit program materials for effective information-sharing.
- ✓ Challenge and improve communication strategies.
- ✓ Review and improve protocols for counselor training and professionalism.
- ✓ Figure out how to cost-benefit the need to transition to the 21st century.
- ✓ Expand community and services partnership network.
- ✓ Review and challenge counselor orientation and training processes.
- ✓ Provide greater support for counselors.

## VRS Response to the Survey & Focus Groups

In response to the findings and recommendations in the survey and focus groups, VRS has developed and implemented several strategies to improve the counselor-participant relationship.

### Person Centered Training

All staff are participating in training on Person Centered Thinking and Planning. One example of how this is being implemented is that, at the end of all VR participant and counselor meetings, the next meeting is formally scheduled to ensure continuity of planning. Intake interviews are more in-depth, engaging the participant in a discussion of their goals in the areas of health, home, skill development, community engagement, work and asset building. Rehabilitation Area Managers are participating in clinical supervision training. Services are better coordinated with the Centers for Independent Living, Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Community Action programs to ensure that the partnership is addressing the person's goals. This holistic approach will better engage participants and reduce the dropout rate.

### Expanded Partnerships

In partnership with the Centers for Independent Living and DHS, the agency has trained 48 benefit and financial coaches. VRS is planning to expand the partnership to include Minnesota Employment Center (MEC), an organization that provides services to Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard-of-Hearing communities. One staff person from MEC will receive training and be available through electronic communications technology to work directly with benefit planners to provide statewide American Sign Language (ASL) services.

### Benefits Planning

Participants who are receiving public benefits will receive benefits planning services as part of plan development.

Once benefits are verified and a vocational goal is established, local Labor Market Information is used to determine the average starting wage. Several Estimator sessions are then completed using Disability Benefits 101 (db101.org) to develop a report and timeline on how full-time or part-time employment will impact public benefits. The timeline shows when essential benefits including Social Security, Minnesota Supplemental Assistance, Emergency Assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food support (SNAP), housing assistance and health insurance will be reduced or end. The timeline also shows when you become eligible for new benefits, such as Medical Assistance for Employed People with Disabilities and earned income tax credits.

### Financial Coaching

The Estimator sessions are updated when the person accepts employment and the actual wage is known. Preliminary results show that participants are willing to take more risks and increase their self-sufficiency if they know in advance when and how their public benefits will be impacted. As a part of benefits coaching, the person will also be offered financial coaching to learn how income and Social Security work incentives can be used together to improve the person's credit rating, pay down credit card debt, or build assets for improved housing, improved transportation or retirement.

### Memorandum of Understanding

VRS and DHS are developing a Memorandum of Understanding that will make supported employment services available to more people. People receiving public benefits can now also continue their benefits planning services through the partnership with the Centers for Independent Living. These long-term supports should make it easier for people to disengage from VRS.

# PROJECT SEARCH AT THE CAPITOL

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By late autumn 2017, as this report was being prepared, all interns who participated in the first year of Project SEARCH within state government had found competitive jobs or internships.



**Samantha Berns** is interning as a file clerk for a provider of adoption and family services.



**Jason Flakne** is a dietary aide at a senior living facility.



**Alex Germain** is a backroom team member at Target.



**Rory Lofgren** is a maintenance worker for a state-operated community mental health facility.



**Trevon Passmore** works in the dining room and kitchen at a Taco Bell.



**Tristan Rankin** is a patio attendant at Portillo's restaurant.



**Randy Yeon** is a maintenance worker at the Minnesota State Capitol.



**Back row left to right:** Jason Flakne, Governor Mark Dayton, Randy Yeon, Tristan Rankin, Alex Germain, Trevon Passmore | **Front row left to right:** Elizabeth Dressel, Samantha Berns, Rory Lofgren, Cherie Yates (*Note: Elizabeth Dressel and Cherie Yates worked together in the governor's office to get the Project SEARCH program up and running.*)

At the Minnesota Capitol last June, six young people walked to a podium and each made a short speech. It was a celebratory day. The lieutenant governor was there to listen, applaud, and offer words of encouragement. Several members of the governor's staff looked on, grinning broadly. VRS managers and staff were there, too, along with a variety of state agency staff and service providers. Parents, family members, and friends sat watching from their chairs in the governor's reception room, a refined and elegant space that is usually reserved for political announcements, press conferences, and receptions for visiting dignitaries.

On that day, these six young men and women were the visiting dignitaries. They were there to graduate and be recognized after completing year-long internships in several Minnesota state agencies. Together, they constituted the first cohort to work in state government agencies through an innovative diversity initiative that aims to increase competitive employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

It's called Project SEARCH, and it takes place in a health care, government, or business setting where total immersion in the workplace facilitates teaching, learning, and the acquisition of marketable work skills. Interns participate in three 10-week internship rotations to explore a variety of career paths. It combines classroom instruction with work experience. The goal is for each intern to achieve integrated competitive employment upon graduation.

Minnesota's Project SEARCH began in 2009, with a site hosted at Medtronic. Since then, the model has grown to eight sites: Fairview Lakes Medical Center, Medtronic, Mayo Clinic, Gillette Specialty Healthcare, Avera Hospital, Children's Minnesota, Hennepin County Medical Center, and, as of last year, Minnesota state government.

In his two terms as Minnesota's governor, Mark Dayton has become a high profile champion for employing people with disabilities. His administration supports and promotes a number of disability employment programs and sets a statewide goal for state agencies to increase employment for people with disabilities to at least 7 percent of the state workforce by August 2018. "State government should reflect all of the people it serves," Dayton said last year. "They should include Minnesotans with disabilities."

That commitment to hiring people with disabilities prompted Gov. Dayton and his staff to pave the way for Minnesota's state government to become a Project SEARCH site.

"It was all very new for everybody," said Cherie Yates, a senior accounting officer and HR generalist in the governor's office. "Everyone was a little nervous about it, a little hesitant, wondering if it was going to just create more work for people. Well, we couldn't have been more wrong."

The first interns worked in several different departments: Veterans Affairs, Military Affairs, Beyond the Yellow Ribbon, Administration, the office Secretary of State, and the Governor's office. Their work experience ranged from office work such as filing to central mail, grounds keeping, and janitorial. And by the fall of 2017, a few months after their state government internships ended, all of the first-year interns are employed in competitive jobs in the community (see sidebar).

Yates said that, by everyone's reckoning, the state government's first foray into Project SEARCH was a big success. "No one wants to see it go away; it's too important." And in fact, for the 2017-18 year, the program has been expanded to at least two more state agencies: the Department of Human Services and the Department of Employment and Economic Development.

## HOW IT WORKS

The interns who participated in the state government Project SEARCH site organized their days according to a schedule that included working at their jobs, classroom instruction, personal time for journaling, eating, and socializing. On a typical day, participants would arrive before 8 a.m., with classroom instruction for the first 45 minutes of their day. Each of the interns would then travel to worksites in and around the Capitol. Their work day usually ran from 9 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., after which they would return to the classroom for additional instruction and journaling.

Adam Tollfeson, a VRS counselor at the Woodbury office, worked closely with all of the participants and Lesa Genovese from the Forest Lake School District was the classroom instructor for the program.

More than 80 percent of the 2017 Project SEARCH graduates in Minnesota are in competitive integrated employment as of October 1, 2017. Project SEARCH is now an international employment model for people with disabilities. It has grown from one original program site at Cincinnati Children's Hospital in 1996 to more than 435 programs across 45 states and eight countries.

For more information about Project SEARCH in Minnesota, check out [WWW.MN.GOV/PROJSRCH/INDEX.HTML](http://WWW.MN.GOV/PROJSRCH/INDEX.HTML)



# EXCEEDING GOALS & GAINING MOMENTUM: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

BY JAN THOMPSON



*Jan Thompson is field director for the Vocational Rehabilitation program.*

**At the close of the recent fiscal year, VR had exceeded its successful employment goal by assisting 2,715 people with significant disabilities obtain and/or maintain competitive integrated employment.**

These outcomes were especially impressive considering the major changes during the year. Increasingly the work of the VR program includes providing information and consultation about WIOA's Section 511 requirements to individuals and their families/guardians, as well as to school, county, and community partner staff. As a result of this work, many individuals with complex disabilities are now considering competitive integrated employment in the community. Additionally, VRS and school staff are providing pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities to prepare them for life-changing employment options.

Job placement work is emphasizing Customized Employment (CE) strategies to meet the needs of people with complex disabilities. Selected agency staff and community rehabilitation partner staff are completing certification training, and others will learn about CE placement services and the qualitative aspects of CE through discussions with internal staff. Agency staff who effectively implemented person-centered practices during the recent Way to Work (WTW) Project at Pro-ACT will also be sharing their "lessons learned."

VRS also began agency-wide Person-Centered Thinking (PCT) training during the past year. Consistent with Minnesota's Olmstead Plan, Employment First initiatives, and WIOA's regulations, VRS will continue statewide staff training on Person-Centered Planning, implementation, and practices.

In addition to the considerable changes that have taken place since WIOA's final rules were published in 2016, the VR program will no longer be measured by the former traditional measures of success. Instead, the program's accomplishments will be tracked through six new WIOA common performance measures. In August 2017, administrative and field leaders received overview training of the new performance measures. Additional leadership training will be provided in early 2018 by the Workforce Innovation Technical Assistance Center.

Throughout the past year, VR staff have been energized and optimistic in assisting people with significant challenges to gain and retain competitive employment in the community. As the Minnesota rehabilitation community continues to work together, the objectives of WIOA will be strengthened and improved to provide the best possible employment assistance to youth with disabilities and to people with very significant barriers to employment.

# VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION OUTCOMES



## WHO VR SERVES

17,554 people received services from VR in FFY 2017, down 120 participants from 2016. Of those who received services, 7,369 were new participants.

43% of all VR participants report a serious mental illness.

45% of those receiving services in 2017 were age 24 or younger.

At application, 43% of VR participants were receiving Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance or a combination of both.

Although VR continues to serve those with the most significant work barriers, there is a growing wait list. By the end of September 2017, 1,580 people were on a wait list.

In 2017, 95% of VR applicants were determined to have a disability that resulted in serious limitations in three or more functional areas.



## VR OUTCOMES

This year, 2,715 VR participants obtained employment.

All VR participants are placed in competitive and integrated jobs. The average hourly wage for participants without long-term supports is \$12.51, down from last year's \$12.71.

25% of those finding employment utilized ongoing supports. For those with ongoing supports, the average wage is \$10.96, up from \$10.80 in 2016.



## RETURN ON INVESTMENT

This year, 2,715 people found work through VR. Upon finding employment, the average wage was \$355 per week.



# VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AT A GLANCE

## EMPLOYMENT

### PLACEMENT BY TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT

Placement by Type of Employment	2015	2016	2017	Pct Placement	Wage	Weekly Earnings
Competitive Integrated Employment	2,231	2,224	2,004	74.0%	\$12.89	\$384.64
Self-Employment	21	21	19	1.0%	\$18.78	\$303.50
Supported Employment in Competitive Integrated Setting	852	870	692	25.0%	\$10.96	\$261.97
<b>Total</b>	<b>3,104</b>	<b>3,115</b>	<b>2,715</b>	<b>100%</b>		

### JOB PLACEMENTS BY BROAD CATEGORY<sup>1</sup>

Job Category	# of Participants	Avg Hours	Hourly Wage	Weekly Earnings	Monthly Earnings
Office and Administrative Support	463	27.0	\$11.81	\$333.00	\$1,442.00
Food Preparation and Serving-Related	419	22.9	\$10.31	\$238.00	\$1,032.00
Sales and Related	388	24.2	\$10.95	\$266.00	\$1,153.00
Building and Grounds Cleaning and Maintenance	248	23.1	\$11.27	\$267.00	\$1,557.00
Transportation and Material Moving	215	28.5	\$12.37	\$366.00	\$1,586.00
Production	188	32.8	\$12.36	\$418.00	\$1,816.00
Personal Care and Service	161	24.5	\$11.32	\$285.00	\$1,236.00
Healthcare Support	111	26.2	\$12.65	\$331.00	\$1,434.00
Education, Training, and Library	84	26.3	\$17.00	\$475.00	\$2,059.00
Installation, Maintenance, and Repair	72	35.6	\$14.21	\$523.00	\$2,265.00
Community and Social Services	67	32.3	\$15.73	\$518.00	\$2,243.00
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	49	33.5	\$20.72	\$722.00	\$3,131.00
Computer and Mathematical	41	35.6	\$19.88	\$734.00	\$3,181.00
Construction and Extraction	39	37.5	\$17.22	\$655.00	\$2,839.00
Business and Financial Operations	34	33.8	\$16.94	\$592.00	\$2,567.00
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, and Media	32	24.5	\$18.14	\$428.00	\$1,855.00
Protective Service	27	30.5	\$12.22	\$375.00	\$1,625.00
Management	25	35.5	\$19.67	\$747.00	\$3,236.00
Architecture and Engineering	18	36.2	\$17.97	\$656.00	\$2,841.00
Farming, Fishing, and Forestry	16	38.6	\$12.91	\$506.00	\$2,191.00
Legal	9	34.9	\$24.64	\$949.00	\$4,112.00
Life, Physical, and Social Science	8	34.4	\$21.42	\$738.00	\$3,198.00
Military-Specific	1	40.0	\$7.25	\$290.00	\$1,257.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,715</b>	<b>27.0</b>	<b>\$12.51</b>	<b>\$355.00</b>	<b>\$1,538.00</b>

<sup>1</sup>All VR placements are competitive and integrated

# VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AT A GLANCE

## DISABILITY GROUP

### DISABILITY GROUP FFY 2017

Disability Group	2017	2017	2017	2017
	Served	Percent of Participants	Employed Outcomes	Percent of Total Placements
Serious Mental Illness	6,007	34.2%	998	36.8%
Learning Disabilities	2,783	15.9%	432	15.9%
Autism	2,555	14.6%	323	11.9%
Developmental Cognitive Disabilities	2,066	11.8%	271	10.0%
Traumatic Brain Injury/Stroke	660	3.8%	99	3.6%
Orthopedic/Neurological Disorders	641	3.7%	95	3.5%
Deaf/Hearing Loss	606	3.5%	130	4.8%
Cerebral Palsy	297	1.7%	32	1.2%
Arthritis & Rheumatism	149	0.8%	33	1.2%
Chemical Dependency	137	0.8%	35	1.3%
Epilepsy	133	0.8%	26	1.0%
Spinal Cord Injury	113	0.6%	18	0.7%
Diabetes	99	0.6%	19	0.7%
Multiple Sclerosis	80	0.5%	14	0.5%
Cardiac/Circulatory System/Blood Disorder	77	0.4%	14	0.5%
Muscular Dystrophy	66	0.4%	7	0.3%
Cancer	59	0.3%	12	0.4%
Respiratory Impairments	39	0.2%	3	0.1%
End-Stage Renal Disease	34	0.2%	5	0.2%
HIV/AIDS	18	0.1%	5	0.2%
All Other Impairments	935	5.3%	144	5.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,554</b>		<b>2,715</b>	

# VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AT A GLANCE

## GENDER, AGE & ETHNICITY

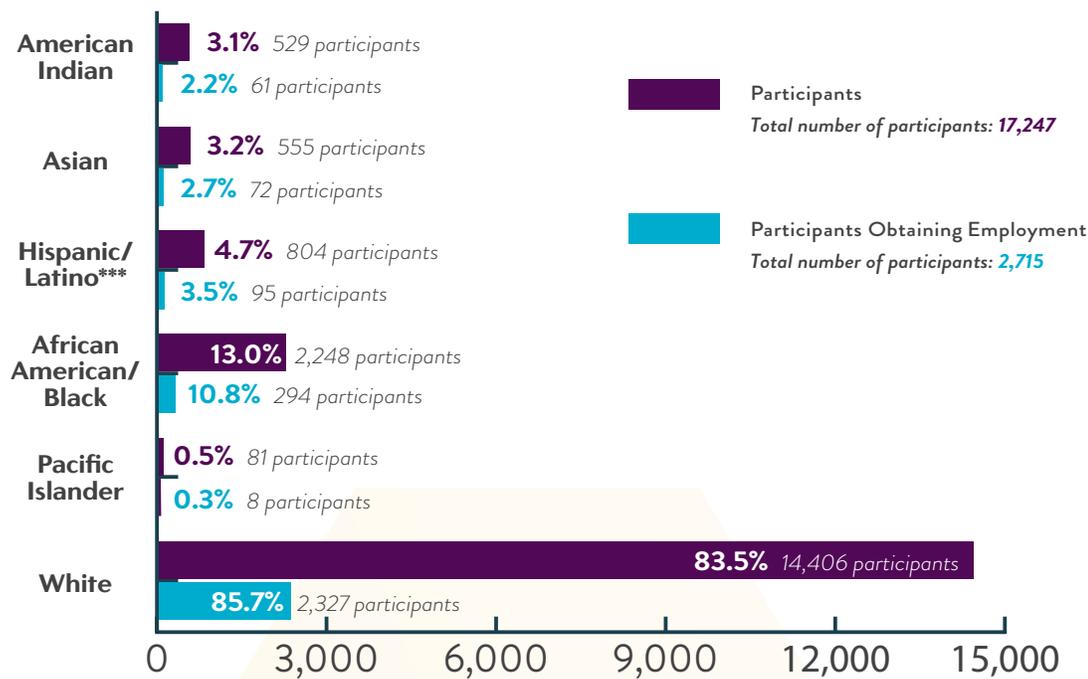
### GENDER

Gender	# of Participants
Did Not Self-Identify	6
Female	7,543
Male	10,005
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,554</b>

### AGE GROUP

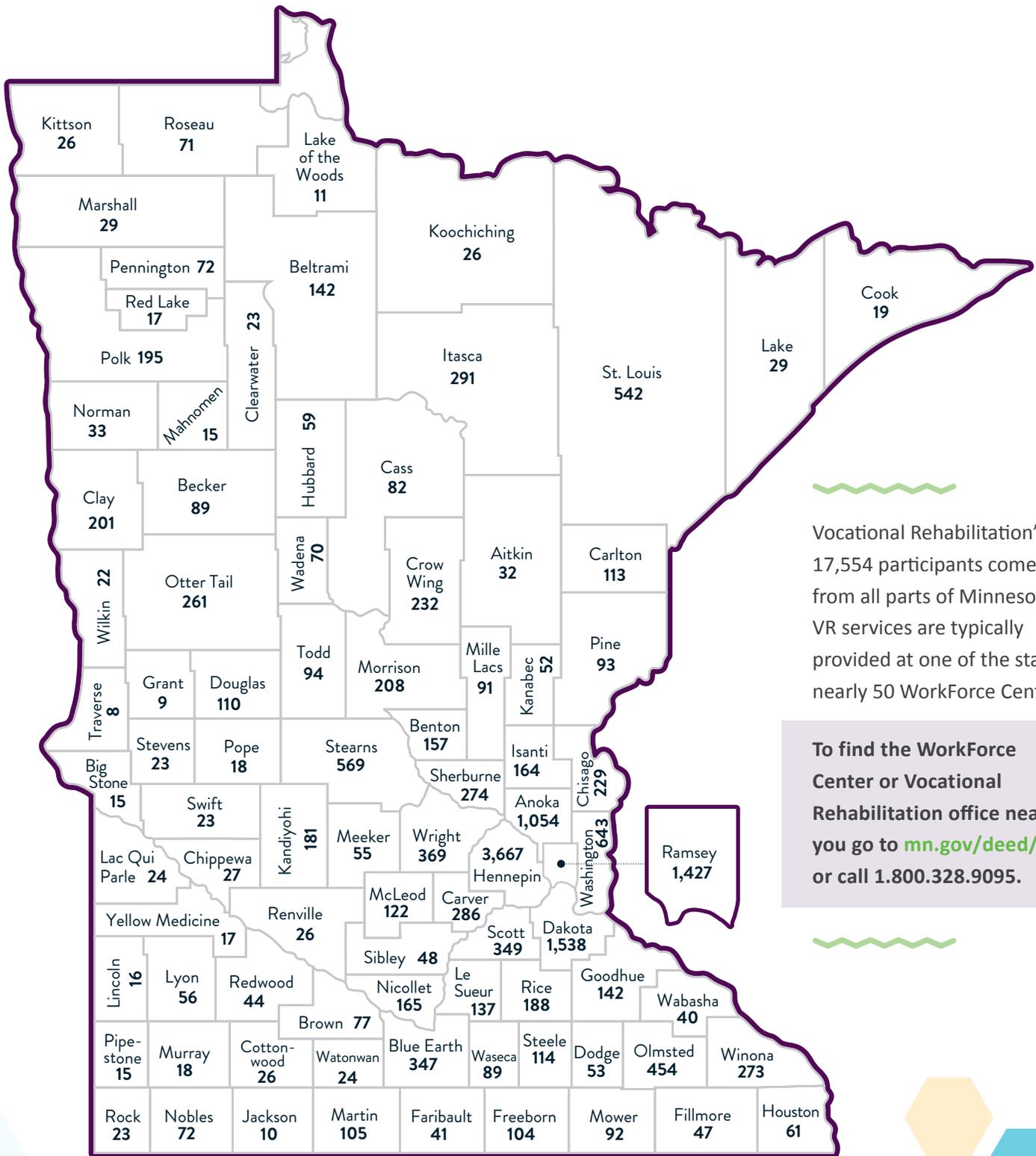
Age Group	# of Participants
Age 21 and younger	6,049
Age 22 and older	11,505
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,554</b>

### RACE AND ETHNICITY



\*\*\* Duplicate Count

# VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PARTICIPATION BY COUNTY



Vocational Rehabilitation's 17,554 participants come from all parts of Minnesota. VR services are typically provided at one of the state's nearly 50 WorkForce Centers.

To find the WorkForce Center or Vocational Rehabilitation office nearest you go to [mn.gov/deed/wfc](http://mn.gov/deed/wfc) or call 1.800.328.9095.



Out of State ..... 49    State Total ..... 17,554



# CHRIS MCINTIRE

BY DANIEL PLANTENBERG

Chris McIntire had worked at a day training and habilitation facility in the Twin Cities, and his family believed that his only option

was to continue in the same of segregated, sub-minimum wage work. But people with significant disabilities who historically were in facility-based employment – people like Chris – were exactly who members of Congress had in mind when they passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) in 2014.

“... CHRIS IS VERY FLEXIBLE, LOVES TO HELP THE COMMUNITY, AND LOVES SPENDING TIME AT THE FRIENDLY BUFFALO.”

One of the provisions of WIOA explicitly seeks to reduce the incidence of subminimum wage employment and to encourage competitive integrated employment for people with disabilities. Because of this provision, Chris was given the opportunity to learn about competitive employment and, if he wished, to pursue such work by working with the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

Chris and his family met Jessica Outhwaite, a VR counselor in the Monticello office, to discuss if he wanted to seek competitive employment. Chris chose to jump straight into placement services.

Functional Industries, a community rehabilitation program in Buffalo, helped Chris develop a job search plan and get started on his job search helping him complete applications and communicate with employers. They also offered job coaching once he started a job. And it didn't take long for him to find one with the family-owned Friendly Buffalo Restaurant in Big Lake. There he works eight hours a week, earning minimum wage. His manager, Lisa Stryeski, says she believes Chris has room to expand his duties and increase his hours and earnings over time.

“Chris’s job involves washing dishes two hours a day,” Stryeski said. “He is fast, thorough, and has good comradery with his co-workers. Chris is always happy and laughing. I would like for him to be able to work on other tasks with me such as setting tables and folding napkins.” She notes that Chris loves interacting with his co-workers.

After his first day on the job, Chris came home happy, according to his mother Judy. She could tell the job was a good fit. “This was new territory for us,” she says.

“However Chris is very flexible, loves to help the community, and loves spending time at the Friendly Buffalo.”

Judy is a staunch advocate for her son, coordinating with his work groups and service providers to make sure Chris has a fulfilling day working in the community and succeeding in his job. Thanks to working at the Friendly Buffalo Chris continues to enjoy his favorite hobbies, including music. He spent his first paycheck on a keyboard.

Scheduling is a big challenge for Chris. Besides his work, he has five days a week of recreation and leisure activities that are county-funded at a work group called Options. He is looking into volunteering at an animal shelter in Big Lake, participating in Special Olympics, and says he really wants to add another day a week working at the Friendly Buffalo. His cognitive disability will not stop Chris. Thanks to the Friendly Buffalo, Options, Functional Industries, and his very supportive family, Chris has found great success and celebrated one year of employment in November.



*Daniel Plantenberg is a member of the State Rehabilitation Council and former recipient of VR services.*



*Claire Reeve is leaving the State Rehabilitation Council after serving two three-year terms. She has served on the SRC Executive Committee and as a representative to the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils.*

When I reflect upon the six years that I have served on the Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council, I am astonished by both the results and impact of the Vocational Rehabilitation program across our great state. Since 2012, VR has supported 17,032 Minnesotans with disabilities in obtaining competitive, integrated employment outcomes. That number represents thousands of stories – stories about creating new realities from the dreams and goals of individuals with disabilities, and the hard work and commitment of VR staff across Minnesota. Each of those employment outcomes represents a positive return to our communities through the wages earned and the integration of qualified talent in our businesses. These results are awe-inspiring and humbling.

In 2012, when I first joined the council, I felt that VR was one of the “best kept secrets” as a support network available to employers seeking to fill positions with qualified talent. Today, I still feel that the VR program is a valuable resource for employers across the state and know that employer recognition of VR is growing. I recognize now how deeply the program changes lives. I have had the privilege to hear many success stories from individuals who accessed VR services and found success in their personal journeys; you simply cannot quantify the quality of service provided through VR without hearing those stories.

Certainly, the landscape that influences the VR program and services has changed dramatically since I became engaged in the SRC. When I first joined the council, some of the more pressing issues

were around increasing collaboration between VR, Extended Employment, and Independent Living; today those connections are much stronger.

Since then, two big legislative items have influenced the priorities and focus of the VR program: the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and Minnesota’s Olmstead Plan. Both are poised to create new opportunities and challenges within the public workforce development system, and have already created demands beyond the limited resources available to the VR program.

From my perspective, we as council members have a prime opportunity to fulfill our responsibilities under the Rehabilitation Act in advising the VR program. I strongly urge my fellow (and future) council members to be active in not only responding to the changing landscape, but also to look ahead and provide meaningful input to the VR program on how to navigate the changes and make the tough decisions that may become necessary.

Beyond that, I believe it is the responsibility of all Minnesotans to review the results achieved by VR and recognize the value that is created through investment in this public program; once you review the information contained in this report, it is easy to see that further investment will return greater results for our state. If you feel inclined, please share this report with your legislative representatives; the Minnesota State Rehabilitation Council-General is available to answer any questions.

The State Rehabilitation Council is a citizen council whose members provide counsel and advice to Minnesota's Vocational Rehabilitation program. Council members play an active role in making program performance and policy decisions. They collaborate with VR leadership and staff to shape priorities, assess needs, convene public forms, measure customer satisfaction, and produce an annual report on the status of the VR program.

Members come from many walks of life and represent diverse parts of the state. If you care about the issue of employment for people with disabilities and want to make a difference, please consider applying for this council. **For more information, please contact Karla Eckhoff at [Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us](mailto:Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us) or 651-259-7364.**

You may apply online by using the Online Application:

**[commissionsandappointments.sos.state.mn.us/Position](https://commissionsandappointments.sos.state.mn.us/Position)**

## STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL MEMBERS

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The Department of Employment and Economic Development is an equal opportunity employer and service provider.

Upon request, this information can be made available in alternate formats for individuals with disabilities by calling **651-259-7364** or emailing **[Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us](mailto:Karla.F.Eckhoff@state.mn.us)**.

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