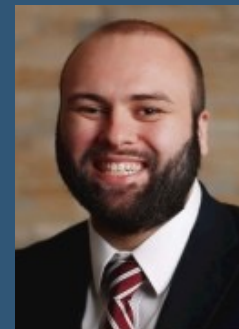




OCTOBER 1, 2023 - SEPTEMBER 30, 2024

State Rehabilitation Council Chairperson's Message

I am honored to present the 2023-2024 Annual Report of the North Carolina State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind (SRC). Remaining true to its mission, the SRC strives to advise and collaborate with the NCDHHS Division of Services for the Blind (DSB) to ensure access to meaningful and effective vocational rehabilitation services for North Carolina's Blind, visually impaired and DeafBlind population. This report highlights DSB's fiscal year 2023-2024 vocational rehabilitation (VR) program goals and progress, VR program outcomes, staff achievements and consumer satisfaction.



I would like to take this opportunity to point out a few notable items in this year's report. As outlined in the report, DSB's VR program saw little fluctuation in the total number of consumers served in fiscal year 2023-2024, a less than five percent decrease. Notably, however, the number of youth served through the transition students and pre-employment transition students programs significantly increased, a roughly 19% increase for transition students and more than doubling for pre-employment transition students. I am proud to say the results of our yearly consumer satisfaction survey, as presented in this report, show the continued dedication of DSB staff and superb quality of their services with VR program consumers' overall satisfaction increasing to 90%. In fact, just as with last year's survey, consumers rated VR program staff and services in the 90th percentile on most metrics. One area, helping consumers decide on job choices, is identified by consumers' survey responses as an area for continued improvement.

Looking to the year ahead, I believe that we as a State Rehabilitation Council have a duty to ensure that DSB'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 continue to be a priority goal of the SRC in the forthcoming year, as it was this year. It is also my goal as the Chair to foster a more active SRC and identify opportunities for the SRC's members to advance the work of the SRC and DSB in service to North Carolina's Blind.

I, along with my colleagues on the SRC, are grateful for the efforts of all DSB 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 SRC and DSB in the coming year as we pursue every opportunity to improve vocational rehabilitation services for North Carolina's blind.

Cody Davis | State Rehabilitation Council Chair

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: DSB staff utilized pre-vocational services (work experiences, internships and on-the-job training) to assist consumers with gaining experience and obtaining employment in their selected field of employment. During FFY 2024, consumers participated in 33 work experiences, 2 internships, and 1 on-the-job training opportunity. These work experiences took place in a variety of settings such as retail and thrift stores, community centers, summer camps, public school facilities, a horse therapy facility, YMCAs, literacy centers, disability advocacy organizations, animal rescue programs, libraries and health care facilities. One consumer participated in on-the-job training at an addiction recovery center. One internship was at a mental health facility, and another was a social media and marketing intern at a non-profit organization serving students in recovery from substance use and mental health issues.

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 and on-the-job training opportunities) to assist consumers in obtaining their employment goal.

Consumers who showed interest in self-employment opportunities were offered resources, such as referrals to the small business centers located in the consumers' local community. Small business development centers provide counseling and training to small businesses to develop and provide informational tools to support business start-ups and expansion of existing businesses. The self-employment handbook that is in the agency's policy manual was also provided and explained thoroughly by VR counselors to consumers who showed interest in self-employment.

The Community Employment Specialists, Business Service Representatives and VR counselors, along with other DSB VR staff, continued to work with consumers on soft skills to increase employment attainment and to assist consumers with maintaining their employment. This often took place in one-on-one settings while meeting with consumers. The other two services that can be sponsored by DSB to assist consumers with learning soft skills

and helping the consumer to be successful on the job are work adjustment services and supported employment services, provided through our partnerships with the community rehabilitation programs. Work adjustment services are sponsored when the consumer is identified as significantly disabled, the need is determined, and it is confirmed that services are required for the consumer to be successful. Work adjustment training is a vocational rehabilitation (VR) service that can be provided during an eligible individual's rehabilitation program to assist the individual in developing work skills, work habits, and job retention skills required to obtain and maintain employment. Work adjustment training includes activities to improve and increase productivity, attendance, punctuality, ability to work with others, ability to work under supervision, and work tolerance. Another service that can be sponsored as needed and required for the consumer to be successful in employment is supported employment services. Supported employment (SE) is defined as competitive integrated employment for an individual with a most-significant disability (MSD), including a youth with a most significant disability. SE is individualized and customized, consistent with the individual's unique strengths, abilities, interests, and informed choice, including with ongoing support services necessary to retain employment.

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) refer internally to our independent living programs if it is determined there is a need by the consumer for these services. The independent living programs provide guidance, comprehensive independent skills training and a connection to vital resources to help people adjust to vision loss and live independently and safely at home and integrated into the community. Eligible individuals will develop independent living goals and create a plan of services to support them as they work to achieve that goal. Some of the services included are: Individual and family counseling regarding vision loss, adaptive devices and referrals to external resources.

The Career and Training Center provided the Adapting to Blindness in a Learning Environment (ABLE) program is available to consumers throughout the year as required and needed by consumers in order to obtain their employment goals. This program runs from August to June, and provides comprehensive, individualized programs of instruction to participants to assist them with achieving their vocational, educational and independent living goals. Those classes and services are adult basic education, basic computers, braille, career education, college prep, consumer education, cooking, keyboarding, mobile devices, orientation and mobility, techniques of daily living, practical application, counseling services, DeafBlind services, low vision services, psychological services, recreation services, and wellness services. The Career and Training Center also offered specialized training where consumers may participate exclusively in technology training.

For consumers who are recipients of SSI/SSDI, VR staff continued to refer them to the Ticket To Work Program through the Social Security Administration. This program provided an explanation of work incentives available to those consumers receiving benefits and wanting to continue to work. Some of those incentives included a trial work period, expedited reinstatement, and protection from medical continuing disability reviews.

DSB continues to have a staff member in one district office who is certified as a Community Partner Work Incentives Counselor to assist with increasing opportunities for benefits counseling to consumers. This staff member attended the National Association of Benefits and Work Incentive Specialists conference in April 2024. This conference provided updates concerning benefits counseling and opportunities to network.

The NC General Assembly allocated DSB a new full-time position for a Community Work Incentives Counselor (CWIC). This full-time position has been filled. This 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.

DSB staff has continued its collaboration and partnership with ABLR that provides customized training to those consumers who are interested and qualified. This customized training program is to assist consumers with becoming Accessibility Analysts. During FFY 2024, 16 participants were enrolled in the customized training program. During FFY 2024, 10 participants took the Certified Professional in Accessibility Core Competencies (CPACC) exam, and eight of those 10 participants passed the exam. The Rehabilitation Program Specialist for Employment Services with DSB meets weekly with the ABLR team to discuss concerns, issues and successes, to be able to make sure that the customized training continues to be available and successful for interested and qualified consumers. Consumers complete various milestones during customized training. In Milestone 6, ABLR staff assist with what is known as career support to those who successfully complete the accessibility analyst program. The goal of this milestone is to provide post-program career support to the participant for up to one year. This stage entails ongoing networking and interview opportunities, support events and bi-weekly one-on-one virtual career coaching sessions. For participants in post-employment, bi-monthly meetings are held to discuss how to succeed in the workplace and two sessions are held with the participants' workplace manager.

In FFY 2024, participants who completed the customized training obtained employment in the following job titles and employers:

Place of Employment – Job Title

- Akalaka – Content Writer and Accessibility Specialist
- Arts Access North Carolina – Accessibility Coordinator
- Blind Institute of Technology – Accessibility Tester
- Fable Tech Labs Inc. – Usability Tester
- Making It Visible, LLC – Founder and CEO
- NCDHHS Division of Services for the Blind – Assistive Technology Instructor Vendor
- Onward Search – Usability Tester
- Talent Tutors – Virtual Music Theory Instructor
- Verizon – Accessibility Tester
- Wake Tech Community College – Accessibility/Usability Tester

DSB understands the importance of providing staff with resources and training to empower them to develop a better understanding and utilization of labor market information and tools to help consumers make informed decisions regarding vocational goals. For FFY 2024, the VR staff were provided opportunities to attend various in-person and/or virtual conferences to assist with enhancing their skills and providing education that would assist with better serving consumers. Those conferences included: the NCWorks Partnership Conference, the NC Council for the Visually Impaired and Blind Conference and the CSAVR Net Summit. Leadership continuously shared training opportunities and resources from various partners such as WorkforceGPS, Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Employment (VRTAC-QE) and the Vocational Rehabilitation Technical Assistance Center for Quality Management (VRTAC-QM). One resource that is continuously shared with staff is “LMI Tuesdays.” These are 30-minute discussions of Labor Market Information (LMI) and how to use it in their work. These sessions are hosted on the first or third Tuesday of each month. Each session is led by analysts from the NC Commerce Department’s Labor and Economic Analysis Division (LEAD) virtually. Each session had different discussions around LMI. With each session, the LEAD hopes to remove the mystery around data, how it can be used and where to access it. Some of the topics covered in FFY 2024 during the LMI Tuesdays were:

- Do you understand the basis of LMI?
- January 2024 NC Economy Watch: What’s Up (and Down) With Manufacturing and Construction?
- How can I quickly and easily access information about my area?

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 2024, DSB sponsored 236 consumers for post-secondary training. Of those, 102 consumers were minorities. During FFY 2024, DSB also sponsored other vocational training for consumers to assist them with obtaining employment. One of those trainings that were sponsored for three consumers during FFY 2024, was the Assistive Technology Instructor training through World Services for the Blind. The Certified Assistive Technology Instructor program provided the students with the skills necessary to be an effective, highly employable assistive technology instructor. Another training that was sponsored to assist a consumer with advancing in her career as a massage therapist was a seminar on advanced pain management. With this seminar completed, the consumer was able to provide services to more clientele and further advance her career.

Leadership continued its focus on providing adequate training for staff concerning the reporting of measurable skill gains and credential attainment. 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 42.2% and credential attainment of 40% for PY 2023. DSB exceeded the negotiated federal target rates of measurable skill gains of 39% and credential attainment of 28%.

Assistive technology (AT) is growing and developing exponentially. It is essential that assistive technology staff continually learn about and be trained in the use of new technology in an efficient manner. The following training courses were provided for staff for FFY 2024:

- Nov. 27-28, 2023: Annual In-Service for AT Staff – This internal training assisted staff with meeting the following objectives:
 - Receive an overview of AI for Accessibility and an understanding of ChatGPT.
 - Gain strategies to create more accessible job aids in Microsoft Word (Digital Accessibility.)
 - Become familiar with smart home technology to assist consumers to meet their vocational and independent living needs.
 - Identify Pre-Employment Transition Service (Pre-ETS) activities that AT staff can record for WIOA purposes in Fiori and increase understanding of DSB Pre-ETS.

- Become familiar with various mobile technology features to assist consumers with meeting their vocational and independent living needs.
- Identify new trends and resources in the field of Assistive Technology as it applies to blind, visually impaired and deafblind individuals.
- Identify milestones of the AblrWorks training program for a Digital Accessibility Analyst through acquiring certification as a Certified Professional in Accessibility Core Competencies (CPACC.)
- Jan. 25-27, 2024: Assistive Technology Industry Association Virtual Event - This opportunity gave staff a chance to engage with other industry leaders and collaborate to develop and discover innovative, life-changing technologies.

In FFY 2024, DSB continued to hire AT instructor providers to expand the network of individuals available to provide instruction to our consumers. In FFY 2024, DSB had a total of 10 vendors available to provide assistive technology to consumers as required for them to meet their vocational goals. DSB continues to work to expand the number of vendors available across the state.

Youth and Students With Disabilities

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

PROGRESS: For FFY 2024, 298 students with disabilities ages 14-24 were served by DSB’s transition program. The number of students with disabilities ages 14-24 served by DSB increased in FFY 2024, from 250 in FFY 2023.

In FFY 2024, The Summer Adapting to Blindness Vital to Visually Impaired Youth (SAVVY) program took place in-person at the DSB Career and Training Center from July 7 - Aug. 2, 2024. SAVVY is a four-week program that provides job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs at institutions of higher education, workplace readiness, training to develop social skills and independent living and instruction in self-advocacy including peer mentoring. Eligible students participate in one of the three programs:

- College Prep: The transition from high school to college is a crucial time. This program equips rising seniors and 2024 graduates with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in a college environment.

- World of Work: program is designed for rising juniors, seniors and 2024 graduates who need to develop in-demand soft skills and gain real-world work experience as part of their Individualized Plan for Employment.
- The Youth in Transition (YIT) program is designed to help sophomores, juniors, seniors and 2024 graduates explore career pathways and develop skills that increase independence, work-readiness and self-confidence.

In FFY 2024, we had an increase in participation in our SAVVY program. In FFY 2023, we had 15 individuals that enrolled/attended and FFY 2024, 17 individuals enrolled/attended.

DSB transition staff held youth summer programs in some 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. The summer programs offered during FFY 2024 were:

- Charlotte District Office: “Pathways to a Bright Future”
- Fayetteville District Office: “Visualize Success S'More in 2024!”
- Winston-Salem District Office: “Youth Symposium 2024”
- Raleigh District Office: “Future Ready Forward Thinking”
- Greenville District Office: “Stepping Into Destiny”
- Wilmington District Office: “Catch the Vision”

Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors refer internally to our independent living programs if it is determined that there is a need; this includes youth with disabilities. The independent living programs provide guidance, comprehensive independent skills training and a connection to vital resources to help people adjust to vision loss and live independently and safely at home and in the community. Eligible individuals will develop independent living goals and create a plan of services to support them to help them achieve that goal. Some of the services included are: Individual and family counseling regarding vision loss, adaptive devices and referrals to external resources. 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.

During FFY 2024, 33 work experiences were completed. Of those 33 experiences, 18 were provided to youth with disabilities ages 14-24. These work experiences took place in a variety of settings such as retail and thrift stores, community centers, summer camps, public school facilities, a horse therapy facility, YMCAs, literacy centers, disability advocacy organizations, animal rescue programs, libraries and health care facilities.

DSB continued to organize Youth Empowerment Meetings geared toward young adults ages 18-24 to meet virtually once a month. These meetings are led by participants. The agency's goal is to foster a platform to help build a community for NCDHHS DSB youth to be heard, connect and learn about resources.

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

PROGRESS: During FFY 2024, the Program Specialist for Transition Services and the Chief of Rehabilitation Field Services held seven town hall meetings for DSB VR staff. These town hall meetings were geared toward enhancing outreach to local partnerships and collaborations to grow our Pre-ETS (Pre-Employment Transition Services) program. Resources were shared with staff on how to target local agencies, schools and other entities to increase student referrals to the vocational rehabilitation program.

We conducted three interagency meetings with our Social Workers for the Blind to educate and increase their knowledge of the DSB Pre-ETS and Transition programs. The targeted outcome was to increase awareness of services and cross program referrals.

DSB staff received various training opportunities to gain skills and knowledge to provide pre-employment transition service activities for our students. Refresher training was offered to all staff in October 2023 in each of the five Pre-ETS categories. In January 2024, a three-part training series was developed and offered to VR staff. The training has been recorded and provided to VR supervisors to incorporate in the onboarding process for selected VR staff who deliver Pre-ETS activities to our students when they are hired by the agency.

During FFY 2024, DSB had six 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. Examples of resources utilized include Career Connect, Explore Work, T-Folio, NC Careers and College Foundation of NC.

NC Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and DSB Leadership continued to meet monthly to discuss joint opportunities, issues, and to conduct strategic planning, including developing combined training for staff. The following presentations were completed virtually by DSB staff to DPI staff across the state to educate staff on DSB Services that are available to students who are 14 years old or older:

- Feb. 22, 2024: DSB Career and Training Center presented services provided by the center. This included brief discussion about services provided through the evaluation unit, classes, referral process, and our two major programs: Adapting to Blindness in a Learning Environment (ABLE) and our Summer Adapting to Blindness Vital to Visually Impaired Youth (SAVVY). They focused on the three major SAVVY programs: Youth In Transition (YIT), World of Work (WOW), and College Prep (CP), and provided DPI staff with an opportunity to ask questions.
- March 22, 2024: The Program Specialist for Transition Services and the Chief of Rehabilitation Field Services presented an overview of all the DSB programs offered to students 14 years old or older with visual impairments.

During FFY 2024, DSB contracted with 11 service providers to assist with delivering Pre-Employment Transition Services to youth. We added two additional providers during FFY 2024, which allowed for further expansion of services to more youth across the state.

VR Supervisors scheduled a meet-and-greet with each of the Pre-ETS providers that serve their assigned areas with VR staff. Thirty-two meet-and-greets took place across the state. These meet-and-greets were conducted to increase collaboration, strengthen communication and develop partnerships. DSB continued to solicit other grant applications for services relevant to our students.

Program Specialist for Transition Services began in July 2024, sharing a Pre-ETS activity each month via email with those staff who provide Pre-ETS services to our students. This was put into place to increase ideas and activities to empower staff engagement with our students who are receiving Pre-ETS.

In FFY 2024, DSB had eight interagency transfers in place with eight different school districts. Local district offices continued to collaborate with the school districts to maintain existing interagency transfers. DSB staff communicated and partnered with school staff as agreed upon by both parties to provide updates and discuss referrals. DSB staff continued to pursue opportunities to expand interagency transfers across the state.

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: In FFY 2024, DSB sponsored two VR placement staff members to attend the Windmills Virtual Train-the-Trainer Certificate Program. Our business staff utilized this training to educate community partners, including business partners, on how to become more inclusive of individuals with disabilities in the workplace. Some examples of the community partners meetings where Windmills training was delivered by DSB staff in FFY 2024 include:

- Randolph County NCWorks Partnership Meeting
- Goodwill Industries of Northwest North Carolina Business Advisory Council
- Lion's Club of Lexington

DSB sponsored a training "Improving Business Development" through Mississippi State University for VR Staff to assist staff with increasing their business development skills in order to build long-lasting relationships with business partners. This training took place virtually on Jan. 29 - Feb. 1, 2024. This training entailed evidence-based best practices pertaining to business engagement with the focus on placing consumers who have been diagnosed with visual impairment/blindness. The main objectives for this training were for participants of the training to be able to identify barriers, obtain tools and resources for business development, to increase knowledge and skills to engage with businesses, to utilize counseling skills to facilitate relationship building with employers, and how to play to their strengths when engaging with businesses.

Additionally, DSB staff were offered the opportunity to attend other conferences and other trainings related to increasing employment opportunities for job seekers with disabilities. Conferences attended by staff during FFY 2024 include:

- NCWorks Partnership Conference: Oct. 11-13, 2023, Intentional Inclusion-Opportunities for ALL
- North Carolina Conference on Blindness and Visual Impairment (NCCVIB) March 15-16, 2024
- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) NET (National Employment Team) Summit: Sept. 17-18, 2024.

DSB staff attended the following conferences in FFY 2024 where various vocational rehabilitation topics were discussed, and training was provided:

- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Fall 2023 Conference: Oct. 28- Nov. 1, 2023, History Illuminated – Future Unlocked: Celebrating the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 – Innovating for Tomorrow
- National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) 2023 Fall Conference: Nov. 1-3, 2023
- Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) Spring 2024 Conference: April 6-10, 2024, Policy, Practice, and Performance – Partners for Tomorrow and Innovation for the Future
- National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB): April 10-12, 2024.

Capacity Building

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

PROGRESS: In FY 2024, DSB leadership continued to evaluate current VR service delivery models and focused on researching other innovative and effective VR service models as needed. During FFY 2024, there were two trial policies developed by leadership to facilitate methods of providing more efficient and effective VR services. Both policies were developed in response to feedback from consumers and staff. One of the trial policies that was developed was concerning the DSB Career and Training Center for the Adapting to Blindness in a Learning Environment (ABLE) program. The purpose of this trial policy and procedures is to promote an environment where individuals attending the Career and Training Center are encouraged to take full advantage of services at the Center to adapt to visual impairments, blindness or deafblindness, and to prepare for education and/or employment. The target outcomes for this trial policy were and are for: individuals to report an increase in their acceptance of their visual status and/or their ability to independently function in their daily life and for individuals to have successfully achieved their individualized goals for center participation as set with counselors. The other trial policy and procedures that were put in place during FFY 2024, was for VR Computers for Training. It is known that keyboarding and computer skills are essential for success with many VR goals. Computer skills can only be obtained when keyboarding skills are sufficient for using assistive technology (AT) and common computer programs. Many individuals served

by the Division of Services for the Blind will require touch typing skills to effectively use computers. Acquiring touch typing skills and learning how to use AT and common computer programs requires the client to commit significant time for practice. This trial policy will provide the required equipment and software for individuals to increase their keyboarding and computer skills and to boost their employability. Both trial policies were put into effect from August 2024 to June 2025. A review of the impact of the trial policies will be conducted in June 2025. By July 1, 2025, staff will be informed whether the policy will continue as is, be updated or discontinued.

DSB continued to provide staff training, equipment, materials and resources to facilitate more efficient and effective higher quality VR services as needed and required. In FFY 2024, town hall meetings were held for VR staff to train and educate them on new processes that would assist in providing more efficient and effective VR services. Some examples of those virtual town halls that were held include:

- July 17, 2024: VR Counselor Town Hall Career and Training Center ABLE Updates
- July 10, 2024: Town Hall: Pre-ETS Potentially Eligible Vendor Services

Capacity building is important to DSB because it assists the agency with achieving our goals, improving our overall performance, and establishing partnerships. DSB continues to work collaboratively with other entities, 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, Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities, the Division of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities and Substance Use Services, and the Exceptional Children Division of DPI.

One of the DeafBlind Specialists with the agency attended the quarterly meetings for the North Carolina Council for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing. This Council consists of NC legislators, multiple agencies under DHHS, NC DeafBlind Associates and individuals who are Deaf, hard of hearing, and DeafBlind.

DSB attended and sponsored the SERID Southeast Regional Institute on Deafness (SERID) on Oct. 26-29, 2023. The target audience for this conference included health professionals, employers, consumers, educators, and other people interested in issues affecting individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, and/or late-deafened. This conference allowed staff to gain further knowledge of services and

resources, opportunities to network with other professionals, families, individuals and stakeholders, and information on how to provide quality services to this population.

In FFY 2023 and continuing into FFY 2024, The IDEA Consultant: Visual Impairment and NIMAC State Coordinator for DPI developed a Visual Impairment Resource Hub online for teachers and school staff to access. This hub was developed as a place where DPI staff can obtain information and resources on visual impairment including blindness in North Carolina. DSB is identified on this website as a resource and ally in the field of visual impairment. In this hub, there is a direct link to DSB's website that will provide DPI staff information about DSB programs, and a directory to the district offices so that the contact information is easily accessible to share with students and/or families.

GOAL: Increase collaboration with core WIOA and required program partners and community stakeholders to integrate and expand services for individuals with visual disabilities.

PROGRESS: DSB continued to focus on outreach to ensure that individuals are educated and made aware of DSB services. In Program Year 2024, DSB completed 461 outreach events to educate and provide information about DSB services. The number of participants that were identified at these outreach events was around 25,670. The types of events that took place included: job and health fairs, presentations, sensitivity training, support group meetings, advocacy, exhibitor booths.

The Chief of Rehabilitation Field Services shared a virtual training that was provided by WorkforceGPS called, "Elevate your outreach," with DSB staff. This training focused on identifying strategies and methods for positive and innovative customer outreach.

In FFY 2024, staff from the NC Department of Adult Corrections (NCDAC) met with DSB leadership to learn more about DSB services and how we could help them better serve individuals in NCDAC facilities who have visual impairments. One thing DSB offered was sighted guide training for their staff who could then train any new staff in the proper techniques. DSB also provided them with some basic guidance/etiquette about working with individuals who have visual impairments. DSB staff provided training at two of North Carolina's correctional institutions during FFY 2024: Alexander Correctional Institution in Taylorsville, and Southern Correctional Institution in Troy.

DSB staff continued to have a presence in NCWorks Career Centers. Staff attended partnership meetings, made periodic visits and some staff utilized NCWorks offices to meet with consumers. DSB staff continued to have a presence at the local chambers of commerce and NCWorks Centers and have participated in NC Works hiring and recruiting events as well as Chamber of Commerce events and ADA Celebrations. Many staff also presented at NCWorks gatherings throughout the year to market and inform partners about DSB services.

NCWorks provided a presentation during the mandatory DSB Best Practices for Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors training to increase the counselors' knowledge of services provided by NCWorks and to emphasize the importance of collaboration between the two agencies.

The Division Director continues to serve as an NCWorks Commission member and chairs the Local Innovation Committee. The area supervisor of the Winston-Salem District office served on the Guilford County Workforce Development Board and the Chief of Rehabilitation Field Services served on the Capital Area Workforce Development Board. When serving on a workforce development board, each member is also a part of a committee. The Area Supervisor of the Winston-Salem District office serves on the Emerging Workforce Committee and the Chief of Rehabilitation Field Services serves on the Customer Success Committee. The committees meet at least once a month and provide updates at each quarterly workboard meeting.

DSB staff continue to collaborate with National Technical Assistance Center on Transition: The Collaborative (NTACT:C) to improve our delivery of services, receive opportunities and resources, and to increase our outcomes for students and youth with disabilities. Leadership shares training and opportunities that are provided by NTACT:C, 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. DSB staff attended the Fall and Spring CSAVR and NCSAB conferences.

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: As stated above, in PY 2024, DSB completed 461 outreach events in to educate and provide information on DSB services. These events included participants with the most significant disabilities, minorities, low income and underserved populations. The types of events that took place included: job and health fairs, presentations, sensitivity training, support group meetings, advocacy, exhibitor booths.

Supported employment services are provided through DSB's partnership with Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRP) throughout the state. In FFY 2024, DSB had 50 approved vendors available to provide supported employment services to consumers who were determined most significantly disabled and required the services to obtain, maintain, regain, or advance in employment.

DSB values our CRP partners and the work they do. DSB leadership increased the milestones rates by more than 30% for both work adjustment and supported employment services to strengthen the partnership between the agency and the CRPs so that these valuable services could continue to be delivered.

GOAL: Provide supported employment training for new counselors.

PROGRESS: Mandatory Best Practices Training is a requirement for all new VR counselors. The learning objectives for this training is to assist VR counselors with developing comprehensive counseling and case management skills that are effective and result in successful outcomes, understanding individualized factors which impact a consumer's ability to achieve their goal of independence and employment, and with identifying resources in the community that may assist the consumer with overcoming these factors. There are specific components pertaining to supported employment, customized training, and policies and procedures around defining most significantly and significantly disabled, determining eligibility, and plan development.

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: In FFY 2024, DSB had 50 approved vendors available to provide supported employment services to consumers who were determined most significantly disabled and for whom services are necessary for to maintain, regain, or advance in employment. The Rehabilitation Program Specialist for employment services, along with other DSB staff, continues efforts to increase the number of approved providers.

DSB continued to offer opportunities to community rehabilitation program staff and supported employment service providers to attend sensitivity and awareness training 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, during FFY 2024, other DSB staff provided 11 sensitivity trainings to community partners, which included community rehabilitation program staff.

Vocational Rehabilitation Program Outcomes FFY 2024



Number Served:

2,556



Number of Individualized Plans for Employment Created:

417



Number of Consumers who Achieved Competitive Integrated Employment:

246



Number of Consumers Served with the Most Significant Disabilities:

1,062



Average/Median Earnings:

**\$20.73
(HOURLY)**

Transition and Pre-Employment Transition Services FFY 2024



Number of Transition Students Served:

298



Number of Pre ETS Served:

215

Assistive Technology Services FFY 2024



Number of new referrals:

345



Number Successfully Closed:

404



Number of Instructional Hours:

650

DeafBlind Services FFY 2024



Number served:

80

DSB Career and Training Center SFY 2024



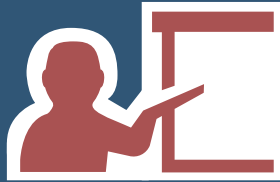
ABLE Assessments
Participants:

23



ABLE Program
Participants:

47



ABLE Instructional Hours:

5,832



Evaluation Unit
Participants:

30



Low Vision
Evaluations:

29



SAVVY Participants: **17**
7 YOUTH IN TRANSITION
7 WORLD OF WORK
3 COLLEGE PREP

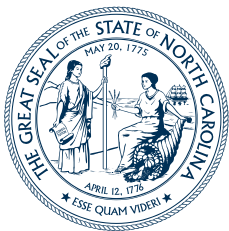
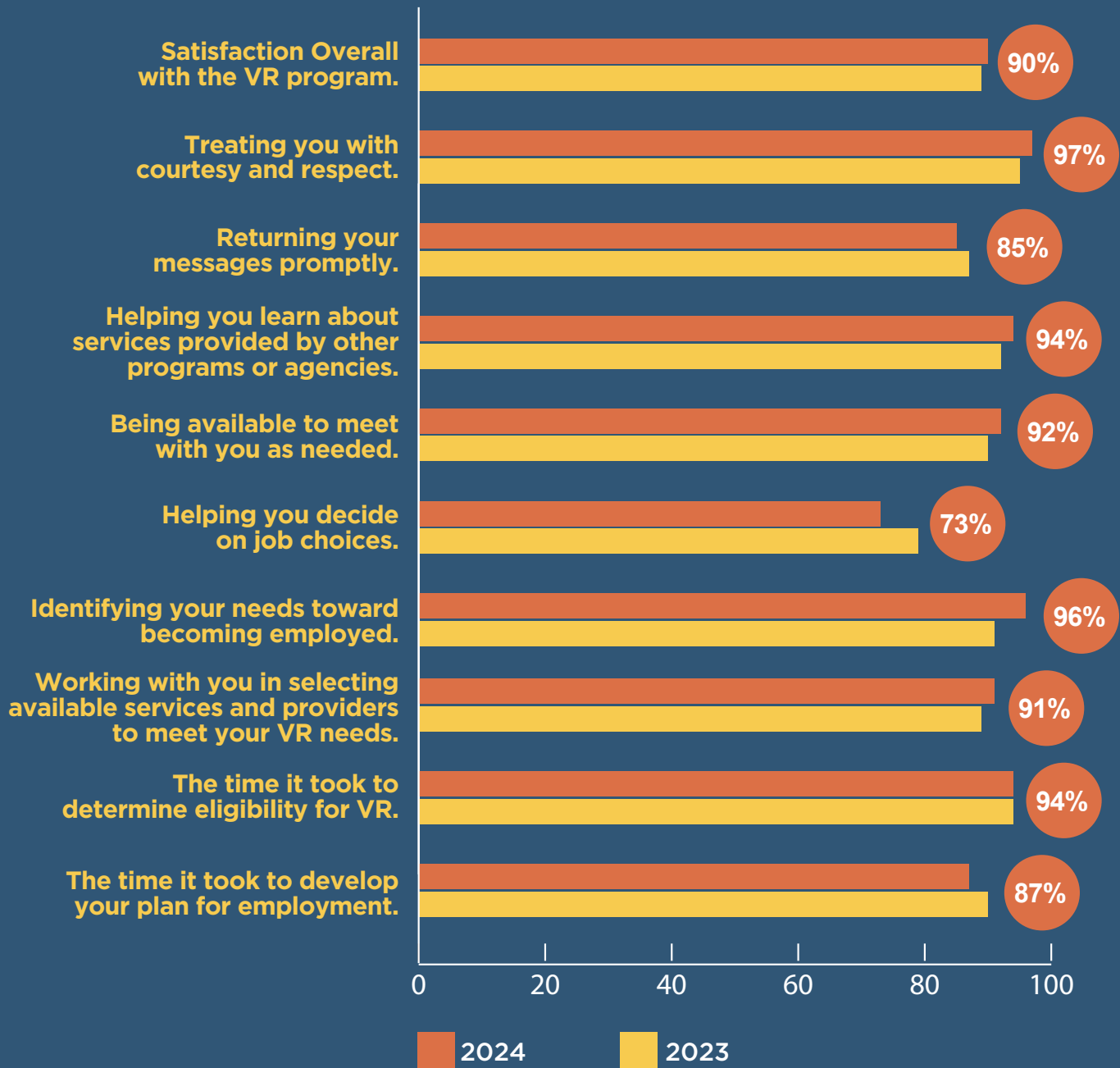


Achievements

On June 5, 2024, Seanetta Graham, Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, successfully completed the NC 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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NCDHHS is an equal opportunity employer and provider.

NCDHHS DSB's vocational rehabilitation program received 78.7% of its funding through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. For the federal fiscal year 2024, the total amount of grant funds awarded was \$18,802,024. The remaining 21.3% of the costs, \$5,088,730, was funded by state appropriations and non-federal receipts.