

NORTH CAROLINA  
**State  
Rehabilitation  
Council**

**2023 REPORT**



## **MISSION OF THE COUNCIL**

**To enhance the employment, independent living and equality of individuals with disabilities in the state of North Carolina.**

## **PURPOSE OF THE COUNCIL**

- **To advise and work in partnership with the NC Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services.**
- **To assist the division in accomplishing its mission to promote employment and independence for people with disabilities through customer partnerships and community leadership.**
- **To provide guidance, input and recommendations relative to the development and expansion of vocational rehabilitation services and programs in an effort to maximize employment opportunities and independence for individuals with disabilities.**
- **To advocate for legislation that supports individuals with disabilities in making successful transitions into the workforce and the community.**
- **To provide customers and stakeholders of vocational rehabilitation services with a formal mechanism to influence policy and the direction of the division at the highest administrative level of the state.**

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## 2023 HIGHLIGHTS



DVRS helped **2,927 individuals** with disabilities achieve **competitive integrated employment (CIE)**

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The **average hourly wage increased to \$14.69**, with clients working **32 hours per week** on average

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**50%** of DVRS' successful employment outcomes were achieved by **transition-age youth**

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The Independent Living Rehabilitation Program (IL) helped **794 North Carolinians** achieve their goals for independence

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The Assistive Technology Program (NCATP) people provided outreach to **12,999 people, which included making 941 and providing** short-term loans, through 1,421 demonstrations, and providing training, information and assistance

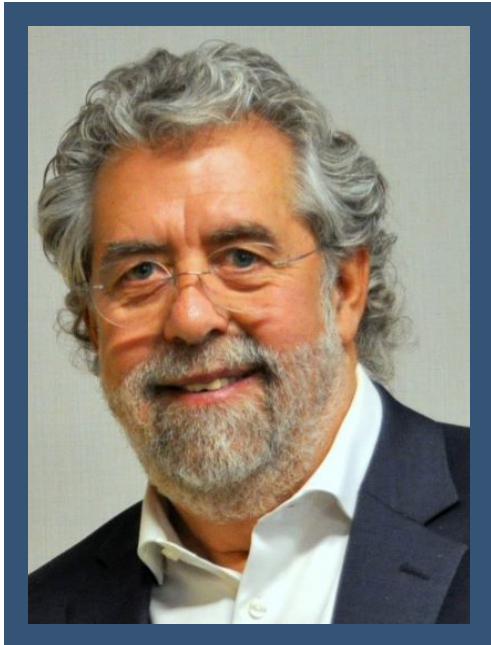
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The Client Assistance Program (NCCAP) helped **1,193 individuals** and provided mediation, negotiation and advocacy for **121 individuals**

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## CHAIR'S MESSAGE



On behalf of the North Carolina State Rehabilitation Council and those we serve, I would like to thank you for your partnership with, support of, and interest in North Carolina's vocational rehabilitation services during 2023. It has been a very active year for the NCSCRC as we continue to further advance and fulfill our statutory responsibilities and our role as advocate for the employment, independence, and rehabilitation needs of North Carolinians with disabilities.

Highlighting 2023 was the Council's commitment to further expanding our participation in four major areas:

- Hosting virtual forums to gather public input regarding VR services;
- Providing input and review for the development and implementation of North Carolina's State Plan
- Advocating for enhanced state funding from the NC General Assembly to improve recruitment and retention efforts for agency, which ultimately will expand the division's capacity to serve clients; and
- Increasing cross-agency partnerships within the NC Department of Health and Human Services and externally with other state agencies.

You will find the NCSRC's participation in these areas detailed in this report.

The SRC's work continues to be guided by our strategic plan goals to foster greater collaboration in the delivery of VR services among the various divisions of the Designated State Unit (NCDHHS); to increase knowledge of the SRC and its purpose; to explore and apply new avenues for use of technology in SRC activities, and to enhance understanding of what participants want and what the VR program can offer in terms of employment and independence services.

I am pleased to report the work and accomplishments of the SRC. Most importantly I'd like to thank the council members for their work and dedication as an advocacy voice for individuals with disabilities working within our communities.

**F. Michael Maybee, Chair**

**NC State Rehabilitation Council**



# OBJECTIVES

1

**Consulting with North Carolina workforce development board to review, analyze and advise the NC Department of Health and Human Services regarding the performance of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services, particularly with responsibilities related to:**

- eligibility, including order of selection
- the extent, scope and effectiveness of services provided
- functions performed by state agencies that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities to achieve competitive integrated employment outcomes

2

**Partnering with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services to:**

- develop, review and agree to state goals in accordance with section 101(a)(15)(C) of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (the Act);
- evaluate the effectiveness of the vocational rehabilitation program
- submit progress reports to the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) of the U.S. Department of Education in accordance with section 101(a) (15) (E) of the Act

3

**Advising the NC Department of Health and Human Services and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services regarding:**

- authorized activities to be carried out under this the Act
- development of and amendments to the Unified State Plan, applications, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations required by the Act

4

**Conducting reviews and analysis of the effectiveness of consumer satisfaction of:**

- functions of the NC Department of Health and Human Services provided by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and other public and private entities responsible for providing services to individuals with disabilities
- employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services, including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with such employment outcomes



## OBJECTIVES

5

**Preparing and submitting an annual report to the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration and the Governor on the status of the vocational rehabilitation programs operating within the state and to make this report available to the public**

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6

**Coordinating with other state councils to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance the number of individuals served through participation in:**

- the Statewide Independent Living Council
  - the advisory panel established under section 612(a)(20) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
  - the NC Council on Developmental Disabilities
  - the NC Mental Health Planning and Advisory Council established under section 1914(a) of the Public Health Service Act
  - the Workforce Development Planning Council, other public and private organizations, groups and functions
- 

7

**Supporting the coordination and establishment of working relationships among the NC Department of Health and Human Services, the Statewide Independent Living Council, and Centers for Independent Living within NC**

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8

**Performing other functions consistent with the purposes of the council and comparable to other functions performed by the council.**

# STRATEGIC PLAN 2023-2025

The Strategic Plan has four strategic goals and sub-strategies that provide guidance when creating the SRC quarterly meeting agenda and establishing committee goals. The SRC mission to the commitment of these goals was accomplished for the period ending in calendar year 2023.

| STRATEGIES  | SUB-STRATEGIES   |
|---|--|
| <p>1. Increase marketing and outreach to individuals with disabilities, employers, and potential partners, including colleges and universities.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Plan for multi-faceted outreach to employers and potential VR consumers and partners in coordination with other Division efforts.</li> <li>b. Leverage social media and other platforms to heighten awareness of VR and its services to North Carolinians with disabilities.</li> <li>c. Identify strategies with potential partners to promote VR as a potential career option. (Examples: University Career Fairs, VR jobs that are not known to students, focus on students as target audience, for those in transition, career change, vocation or occupational interests, NCWorks, Colleges and universities, HS/transitional programs. community colleges).</li> </ul> |
| <p>2. Honor people’s life choice by assuring that IPE goals and service provision are consumer-driven and consumer-focused.</p>                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Review how VR is measuring casework quality and recommend new measures as the SRC finds appropriate.</li> <li>b. Review consumer satisfaction questionnaire for clarity and distinction between experiences with VR versus contracted vendors.</li> <li>c. Monitor and evaluate performance on consumer satisfaction with their involvement in their IPE (e.g., if you had natural or professional supports that you wanted engaged in your services with VR, were they engaged? Response options: yes, no, n/a).</li> </ul>   |



| STRATEGIES  | SUB-STRATEGIES   |
|---|--|
| <p>3. Assist VR in attracting and retaining professional staff.</p>                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Propose legislative strategies to increase salaries for rehabilitation counselors.</li> <li>b. Draft a bill, get it introduced and submitted to legislature with the goal of having the bill incorporated into the budget.</li> <li>c. Advocate for salary pay grades for counselors be aligned at the appropriate level by HR.</li> <li>d. Continue to work with the division and HR to reduce the length of time from candidate's acceptance to job offer.</li> </ul>  |
| <p>4. Assist VR in adapting to the changing employment landscape and marketplace.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Increase the number of people with disabilities who are employed in inclusive workplaces.</li> <li>b. Promote and support efforts to keep VR staff informed of existing and emerging technologies and other relevant developments that can expand employment options for VR consumers.</li> <li>c. Broaden the employment opportunities for people with disabilities.</li> <li>d. Create processes and procedures to ensure that consideration is routinely given to training in, and utilization of appropriate technology and other tools when developing IPEs.</li> <li>e. Track number of VR consumers who obtain non-traditional employment as an indicator that the staff are actively considering the full range of employment options available in the contemporary labor market.</li> <li>f. Increase the number of people with disabilities who are working in high demand occupations.</li> </ul> |



# COMMUNITY OUTREACH

To fulfill its statutory obligations and mission, the SRC designates members as liaisons to seven state councils, as well as additional interest and advocacy groups.

## STATE COUNCILS

Council on Education Services for Exceptional Children

NC Mental Health Planning and Advisory Council

NC Substance Use Disorder Federation

NC Council on Development Disabilities

NC Statewide Independent Living Council

NCWorks Commission

Commission for Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities,  
and Substance Use Disorder

## ACTIONS

1.

Identify candidates who can effectively liaise with the state councils to connect with key partners and facilitate strategic paths for community outreach, advocacy, and member development.

2.

Exchange information to educate members about advocacy efforts within each sector.

3.

Enable more stakeholders to participate in statewide and regional events by hosting on accessible virtual platforms.



## COMMITTEES



### Executive Committee

Acts on behalf of the Council consistent with its purpose as outlined in its bylaws being responsible for compiling the Council's response to the Unified State Plan and triennial Comprehensive Needs Assessment, preparing the annual report, establishing meeting agendas and setting the general direction of the council and its committees.

### ACTIONS

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1. To expand SRC participation in the development and implementation of the Unified State Plan, the committee addressed state plan development, implementation and progress toward Plan and SRC goals within the "Goals, Priorities and Strategies" section of the Plan during meetings with the division director.
2. Advocated for strong leadership roles on the council and carefully reviewed membership terms. New members are encouraged to serve on designated committees to provide a more balanced representation.
3. Members were informed of the RSA monitoring visit scheduled for September and contacted for their feedback. House Bill 190, Section #8 142-538 changed the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (DVRS) to the Division of Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities. The joint House and Senate were both in agreement about Medicaid Expansion, which required learning about customized plans and supports as to what services are covered or not covered. The division is supporting a long-term wage study in conjunction with the Labor and Economic Analysis Division of the Department of Commerce. Members were invited as part of a stakeholder group to attend a meeting with George Washington University about a return-on-investment study of the VR program. The department level strategic plan for 2023-2024 includes investing in behavioral health and resilience; child and family well-being; and a strong inclusive workforce.

4. On the NCDHHS Employment Satisfaction Survey, the agency scored high in the areas pertaining to staff productivity and feeling satisfied with work/life balance. Areas of improvement were promotional opportunities and more collaborative relationships with other agencies. There was ongoing internal training on testing the functionality of ENCORE. The agency participated with Geographic Solutions Incorporated (GSI) and the Social Security Administration programs to receive certification as a user acceptance testing site. The agency also worked on Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) training. Internal audits were in process.
5. The agency participated with Geographic Solutions Incorporated (GSI) and the Social Security Administration certification program and received certification for user acceptance testing site. The agency also worked on Community Rehabilitation Provider (CRP) training. Internal audits were in process. House Bill 583 and Senate Bill 664 were introduced to help the agency and providers retain and hire labor, while there was tremendous support for it, it did not get into the budget.
6. During the December meeting, the SRC Chair announced that the Executive Committee is to meet one month prior to the quarterly meeting to set the agenda. There will be standing items which include standard reports and updates, Old Business, and New Business. Old Business will consist of items from the previous meeting. New Business will be new items from recent discussions. The Council plans to invite a representative from the Office of State Human Resources to its 2024 spring quarterly full council meeting to address concerns regarding the ease of hiring, onboarding, and the banding of services when the mandate came out for masters degrees. The Council is also considering extending an invitation for a representative from the Department of Transportation to present at a full council meeting.
7. Kenneth Bausell, Senior Director for Employment and Inclusion met with the committee members to share his previous experience and vision. Kenneth spoke about bringing in more resources and structure to the ENCORE Case Management System to meet the needs of providers, staff, and individuals receiving payments. The North Carolina Finance System (NCFS) is experiencing delays in payments due to items getting stalled in the system. NCDHHS is working to triage issues and prioritize payments. The Council will review the SRC budget for in-person meetings including travel expenses and the costs involved in sending a few members to the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils conferences in the spring and fall of 2024.



## Consumer Input and Public Outreach Committee

Reviews, analyzes and makes recommendations to the council regarding the effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services delivered by the division and other public and private agencies in the state.

### ACTIONS

1. Reviewed the current methods and strategies for monitoring consumer input and public outreach. Due to an increase in the cost of surveys, the contract with North Carolina State University reduced the number of telephone surveys to 335 to be conducted on a quarterly basis. The feedback has provided improved data results to track trends and themes.
2. The CIPO Forum Planning Subcommittee met on a frequent basis to make improvements based on feedback received after each event. Alternative strategies were discussed; for example, how to attract more participants using the virtual platform. The plan included early notifications and reminders by posting details of the forum on the NCDHHS social media sites, email outreach to stakeholder groups with requests to post on their social media, and by electronic distribution of flyers to consumers and providers. Outreach efforts were expanded by increasing the number of statewide electronic invites from the agency's internal database. NCSU's McKimmon Center provided technical support for registration and in hosting the forums. CIPO's goal was to encourage free-flowing conversation at these events. Changes were made to the presentation to include polling questions to engage participants. The Q&A feature allows participants to voice concerns, share experiences, and obtain information. Resource materials were sent to each registrant before the forum. CIPO forums continue to expand opportunities for public feedback.
3. In preparation for 2024 public forums, questions were added to the December forum registration form to gauge what the audience was most interested in learning about in the future. The nine options given were: access to VR services, core services versus support services, disability services, accommodations, assistive technology for employment services or job placement support, internships, services for transition-aged youth, training and education, transition to postsecondary education or employment, or other. SRC forum volunteers were instructed to allow VR staff to address technical Q&A's during the forum to avoid any conflicts of interest and ensure that accurate VR information was being presented.



## Policy and Rules Review Committee

Reviews and makes recommendations relating to division policies and procedures that affect the public, and that are subject to public rule-making hearings under the state's Administrative Procedures Act and required for compliance with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

### ACTIONS

1. Draft policies reviewed and feedback provided on the following topics:
  - Review of SSI/SSDI Cost Participation Decision
  - Status of Policy Draft Discussions during 9-29-2022 Meeting
  - ENCORE Policy Modules and High-Level Changes
  - 1-21 Informed Choice Final Draft
  - 3-10 Financial Need Final Draft
  - Appendix Family Chart
  - Chapter 3 Combined Revisions
  - Chapter 4 Final Draft
  - Chapter 6 Final Draft
  - IPE Instructions Final Draft
  - Section 1-20 Supervisor Approval
  - VR Handbook
  - Vol-I Section 1-9 Identification and Verification
  - 1-11 Invoice Processing Vol 1
  - 1-12 Imprest Cash Vol 1
  - 1-13 Service Enrollment Authorizations Vol 1
  - 1-15-18 Sign Language Revisions Vol 1
  - Chapter 5 Final Draft
  - Chapter 8 Pre-ETS ENCORE
  - Project SPARK VR Policy Appendix
  - Assertive Community Treatment Final Draft
  - Supported Internships
2. The Policy Team worked diligently on policy changes, guidance, and procedural adjustments. Policy changes were required due to the changeover from case management systems. Video modules were recorded for high level changes with positive feedback and more modules and live events are to be developed. The new case management system, ENCORE, was not fully customized; 80% was off the shelf with much of it a shared functionality with workforce and the remainder a customized module and functionality aligning more with the processes used by VR programs. The Finance Need Survey functionality required some revisions. The VR Handbook was created as a guide to the VR Process and Services.

5. Project SPARK is the pilot project proposed in North Carolina's Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment (SWTCIE) five-year, \$13.8-million grant award. Pilot programs were developed for intensive job search for the most significantly disabled (MSD), wraparound services, long-term job coaching, transportation, meaningful employment for individuals who are unable to work a full day, benefits counseling, and peer mentoring. There are three pilot programs participating, Wake Enterprises, Chatham Trades, and Tri-County Industries. The goal is to support approximately 300 individuals. There are different levels of Competitive Employment (CE) Milestones.
  - CE Milestone 1: Intake and Orientation
  - CE Milestone 2: Job Development and Retention
  - CE Milestone 3: Job Supports and Community Access
  - CE Milestone 4: Employment and Independence
6. Members reviewed the draft for Supported Internships. The focus is on individuals and VR clients who require a program of supported employment which targets individuals with Project SPARK and others who may not have traditionally sought out competitive integrated employment. There are three separate and unique internships approved at the local level. If an individual needs additional internship beyond the three, it requires a higher level of approval. For standard internships, VR allows the first supported internship to be done through the comprehensive assessment process. Training and employment services must be provided under an employment plan. The Supported Internship Policy recognizes that there is a benefit to providing experience in conjunction with working with the client to gauge their interest in what they want to do, where they want to work, and how many hours a week they choose to work. Interns cannot work more than an average of 28 hours per week and not exceed 18 weeks without a higher level of approval. Job coaching and support may be required; benefits counseling and its impact on wages.
7. Assertive Community Treatment is a wraparound service designed for individuals with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI) with avoiding the duplication of services. The ACT Teams began providing benefits counseling services. This option was removed from the policy which stated that VR can and should provide the services since it is now inherently offered through the ACT Teams.



# CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY

The consumer satisfaction survey is mandated by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended (the Act), which states that the SRC shall conduct a review and analyze the effectiveness of client satisfaction with:

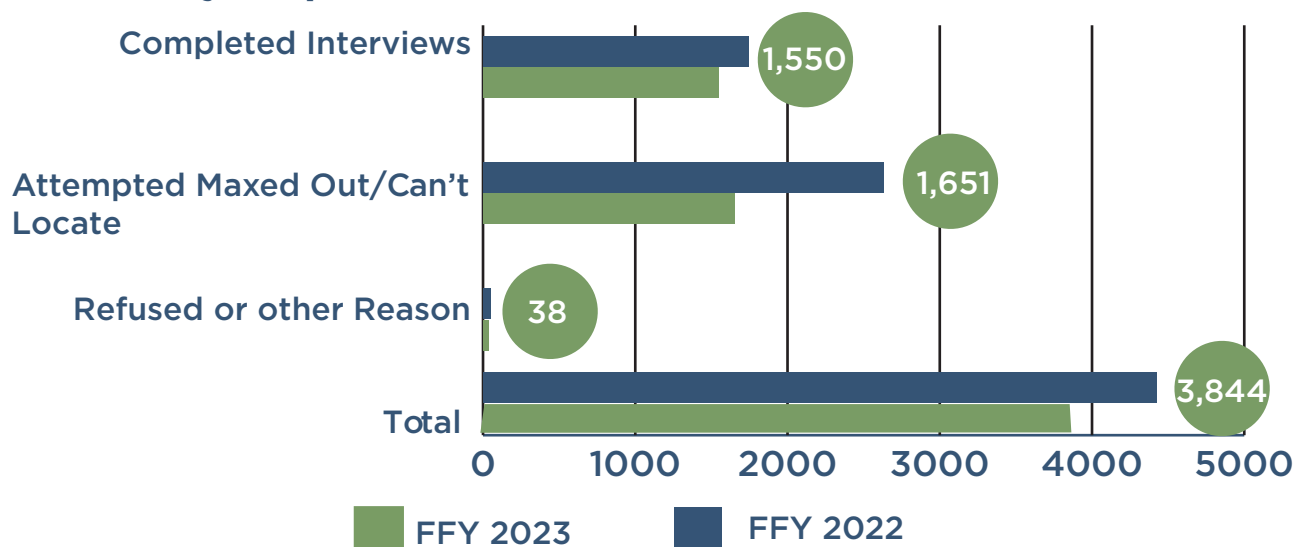
- The functions performed by the designated state agency
- Vocational rehabilitation services provided by state agencies, and other public and private entities responsible for providing vocational rehabilitation services to individuals with disabilities under the Act
- Employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals receiving services under Title I of the Act including the availability of health and other employment benefits in connection with those employment outcomes

## SURVEY PROCESS

The survey is conducted by the SRC in cooperation with division staff. Council and staff share responsibility for analyzing and reporting the results.

In FFY 2023, interviews were completed for 40.3% of the 3,844 VR clients sampled for the survey. This was consistent with the prior year in the proportion of completed interviews. The adjusted completion rate of 99% includes only clients that were contacted.

### Survey Completion Results





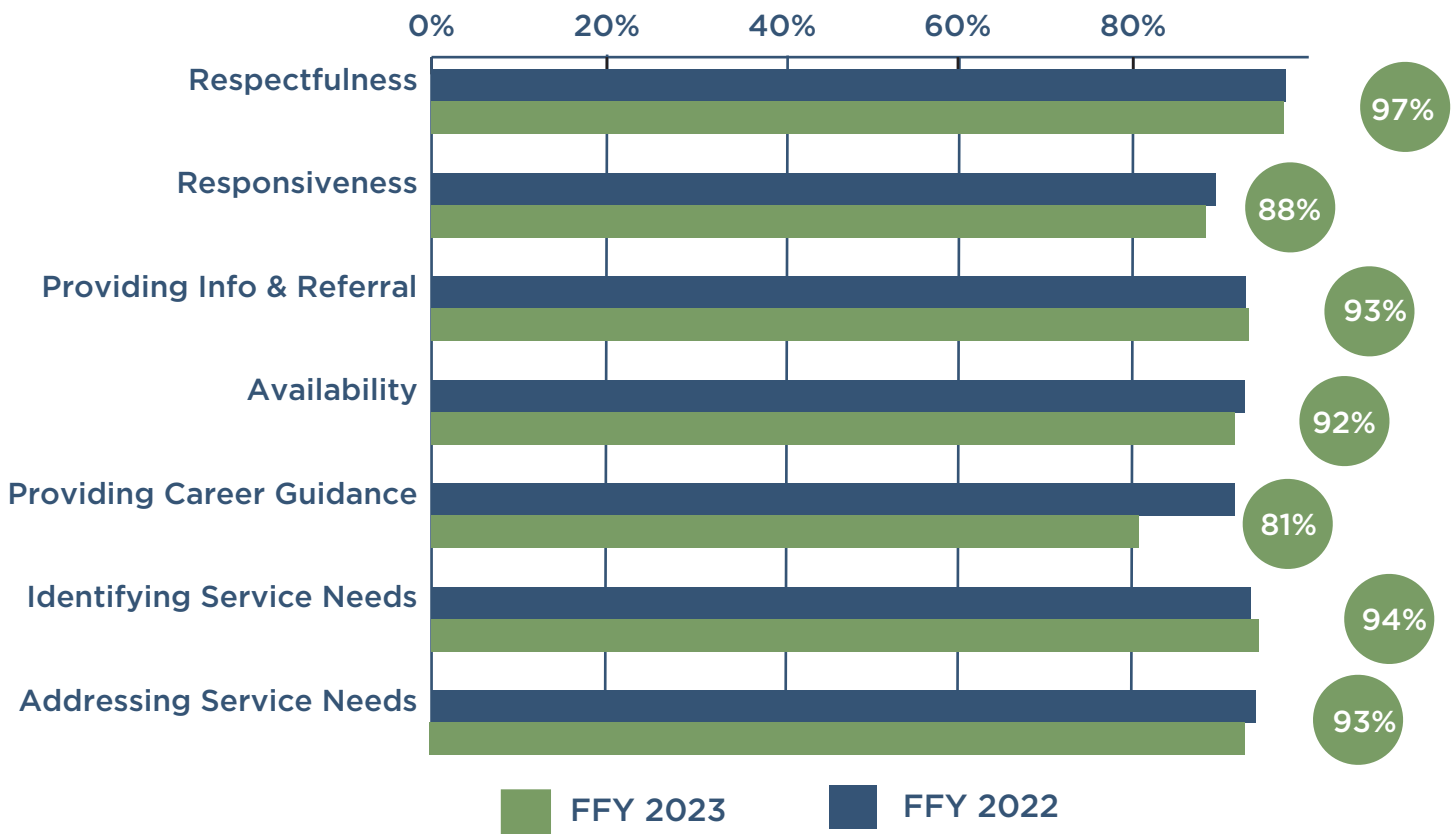
# CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY



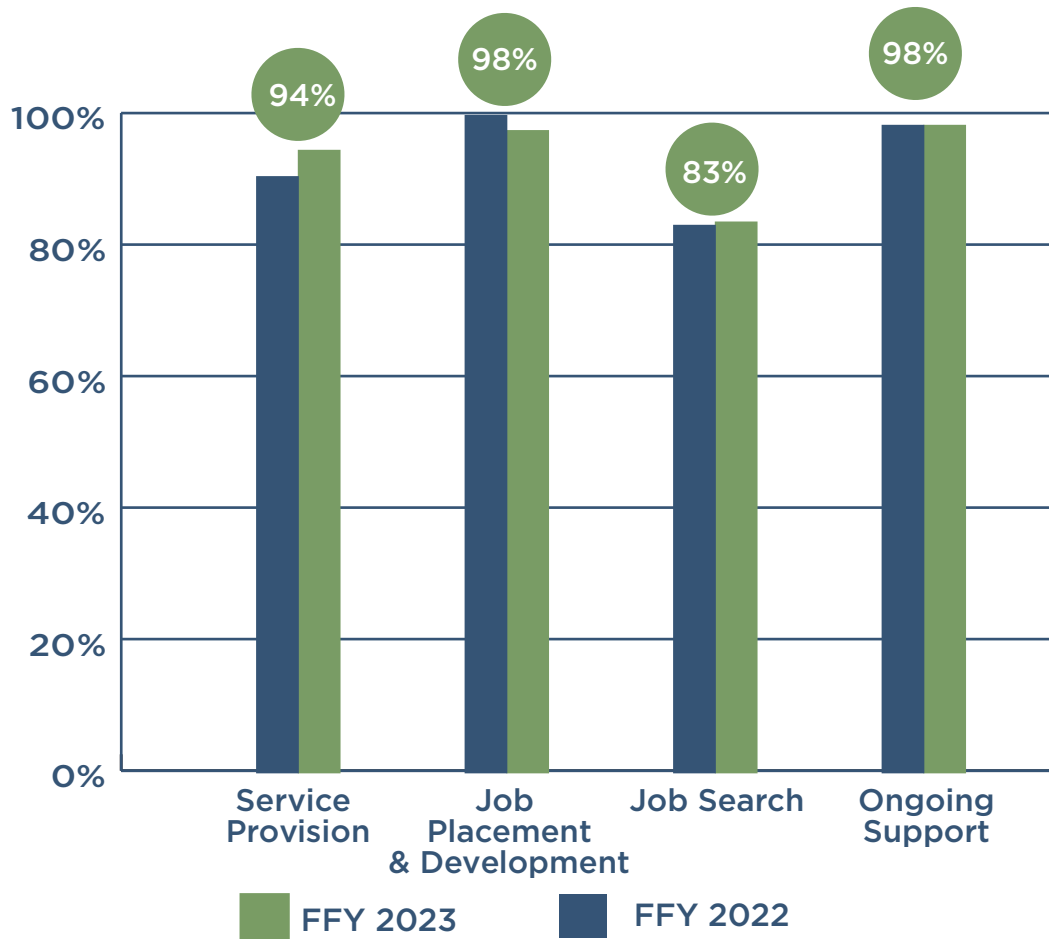
## SECTION I

Compared with the prior year, client satisfaction with VR counselors and other team members in FFY 2023 was consistent with the prior year. The three items where satisfaction decreased most are helping participants find a job (-9.0%), following up with them after they went to work (-7.2%), helping the participant decide on job choices (-3.4%), The area where satisfaction increased most was with identifying the participants' needs toward becoming employed (+2.4%). The overall satisfaction rate was 87.8%, a 1.7% decrease from the prior year but within the margin of error for the survey.

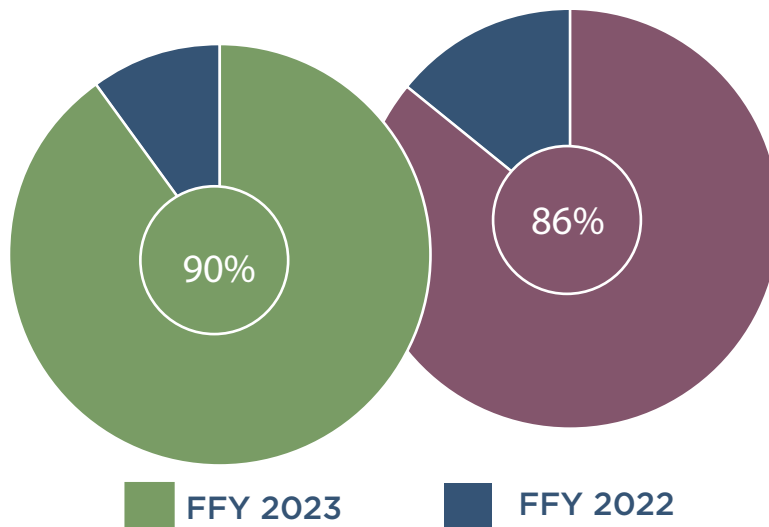
### Satisfaction with Counselor and Staff



### Satisfaction with Timeliness of Services



### Satisfaction with Overall Experience



SECTION II

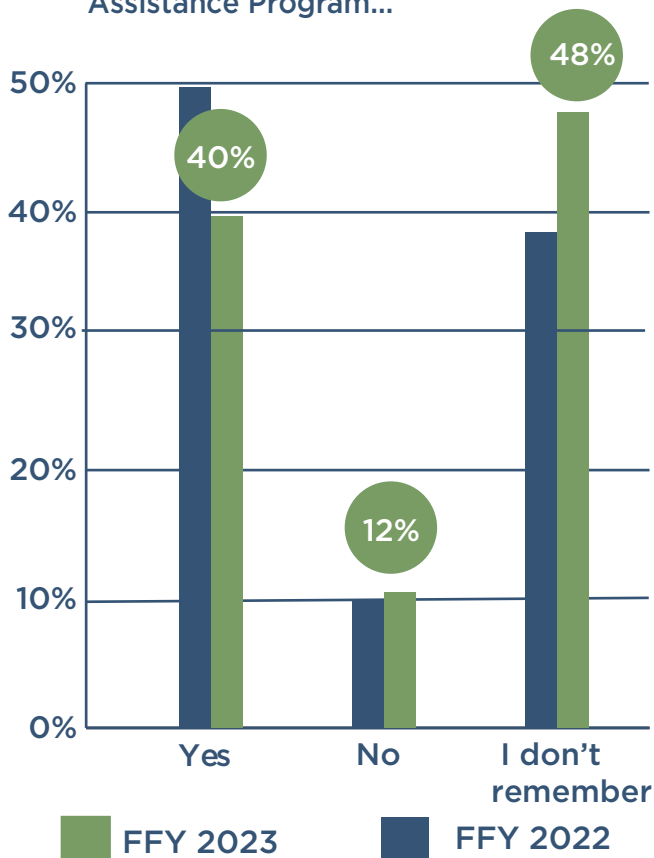


Respondents were asked whether they were informed about the North Carolina Client Assistance Program and their right to appeal agency decisions with which they disagree. Sub-items were added to determine if clients received information about NCCAP’s services when they applied for services and when completing an individualized plan for employment (IPE).

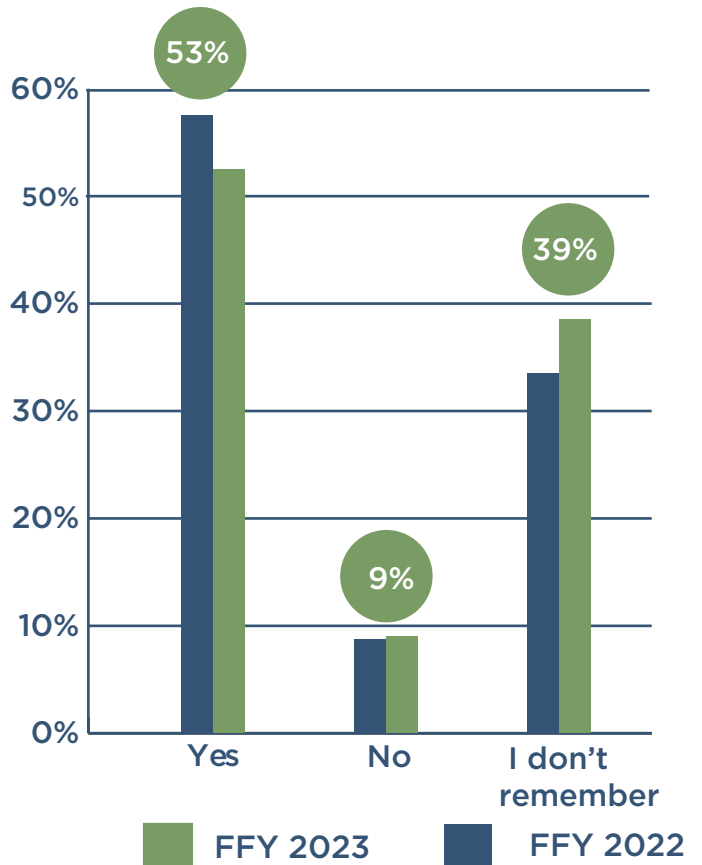
Compared with FFY 2022, 9.6% fewer reported being informed about the Client Assistance Program in FFY 2023, although the proportion who indicated they weren’t informed only increased by 0.7% and 8.9% responded that they didn’t remember. Similarly, in FFY 2023, 5.2% fewer indicated they were informed about their right to appeal agency decisions with only a 0.2% increase in participants reporting that weren’t informed and 5.0% responding that they didn’t remember. For both items, the decrease in the proportion responding “yes,” is largely accounted by the increase in the proportion responding, “I don’t remember.”

**Client Assistance Program Questions**

Did your counselor inform you that if you had a concern about services that you could contact the Client Assistance Program...



Did your counselor inform you about your right to appeal agency decisions with which you disagree...



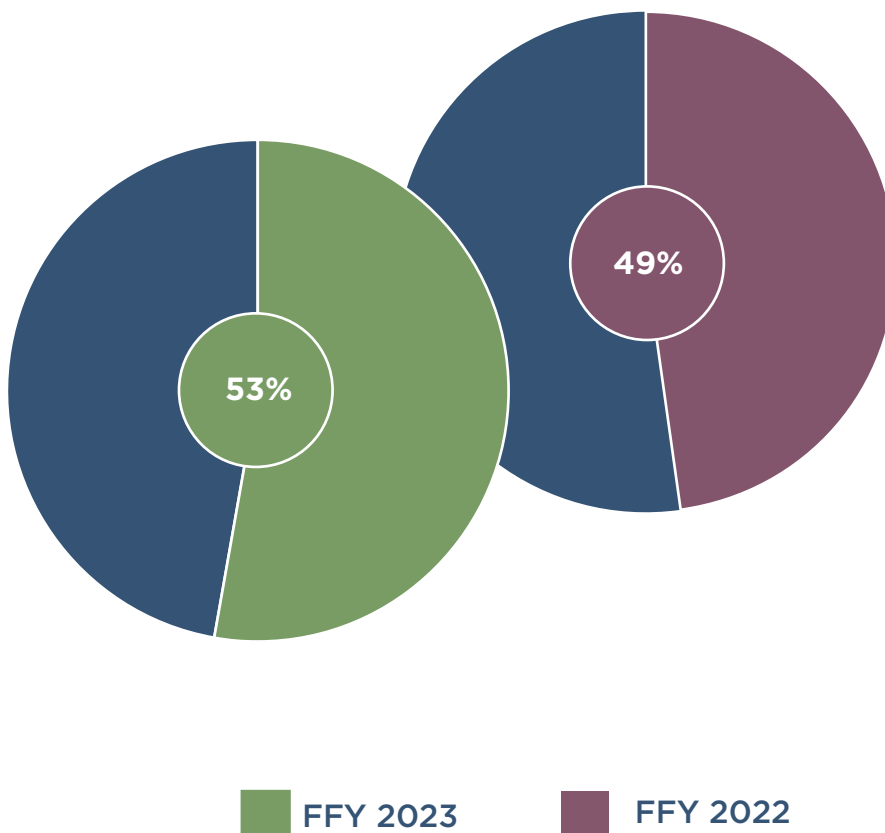


## Section III

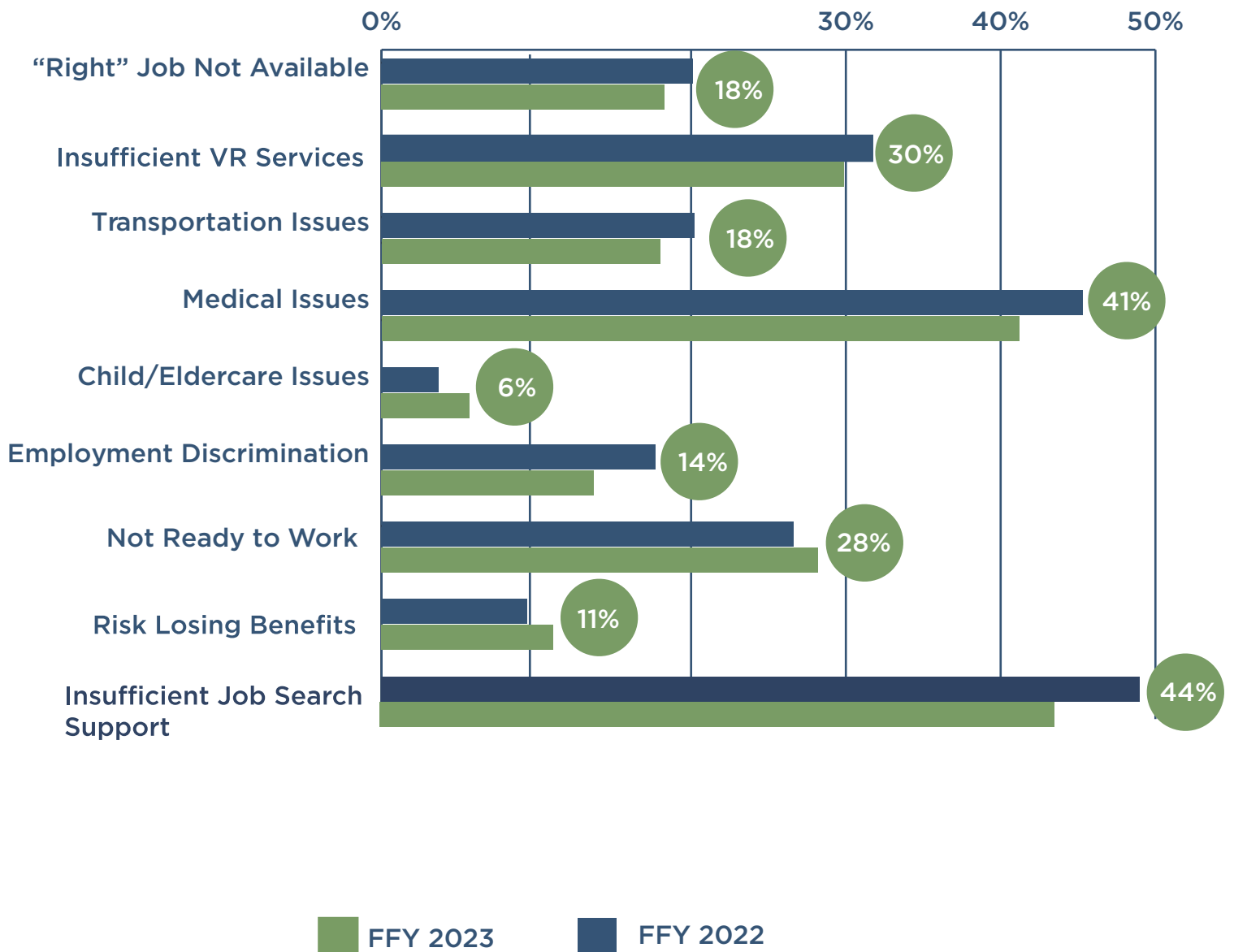
Respondents were asked if they were currently working. Those that indicated they were **NOT** working were then asked to answer nine sub-questions regarding barriers to employment.

In FFY 2023, a little over half (53%) of the 1,363 individuals that responded to this question, answered they were not employed. These include clients with open VR cases progressing toward their goal, including clients who received job placement services, and former VR clients with recent case closures.

### Are you NOT currently working?



### Barriers to Employment if NOT Employed





## PUBLIC FORUMS

The SRC's Community Input and Public Outreach Committee hosted three virtual public forums in 2023, with the support of NC State University's McKimmon Center. The CIPO Forum Planning Subcommittee held after-forum meetings to discuss areas to improve upon for the next forum. Previous recommendations were incorporated in determining key activities and identifying panelists. Information about the forums was shared through social media sites and via emailed flyers to consumers, staff, and community stakeholders. Those unable to attend were asked to share their questions or concerns through an email link to the SRC Chair. The forums were recorded and posted on the division's website.

**March 9, 2023:** More than 220 individuals attended this virtual event, providing feedback provided about the need for: more information, help with job placement, employment opportunities, and lower vacancy rates. Lessons learned were to add the information about the North Carolina Client Assistance Program (NCCAP) at the beginning of the presentation. Many individuals were confused by the acronym CAP which is shared by the Community Alternative Program. Representatives from colleges, universities, and others needed to be utilized more during the round table discussion panel.

**September 21, 2023:** With 112 attendees, the SRC heard feedback about hosting an info session on the VR process, internships, Pre-ETS and other student services. Lessons learned included sharing more about VR and CRP services, limiting the number of slides and topics; and the need to redirect questions about services to local offices.

**December 14, 2023:** Approximately 110 attendees provided feedback about increasing awareness/info about VR, education and housing opportunities, transition services, small business services and processes, and needing help finding and keeping a job. Lessons learned included increasing interaction between the audience and panelists, how to blend the roundtable with Q&A, overcoming technical challenges with CART, limiting time for questions and personally identifying information shared, sharing regional contact information.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive Committee provided the following recommendations to the Division regarding goals, priorities or strategies.

1

**In support of their strategic plan pertaining to increased marketing and outreach to individuals with disabilities, employers, and potential partners, including colleges and universities, the Council recommended to conduct stakeholder listening sessions remotely with increased measures of outreach including mailed out invitations, email invites, and social media blasts to invite stakeholders to attend professionally coordinated virtual listening sessions to be held a minimum of three times per year.**

The Division has supported all recommended adjustments and expansions to the methods of outreach, including increased frequency and expansion of outreach venues to potential clients and partners.

2

**The council recommends improving the efficiency of the VR process through the exploration of ways to expedite the provision of consumer services, including client purchases; conduct reviews of process for increased efficiencies, explore ways to involve staff in indentifying and addressing inefficiencies, and, in general, increase capacity to serve consumers who use English as a second language.**

DVRS supports all components of this recommendation and is addressing them. The procedures for purchasing prosthetics and orthotics have been improved and ongoing work is being done to simplify the self-employment evaluation process to a feasible extent.

3

**The council recommended for the quarterly full council meetings to contain a standing item for the Client Assistance Program to give an activity update. Further, the council recommended for a standardized set of questions and topic areas to be provided as a standard guideline to be used for regional director and/or regional unit manager reports during quarterly meetings to allow managers to provide updates for local activities, developments and to express any concerns to the council.**

DVRS has incorporated the recommended changes and will continue with these standing topics until the council recommends further adjustments.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

4

**The council recommended to continue to jointly conduct consumer input sessions to be held a minimum of three times annually collecting input from various communities across the state and to strongly encourage staff attendance at such sessions whenever possible.**

DVRS will continue to actively support jointly conducted input sessions three times annually canvassing various communities across the state focusing on how the VR program is addressing consumers' VR needs through its service provision. This has been accomplished virtually since June 2020, and the Consumer Input and Public Outreach Committee meets with Division staff regularly to steadily improve and expand the means of accomplishing this.

5

**Whereas the council is concerned about providing responsive services to consumers and realizes the division's abilities in this area are impeded when high vacancy rates occur within the division, the council recommends that DVRS provide regular updates regarding key vacancies, including direct service positions such as counseling positions, so that the council may advocate appropriately as included within the council's current strategic plan.**

DVRS supports this recommendation and will continue to work with council members to regularly provide updates through statewide and regional vacancy reports.

6

**Where as the SRC Consumer input and Public Outreach Committee acknowledged decreasing response rates on client satisfaction self-administered written questionnaires, the council recommends that DVRS continue the use of the telephonic client satisfaction survey. Further, the Council recommends continuing the practice of surveying clients in active status to continue employing a weighted sampling method to maintain costs and ensure representation across disability types, minority status, age and gender.**

The division supports this recommendation and will continue its adjusted sampling practices, contracts, and purchase orders accordingly.



## MEMBER DEVELOPMENT

DVRS Director Kathie Smith reported out at each SRC quarterly full council meeting. Smith reported that Employment First internships have expanded in state government and introduced Brendon Hildreth, her intern. Hildreth is from New Bern and has helped the division to think outside the box and is a huge value to her office. Brendon leads the Accessible Icon Project in North Carolina and his mother Darcy Hildreth is his personal assistant. Several projects were going on the with North Carolina Rehabilitation Association (NCRA) Legislative Breakfast and the Employment First event which highlighted VR interns. Emma Friesen, SRC member shared her testimonial at the NCRA Legislative Breakfast held on April 6, 2023.

Vacancies continued to be a challenge, with statewide rates at 25%. Director Smith and Assistant Director Kenny Gibbs visited several offices to keep lines of communication open and have encouraged hiring temporary staff to ease the burden on existing staff. During staff visits, staff commented about how they love the work; the strong support from the community; working with their providers; and about how managers felt about their staff. A new series of quarterly “All Staff Calls” with division leadership give staff the opportunity to ask questions and there is work being done on the Equity, Recruiting and Retention Project. Legislative increases to raise salaries with retention bonus payments. State employees were given a 5% rate increase over the next two years, 3% effective July 1, 2023, and 2% effective July 1, 2024.

Ergonomic workstations with sit/stand desks were offered to senior staff with 10+ years of experience and worn-out office furniture discarded. The safety officer visited offices due to concerns raised by staff. Efforts are underway to provide special trainings for ENCORE and Pre-ETS to staff and vendors; promoting rehabilitation counselors to independent status with an increase in pay; providing trainings for basic knowledge and being able to hire more managers and have the independent counselors apply for supervisory and management positions. As part of the university collaboratives, potential employees can bring their credentials and resumes to job fairs to receive tentative job offers and get the hiring process started earlier. Some positions are required to be reviewed by the NCDHHS HR Team before their candidates can be hired. Managers maintain high volume caseloads in the midst of vacancies and manage multiple sub offices in many situations. Professional Development and Training (PDT) is providing Orientation Training to new staff.

During the June full council meeting, members were given a demonstration on the ENCORE case management system with an overview of how case flow occurs and how the data is being used. The ENCORE case management system went live in August. There were a few glitches and working groups are meeting daily, weekly, or biweekly to resolve them. ENCORE has to communicate via interface with the new North Carolina Finance System (NCFS) which is the system that DHHS uses to make payments. As a result, there have been delays in payments to clients, vendors, leases, and staff for travel reimbursements. For clients, VR has been able to utilize P-Cards and access Imprest Cash. NCFS is doing a lot of reconciling and data entry; prioritizing and tracking payments. This was referred to as a stabilization period with the launch of these new systems. Focus groups met to produce a user-friendly trade name. The SRC was one of the groups to provide input. This movement started years ago. Implementation began through listening sessions, special focus groups and meetings with colleges and universities. The name change is the Division of Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities (EIPD). There will be a formal announcement and a statewide unveiling along with numerous celebrations in 2024. The media campaign is to include online advertising and social media. Gracie Snyder, Executive Assistant, and Kaleigh Kemp, Social Media Consultant are the new team members. Documents and conversations will begin to use the new name.

Members received regular quarterly updates from SRC member, Gloria Garton SRC member, Executive Director of the North Carolina Statewide Independent Living Council (NCSILC). There are 20 members appointed by the Governor for 3-year terms to help guide the IL services in North Carolina. NCSILC held five forums; actively working on the needs assessment; represent people with all types of disabilities and ages with access to 41 counties with a Center for Independent Living (CIL). The Greenville CIL closed; however, the CIL in Raleigh has taken over Pitt, Wilson, and Beaufort counties. The NCSILC is working on affordable and accessible housing, emergency preparedness; and youth leadership. States such as Florida and Illinois, have passed laws against housing income discrimination, which NCSILC would like to pursue. During the open house of the CIL, consumers shared their testimonies and success with VR. SRC members were invited to attend NCSILC meetings which are open to the public.

Tania Bowers, Interim Director with the North Carolina Assistance Program (CAP), provided quarterly updates. There are a high percentage of cases that are resolved without going to mediation or hearing. The Client Satisfaction Survey noted that the participation in CAP services is particularly good and there are negotiations between both the agency and the individual. Cases are becoming more complex and require a lot more investigation and collaboration with the agency. Some of the categories for problem areas, were communication related to vacancies and some cases were short-term technical assistance.

In March, Robbie Benton, Lumberton Unit Manager, reported on the success of Project SEARCH in Robeson County. There has been a decline in the

number of referrals. Field staff are struggling and there is an issue with the Disability Determination Services charging a \$49 fee upfront to access records which the system is unable to pay. The issue might be due to Social Security Administration records not being contained within a local office. There is one central repository in the Midwest.

In June, Alma Taylor, Central Regional Director, reported that there were many staff retirements, and that the vacancy rate was at 24% in the Central Region. The largest offices are Fayetteville at 44%, Durham at 31%; Greensboro at 27% and Winston-Salem at 28%. There has been a lot of success with entry-level rehabilitation counselors becoming independent rehabilitation counselors. They are in the process of filling other vacancies, and it has been difficult to cover caseloads.

New hires are getting trained and training and support is offered to staff to go to virtual conferences such as AHEC Health Education for Rehabilitation Development. Two managers attended Leadership Training through the University of Wisconsin VR Institute of Innovation in early February 2023 and gave summary reports to the management team. THRIVE is a collaborative project between CRPs and VR working to support clients by working together with employers. The North Carolina Assistive Technology Program (NCATP) hosted pop-up events in Winston-Salem in March. On March 22, 2023, there was also an Employment Marketing Skills Diversity event.

In September, Carl Thompson, Eastern Regional Director spoke about retention. Teleworking agreements with a portion of time teleworking have been an excellent retention tool, and the hiring of temps has helped take the burden off of full-time staff. Retirees and client interns are being pulled in to help with the workflow. WorkSource East (WSE) launched an interactive social media website which is exciting news.

Kimberly Riggs, New Bern Unit Manager shared that there are many client interns being utilized. This is a good example of the Employment First Initiative and has had a two-fold effect. As part of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the unit and the Chamber of Commerce hosted the August Midday Mingle with employers and local ambassadors. They have a 90% retention rate. There are 20 resource partnerships with community services, religious organizations, mental health providers, community rehabilitation providers, IL services, consumers, and a local radio station advertising sponsorship. The partnership with the school system had a resume/interview workshop at a school to do practice interviews. New Bern was also the beginner site for Moving Forward for the Accessible Icon Project which depicts a wheelchair user in motion. Volunteers painted the icons on the parking lot asphalt.

For the December meeting, Vanessa Trapp-Spann, Western Regional Director reported that they have 10 Employment First interns and 36 external internships with employers. These internships give clients the opportunity to experience different careers, to get their foot in the door, and explore

their interests. They have established 62 new relationships with employers as well as strengthening current relationships and developing new ones. The Business Relationship Representatives excel at networking with employers to determine their needs and make good matches when working with VR clients. Visits to employers include reviewing different modules to discuss and provide training with VR staff.

There are 24 CRPs in the region. Referrals are down due to a variety of reasons, including the slow recovery from COVID-19 and staff shortages, which play a pivotal role in covering caseloads. Placement closures are not at the optimal level. Staffing patterns and cases going through the different stages in the process can take up to two years. The vacancy rate is the highest in the state at 43% which is almost half of their counselor positions. Changes have been made at WorkSource West (WSW) in Morganton with the introduction of an engraving program with accessing engraving materials to make things such as plaques. They are waiting for the equipment to arrive. Computer skills have been added to the curriculum because as a client noted, nowadays, everything requires a computer and technology is needed in any job or in applying for a job.

Beth Mills, Hickory Unit Manager shared that their office is part of Lenoir, Caldwell, and Alexander counties. They offer both IL and VR services across their satellite offices which cover Catawba, Caldwell, Alexander, Burke, Lincoln, Cleveland, and Iredell counties. By establishing strong partnerships with community organizations, including employers and CRPs, they are able to deliver pre-employment transition services across five school districts in three counties (Catawba, Alexander, and Caldwell), resulting in new referrals. In 2024, they hope reach even more students that would benefit from VR services.

Consumers are exiting in positions that pay better wages. Beth Mills highlighted several success stories:

- Client with no transportation got an internship at Caldwell Community College and eventually hired full-time with benefits and was able to walk to work.
- Internship with the police department, the client who has a physical disability and utilizes a wheelchair for mobility, desired to work as a 911 operator and is awaiting a job offer.
- Client with no work history for 40 years built a relationship with a provider who is seeking employment opportunities on her behalf.
- Transition student with a degree in finance from Winston-Salem State University received an internship with the NC Forestry Services with the prospect of a permanent job.
- Client with physical limitations impacting their mobility was also experiencing homeless, and lacked transportation. After enrolling in training at WorkSource West to increase work capabilities and gain confidence, client received job coaching. The client was successful placed in a hotel with lodging, was able to purchase a vehicle and is saving for an apartment.

- Client with an associate degree was able to get a job with Greer Labs in Caldwell County.
- VR sponsored a client with a driver's evaluation and training to become independent and work; through the evaluation it was discovered that the client had double vision and needed corrective glasses, and some additional issues were able to be resolved and eased the anxiety for the client.
- Client with a reputation of being difficult within the community who presented as loud, angry, and negative. The Hickory Unit was able to build a rapport with the client and develop a trusting relationship. The client was able to be placed as a certified security guard. The lessons learned were that clients need someone who believes in and listens to them, and can see beyond their anger and frustration.

The IL Program is growing with 30-40 referrals a month. They are dealing with staff shortages. Staff are helping people to be able to live in their homes and provide services to enjoy things like being able to hear the TV after getting hearing aids or providing home modifications such as a bathroom which provided access to a client to be able to take a shower rather than a sponge bath. This is a vital resource to maximize independence for individuals. For the first time in years, individuals are able to leave or access their homes with a ramp. There was a client who needed a hospital bed with a special mattress to prevent bedsores. The IL Program remains positive because of the collaborations with the Community Alternative Program, Medicaid, and pulling down funding to provide these services. They have been able to access over \$40,000 from the CAP Medicaid Program with in Catawba County.

## 2023 COUNCIL MEMBERS



**Michael Maybee,**  
Chair, State  
Rehabilitation  
Council  
Boone, NC



**Emma Friesen**  
Durham, NC  
Representing  
Disability  
Advocacy Groups  
(Appointed 11/22)



**Kelly Friedlander**  
Durham, NC  
Representing  
Disability  
Advocacy Groups  
(Appointed 12/23)



**Clare Miller**  
Cary, NC  
Representing  
NC Chamber  
of Commerce



**James Jones**  
Fayetteville, NC  
Representing  
Regional  
Rehabilitation  
Centers



**Glacia Ethridge**  
Greensboro, NC  
Representing  
Non-Divisional  
Rehabilitation  
Counselors



**Alicia Coleman**  
Durham, NC  
Representing  
Business and  
Industry



**Sandy Pendergraft**  
Goldsboro, NC  
Representing  
Disability  
Advocacy Groups



**David Tedrow**  
Durham, NC  
Representing  
DVRs Consumers  
(Resigned 11/23)



**Tania Bowers**  
Raleigh, NC  
Representing  
Client Assistance  
Program



**Kathie Smith**  
Raleigh, NC  
Non-Voting Member  
DVRs Director



**Celeste Hunt**  
Maxton, NC  
Representing  
Director of  
Projects Under  
Section 121





**Derek Burrell**  
Snow Hill, NC  
Representing  
Disability  
Advocacy Groups  
(Appointed 11/22)



**Berlina German**  
Raleigh, NC  
NCWorks  
Commission  
(Appointed 7/22)



**Anne Monterosso**  
Raleigh, NC  
Representing  
State Agency  
(IDEA)



**Sharon Nellenbach**  
Hickory, NC  
Representing  
Business and Industry



**Agreta Limerick**  
Raleigh, NC  
Representing  
NCWorks  
Commission  
(Termed 6/22)



**David Dyson**  
Greensboro, NC  
Representing  
Disability  
Advocacy Groups  
(Appointed 11/23)



**Yolanda Edwards**  
Winston-Salem, NC  
Representing  
Non-Divisional  
Rehabilitation  
Counselors  
(Appointed 9/23)



**Peter Murphy**  
Salisbury, NC  
Past Chair  
Representing  
Disability  
Advocacy Groups  
Termed 6/23



**Doreen Byrd**  
Davidson, NC  
Representing  
Parent Training  
and Information  
Centers



**Gloria Garton**  
Wilmington, NC  
Representing  
State Independent  
Living Council  
(Appointed 6/23)

**NORTH CAROLINA STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL**

**2023 MEETING SCHEDULE**

**March 9-10 (Videoconference)**

**June 14-15 (Videoconference)**

**September 21-22 (Videoconference)**

**December 14-15 (Videoconference)**