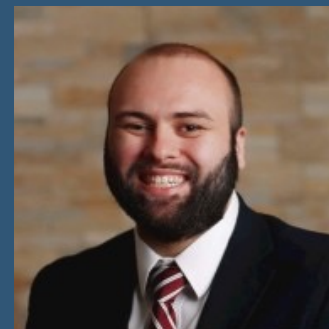




State Rehabilitation Council Chairperson’s Message



I am honored to present the 2022-2023 Annual Report of the North Carolina State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind. Remaining true to its mission, the Council strives to advise and collaborate with the North Carolina Division of Services for the Blind to ensure access to meaningful and effective vocational rehabilitation services for North Carolina’s blind, visually impaired, and deafblind population. This report highlights the services provided throughout this year, the effectiveness of those services for consumers, and the tireless efforts of Division staff to serve their consumers.

I am proud to share that much of this year’s report was compiled using the Division’s newly implemented case management system. I know that Division staff have put great effort into this year’s launch of ENCORE. I also remain impressed by Division staff’s flexibility and persistence this year during what remains to be a trying transitional period coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking to the year ahead, I believe that we as a State Rehabilitation Council have a duty to consumers to ensure that the Division’s programs are well staffed, and that staff have the tools and knowledge necessary to best serve consumers. Improving the resources available is foundational to continuously bettering the quality of services consumers receive. It is my intention that this will be a priority goal of the Council in the forthcoming year. It is also my goal as the Chair to foster a more active State Rehabilitation Council and identify opportunities for the Council’s members to advance the work of the Council and Division in service to North Carolina’s blind.

I, along with my colleagues on the Council, are grateful for the efforts of all Division staff for their contributions to this report. My intention is that the information in this year’s report, as with each previous annual report, guides the work of the Council and the Division in the coming year as we pursue every opportunity to improve vocational rehabilitation services for North Carolina’s blind.

Cody Davis | State Rehabilitation Council Chairperson

Competitive Integrated Employment

GOAL: Increase competitive integrated employment opportunities and outcomes for individuals with visual disabilities, particularly those with most significant disabilities, underserved populations, and individuals with additional barriers to employment.

PROGRESS: In FFY 2023, Division of Services for the Blind's Vocational Rehabilitation program provided services to 996 individuals with the most significant disabilities. In FFY 2023, the Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) increased the number of sponsorships for unpaid work experiences, internships, and on-the-job trainings (OJT). DSB sponsored 26 work experiences, 4 internships, and 3 OJTs.

These experiences were in an array of settings, such as a local pain center, non-profit organization, an addiction recovery center, and healthcare center. During the mandatory Best Practices for New Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors training, a presentation educated counselors on how to utilize pre-vocational services (work experiences, internships, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training opportunities) to assist consumers with obtaining their employment goal.

DSB staff continued to provide resources to consumers who are interested in pursuing self-employment. One of those resources is information on the small business centers that are located throughout North Carolina communities. The small business centers specialize in assisting startups and early-stage businesses by helping to guide consumers through the process and steps that will help their businesses be successful.

DSB VR staff continued to refer consumers who require and are eligible for the independent living programs to assist with the delivery of training on independent living skills such as cooking, cleaning, self-advocacy, etc. The DSB Career and Training Center provided independent living skills instruction to consumers as well when they attended Adjusting to Blindness in a Learning Environment (ABLE). DSB staff made appropriate referrals to assistive technology (AT) specialists and the career and training staff for AT training as needed.

DSB staff provided information to consumers concerning the Ticket to Work program as well as contact information to benefits counselors across the state so that consumers could learn about work incentives and the effects that work will have on their benefits. The NC General Assembly allocated DSB a new full-time position for a Community Work Incentives Counselor (CWIC). This full-time position will provide work incentives planning and assistance to beneficiaries who receive Social Security disability benefits. The CWIC is responsible for counseling and educating beneficiaries about how employment will affect their current benefits (which may include public and private health insurance, federal, state, and/or local benefits received) so that individuals may make informed choices toward employment and self-sufficiency. This position is in the recruitment process.

DSB Staff monitor employment trends and are actively engaged in adapting service methods to enable the consumers we serve to be successful in today's job market. We are engaged in strategic collaborations and partnerships with organizations such as ABLR and NSITE, to provide training for consumers in high demand occupations to create additional avenues for competitive integrated employment.

DSB had one consumer enrolled in the customized training through NSITE known as the Cisco Academy that graduated and is now employed. Another consumer successfully completed the customized sourcing training through NSITE and obtained employment in the field. The contract for ABLR was approved and executed. In Cohort 1, there were 8 students who completed the digital accessibility analyst course. Six of those 8 students passed and received the Certified Professional in Accessibility Core Competencies (CPACC) certification. All 8 students completed a 12-week internship. Thus far, 3 of those 8 have obtained successful employment in the accessibility field and the other 5 are continuing to work toward obtaining employment. In Cohort 2, 9 students completed the digital accessibility analyst course and 7 out of 9 received the CPACC. Cohort 2 are now completing their 12-week internship. DSB is working with ABLR to add another training course known as Sales Force Service Cloud training in hopes this will be offered in January 2024.

VR Staff are provided various resources and training opportunities to enable them to develop better understanding and utilization of labor market information and tools to help consumers make informed decisions regarding vocational goals. Some of those trainings that have been shared are from WorkForce GPS "Using Labor Market and Skills Information for Effective Sector Strategies" and NCWorks training center/ solutions "LMI Tuesdays".

GOAL: Increase opportunities for training and employment services for adults with visual disabilities, particularly those with most significant disabilities, and underserved populations.

PROGRESS: In FY 2023, DSB sponsored 269 consumers for post-secondary training. Of those, 141 consumers were minorities. Leadership continued its focus on providing adequate training to staff concerning the reporting of measurable skills gains. A monthly training is provided to DSB staff known as “Coffee Talk with WIOA”, which provides support and education on the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) along with the importance of accurate reporting. DSB achieved a measurable skill gains rate of 35.9% for Q4 program year (PY) 2022.

Assistive technology is advancing day to day. It is very important that our assistive technology staff continuously receive training on new technologies so that they can assess and recommend AT equipment that will assist our consumers with reaching their goals of employment. The following trainings were provided to staff for FFY 2023:

- October 4, 2022 – New Trends and Resources for Assistive Technology including Mississippi State course “Teaching iPhone for Low Vision, Where to Start.” This course was tailored to blind instructors with JAWS accessibility.
- February 2-4, 2023 – Several staff attended the national Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) Conference virtually to stay updated with current assistive technology. This includes: What’s New with Apple Accessibility; Cracking the Code – Teaching Coding Concepts to the Blind; App Smackdown; Experiences with AT to Combat Social Isolation; Job Accommodation Bootcamp; Together Again, AT for Travel and Inclusive Events; Foundational Communication: Individualizing Access for DeafBlind Students; and Monitoring Writing Progress: Digitizing Assessment to Facilitate Writing.
- July 19, 2023 – Or-Cam My Eye demonstration, features, uses for consumers. (Head borne technology)
- August 17, 2023 – Or-Cam Read 3 (brand new product) demonstration, features, uses for consumers. (Head borne technology)

In FFY 2022, DSB hired AT instructor providers to expand the network of individuals available to provide instruction to our consumers. In FFY 2023, DSB increased the hiring of AT Instructor adding 2 vendors to expand the network of individuals available to provide instruction to our consumers to 10 total.

Youth and Students With Disabilities

GOAL: Increase opportunities for training and employment services for youth with visual disabilities.

PROGRESS: For FFY 2023, 250 students with disabilities ages 14-24 were served by DSB's transition program.

DSB staff continue to provide one-on-one soft skills training to youth and students with disabilities. Career and Training Center staff focus on providing soft skills training to the youth and students with disabilities during the youth summer program, Summer Adapting to Blindness Vital to Visually Impaired Youth (SAVVY). The Career and Training provides assistive technology and independent living skills training to youth and students with disabilities during the SAVVY program.

DSB transition staff held youth summer programs in each of the local district offices. These summer programs were held in the local communities that focused on work readiness such as soft skills training, independent living skills, and/or assistive technology training, etc. The summer program offered by each office during the summer of 2023 along with their titles were:

- Asheville: Summer Youth Training Program
- Charlotte: Pathways to a Bright Future
- Fayetteville: Visualize Success 2023!
- Winston Salem: Youth Symposium 2023
- Raleigh: Ready for the World? Adulthood is Coming!
- Greenville/Wilmington: Youth Without Limits

DSB VR staff continue to refer youth and students with disabilities to the Independent Living Programs to assist with the delivery of training on independent living skills (such as cooking, cleaning, etc.). DSB staff made appropriate referrals to assistive technology specialists in the field that assisted with the delivery of AT training as needed for youth and students with disabilities. DSB VR staff continues to utilize a variety of sources to deliver services to the youth and students with disabilities.

GOAL: Increase the provision of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) for students with visual disabilities.

PROGRESS: DSB staff continue to collaborate with the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Consultants for Visual Impairment to enhance and increase services for students with visual impairment/blindness or who are deafblind. DSB staff and DPI staff meet once a month and these meetings focus on increasing student referrals for DSB VR services to provide more Pre-ETS services and Transition services. During FFY 2023, DSB information on Pre-ETS services, DSB Career and Training Center SAVVY, and other opportunities were posted on the DPI Visual Impairment Resources webpage. The DSB webpage has been added to the “Allies in the Field of Visual Impairments” link. This link provides easy access for teachers and parents concerning DSB services and resources. More information will be added in the future.

During FFY 2023, DSB had five pre-employment transition services associates on staff across the state that assist with identifying potentially eligible students and increasing the provision of pre-employment transition services. DSB staff along with the Pre-ETS associates, continued to use a variety of sources to deliver pre-employment transition services for students who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind. These activities are individualized and/or take place in small groups. Some of the activities come from the following resources: APH Tote system, Career Connect, Explore Work, T-Folio, and other online platforms. Leadership continues to evaluate and research other resources that can be used to increase the provision of pre-employment transition services.

During FFY 2023, DSB contracted with nine service providers to assist with providing Pre-Employment Transition Services to youth across the state. We added three additional providers during FFY 2023. There are now providers offering services in each of the 100 counties.

Business Engagement

GOAL: Build stronger relationships and partnerships with businesses and government agencies to develop or expand work experiences, internships, and employment opportunities for adults and youth who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind.

PROGRESS: This year DSB continued to work toward our goals of building strong business partnerships using the dual customer model. We recognize that our consumer customers and business customers are equally important in the work we do, and both require customized services to meet their needs. DSB placement staff were involved in multiple types of activities to engage and serve our business partners throughout the state. For FFY 2023, DSB sponsored 26 work experiences, 4 internships, and 3 OJT experiences. There were employers from many different sectors that partnered with DSB for these experiences including the health care industry, food service, arts and theater, non-profit sector, animal adoption and rescue, childcare, hospitality and event planning, sales and marketing, government services, and more. DSB staff continue to have a presence at local chambers of commerce and NC Work Centers and participated in NC Works hiring and recruiting events as well as chamber of commerce events and ADA celebrations. Many staff also have presented at NC Works gatherings throughout the year to market and inform partners about DSB services.

DSB staff provided direct services to many employer partners including workplace accommodations consulting, work experience, internship and OJT development, talent pipeline/recruitment assistance, job applicant screening, information on tax credits, and federal bonding related to hiring. Many new employer partnerships got underway this year because of outreach efforts from DSB placement staff including community colleges, manufacturing, hospitality, human services organizations, shipping and logistics, addiction and substance abuse recovery centers, health care, law enforcement, and the faith community. A training has been scheduled for January 2024, with Mississippi State University that will focus on business development training for counselors and other VR placement staff. This training will entail evidence-based best practices pertaining to business engagement with the focus on placing consumers who have been diagnosed with visual impairment/blindness. Additionally, many DSB staff attended the NC Works Partnership Conference and other trainings related to increasing employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities.

Capacity Building

GOAL: Increase internal capacity and develop the program infrastructure needed to improve service delivery for VR participants and employers.

PROGRESS: DSB leadership continued to evaluate current VR service delivery models and focused on researching other innovative and effective VR service models as needed.

DSB continues to work collaboratively with other entities serving people who are deafblind, including the Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DSDHH), the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Deaf-Blind Project with the Exceptional Children Assistance Center (ECAC), the non-profit North Carolina Deaf-Blind Associates, the Deaf-Blind Advisory Council, the Statewide Interagency Team and Regional Interagency Teams which are comprised of staff from DSDHH, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Use Services, and the Exceptional Children Division of DPI. In addition, the Division of Services for the Blind is a member of the National Community of Partners (NCOP) sponsored by the Helen Keller National Center (HKNC).

DSB's Deafblind Assistive Technology Program Specialist (DBATPS) attended the quarterly meetings for the North Carolina Council for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing. The DBATPS presented at the NC Council for Deaf and Hard of Hearing on August 4, 2023, on DSB deafblind services. This Council consists of NC legislators, multiple agencies under DHHS, NC DeafBlind Associates and individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing. The presentation included current services provided, VR services doing well, challenges, and perspectives on the current & future state of VR services for deafblind individuals in North Carolina.

Deafblindness 101 training was hosted by East Carolina University on September 28, 2023. Three out of five Deafblind Specialists attended the training. Some of the training topics included: facts about etiologies related to deafblindness, misconceptions concerning deafblindness, and instructional planning.

DPI and DSB continue to meet monthly to discuss joint opportunities, issues, and to conduct strategic planning, including developing combined training for staff. Leadership presented at the 71st Conference for

Exceptional Children in October 2022. This was another way to assist DSB staff with increasing collaboration with the NC Department of Public Instruction and provide outreach on transition and Pre-Employment Transition Services to teachers and leadership across the state.

NC DeafBlind Transition Collaboration meetings started in the fall of 2022 with staff attending the DeafBlind Institute training in Greensboro. Afterward, monthly meetings were established to increase collaboration between professionals serving the student population. The goal is to increase effective service delivery to students and families and to assist them in the transition from school to employment and/or training. Focus is given to students with complex needs who are deafblind. The State Capacity Building Team “North Carolina - DeafBlind Project” was formed to further assist with the collaboration effort and the team members were able to meet in Charlotte to discuss action items to increase collaboration. In September a “NC Transition - Professional Focus Group (VR & EC & Transition)” took place to hear from professionals on the current services as well as needs. NC team members are East Carolina University Teacher Support Program for Learners with DeafBlindness technical assistance consultants/contractors, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Education coordinator/specialist, National Center of Deaf-Blindness TA consultant/contractor, and Exceptional Children’s Assistance Center Parent Center representative.

GOAL: Increase collaboration with core Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and required program partners and community stakeholders to integrate and expand services for individuals with visual disabilities.

PROGRESS: The division director continues to serve as an NC Works Commission member. As previously stated, DSB staff continues to have a presence at the local chambers of commerce and NC Work Centers and has participated in NC Works hiring and recruiting events as well as Chamber of Commerce events and ADA Celebrations. Many staff have also presented at NC Works gatherings throughout the year to market and inform partners about DSB services. NC Works again provided a presentation during the mandatory Best Practices for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors training to increase the counselors’ knowledge of services provided by NC Works and to emphasize the importance of collaboration between the two agencies. DSB staff continues to collaborate with National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C) concerning

resources and delivery models to meet the holistic individualized needs of the consumers seeking employment. Leadership shares training and opportunities that are provided by NTACTION, Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VR TAC: QM), and Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE) with VR staff to enhance the staff's knowledge.

Supported Employment

GOAL: Increase outreach to identify individuals who are most significantly disabled and require supported employment services to achieve a successful competitive integrated employment outcome including outreach to consumers who reside in rural areas who may also be underserved.

PROGRESS: In FFY 2023, DSB had 50 approved vendors available to provide Supported Employment to consumers who are most significantly disabled. During this FFY, one additional provider was added to the provider list for DSB.

GOAL: Provide supported employment training for new counselors.

PROGRESS: Mandatory best practices training has been provided for new counselors. This training is focused on assisting consumers to address and overcome barriers to employment and identifying career-based employment. A specific component pertaining to supported employment is included in the training.

GOAL: Continue efforts to identify and expand the number of community rehabilitation program providers focusing on areas across that state that have limited resources.

PROGRESS: During FFY 2023, DSB had 50 approved vendors available to provide supported employment services to consumers who are most significantly disabled; one new provider was added this year. The Rehabilitation Program Specialist for employment services, along with other DSB staff, continue efforts to increase the number of approved vendors. DSB offered sensitivity and awareness training for community rehabilitation program

staff and supported employment service providers pertaining to working with individuals who are blind or have visual impairments, including exposure to AT and adaptive devices. The training is known as New Employee Sensitivity Training (NEST) and takes place twice a year at the DSB Career and Training Center. In addition, our DSB specialists and counselors offer training to the community rehabilitation program staff and supported employment providers to increase their knowledge of working with consumers who are blind, visually impaired, or deafblind. Some examples of the training topics are sighted guide, AT, and adaptive devices.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Outcomes FFY 2023



Number served:
2,681



Number of Individualized
Plan for Employment created:
427



Number of consumers who achieved
Competitive Integrated Employment:
312



Number of consumers
serve with the most
significant disabilities:
996



Average/
median earnings:
\$14.39
(HOURLY)

Transition and Pre-Employment Transition Services



Number of transition students served:

250 FFY 2023



Number of Pre ETS served:

83 PY 2022

Assistive Technology Services FFY 2023



Number of new referrals:

494



Number Successfully Closed:

388



Number Hours of Instruction:

1,012

Deaf Blind Services FFY 2023



Number served:

208

DSB Career and Training Center SFY 2023



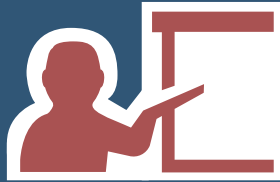
ABLE Assessments
Participants:

37



ABLE Program
Participants:

32



ABLE hours of Instruction:

4,367



Evaluation Unit
Participants:

33



Low Vision
Evaluations:

84



SAVVY Participants: **10**
6 YOUTH IN TRANSITION
1 WORLD OF WORK
3 COLLEGE PREP

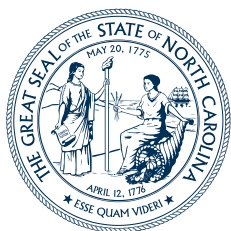
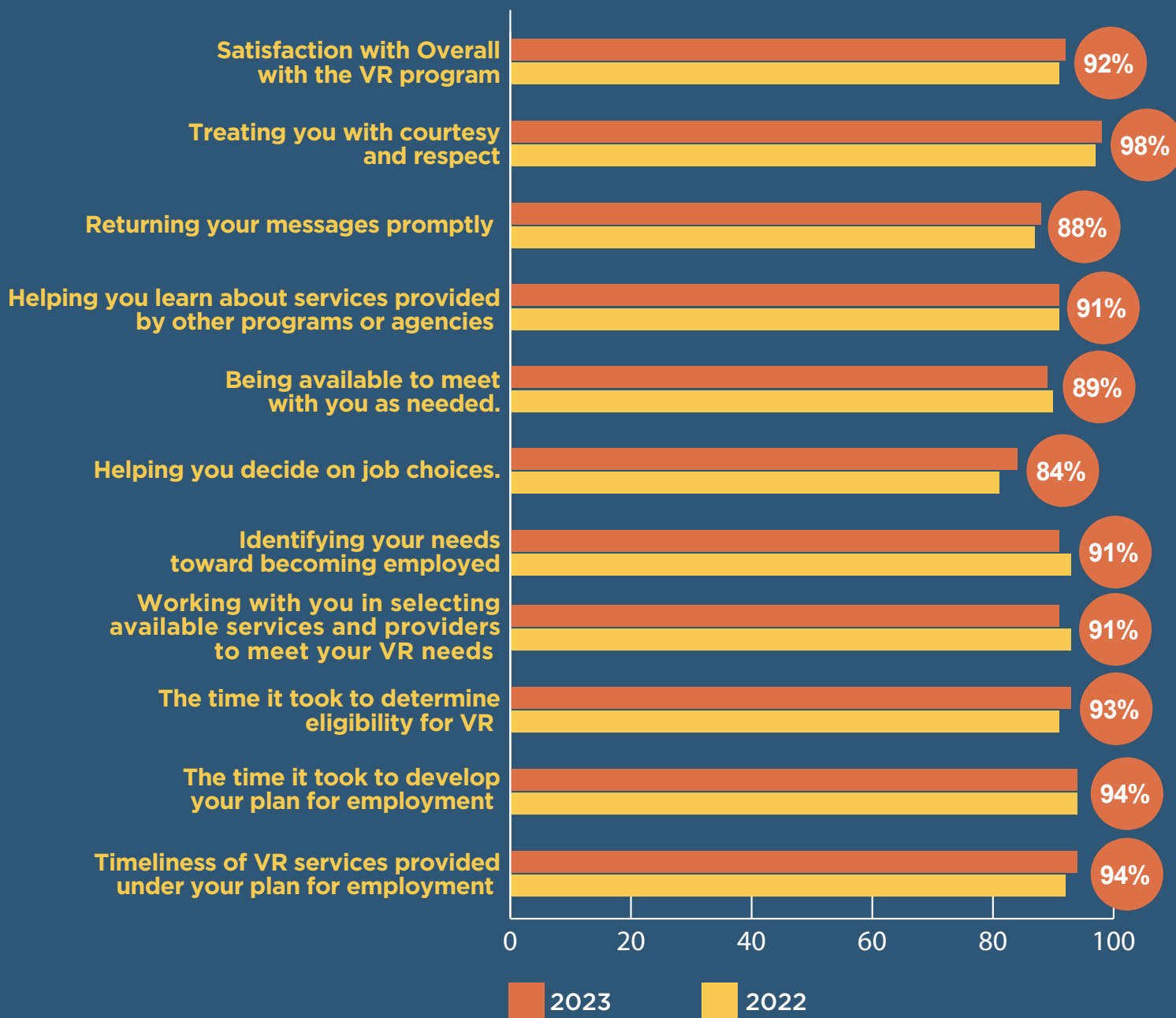


Achievements

On June 23, 2023, Andrea Dickerson successfully completed the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Leadership Management Development Program Certification.

Consumer Satisfaction

Are you satisfied with your VR counselor and other VR program staff in terms of?



NC DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES**
Division of Services for the Blind

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NC DSB's vocational rehabilitation program received 78.7 percent of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For the federal fiscal year 2023, the total amount of grant funds awarded was \$17,935,519. The remaining 21.3 percent of the costs, \$4,845,212, were funded by state appropriations and non-federal receipts.