



# State Rehabilitation Council

*Annual Report 2021*

# Letter from the State Rehabilitation Council

*To the Honorable Governor Bill Lee and RSA Commissioner Mark Schultz,*

On behalf of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of Tennessee, I am privileged to present the 2021 SRC Annual Report to provide an update on the Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Program and to highlight the work of the SRC during the past year. We address the key accomplishments of the VR program during 2021 and look to continuing to improve services provided to individuals with disabilities in Tennessee. The report also reviews the responsibilities of the SRC and its achievements during the past year as we serve as the voice of the consumer to review, analyze and advise the VR program.

A highlight of the annual report is the inclusion of customer success stories to communicate a snapshot of the VR program in a way which pure data cannot. These stories reflect individuals at different stages in life and with a variety of backgrounds, experiences, abilities and interests who all share a desire to obtain competitive integrated employment and who required the support of the VR program in order to achieve that goal. We received success stories from Master's level Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for each region and selected nine stories from across the state to represent VR services in Tennessee. Members of the Outreach, Public Relations & Awareness Committee reviewed the stories and made selections, noting that these stories are important because it puts faces to the individuals the VR program has served.

In a major undertaking during 2021, the SRC reviewed and provided feedback on the proposed revisions to the VR policy and procedure manual. Our efforts ensured that the proposed policies are aligned with federal regulations and would be fair to VR customers. I want to express my appreciation to the members of our Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee who expended numerous hours to review prior assessments from Tennessee and other states and worked with the VR team to develop the 2022 assessment. The full results and key priorities to be addressed by the VR program will appear in our next annual report.

The SRC is comprised of a diverse group of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences; however, we all share a common goal in working with the VR program to enhance employment outcomes for individuals with disabilities. The SRC's ability to perform our numerous functions was enhanced by the appointment of members by Governor Bill Lee during the past year, and we are grateful to his office for the responsiveness to the needs of the SRC. I am thankful for the returning members who are always willing to support the new members and to the new members for their insights, creativity and probing questions which help to keep us all invigorated in our work!

*Sincerely,*

Christina Clift  
2020 SRC Chair

# Message from the Assistant Commissioner



Since joining the Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) in 2017, the Division, along with the entire Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) has been on a journey to transform the customer experience. The Department and its many programs and services are moving toward a more integrated service delivery model that is focused on modernization efforts agency-wide that will dramatically impact the way that human services are delivered and received by Tennesseans.

Across the agency, TDHS is striving to improve customer interaction, making it less bureaucratic and more customer friendly, efficient, and effective. While these modernization efforts come with enhanced technology to help create a more efficient service delivery model overall, the driving force behind the initiatives taking place is to ensure that the customer we are serving is at the center of any and all improvements being made. Within the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program in particular, we have taken this opportunity to look introspectively at who we serve, how we serve, and just as important, why we serve.

At our core, we believe in the power of work. Every day we have the opportunity to see how work changes lives. Beyond the paycheck and the opportunities having a steady income can make possible, work can bring a sense of accomplishment and build our confidence. It gives us a way to share—and deepen—our talents and contribute to our communities in valued ways. And it offers us opportunities to develop new friendships and stronger connections to our communities. When connected to the right job, so many of the other goals we have for our lives become all that much easier to accomplish.

All too often people with disabilities are told what they can't do – in the Division of Rehabilitation Services, we get to support people in discovering what they can do. Together with our community partners and stakeholders, including the State Rehabilitation Council, we are on a journey to create a Vocational Rehabilitation program that embodies the belief that everyone can work and has something valuable to contribute to their community.

Together we are transforming lives, transforming businesses, and transforming communities.

**Mandy Johnson,**

*Assistant Commissioner, Division of Rehabilitation Services  
Tennessee Department of Human Services*

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# Vocational Rehabilitation Program Overview

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) is a joint federal and state program that assists people with disabilities to prepare for, secure, retain, advance in or regain employment. The VR program provides a variety of individualized services to persons with disabilities in preparation for their employment in the competitive labor market. VR advocates employment outcomes for customers that are consistent with their individual strengths, resources, abilities, capabilities and informed choice. In Tennessee, the VR program is administered by the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS), Division of Rehabilitation Services.

## Services Include:

- Information and Referral
- Counseling and Guidance
- Training
- Maintenance and Transportation
- Transition Services from School to Work
- Rehabilitation Technology Services
- Job Placement
- Post-Employment Services
- Supported Employment Services
- Independent Living Services

## Specialized VR Services:

In addition to the broad array of VR services available to eligible individuals, VR also provides specialized services to target populations.

**Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)** are available to students with disabilities ages 14-22. Pre-Employment Transition services are focused on preparing students for life after high school. Pre-ETS services include the following services:

- Job exploration counseling,
- Work-based learning experiences,
- Counseling on opportunities for postsecondary educational programs,
- Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living, and
- Instruction in self-advocacy.

**Business Services** provided by the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) program works with employers to promote competitive integrated work opportunities and career exploration for

customers through job search and placement services, combined service provision with Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA) core partners and stakeholders, and facilitation of work-based learning opportunities and employer-based training and employment programming. Vocational Rehabilitation program customers can work with a Business Employment Consultant from the Business Service Unit to explore career opportunities aligning with their occupational goals and desired geographical location of residence. Together, the Business Employment Consultant and Vocational Rehabilitation customer can search for local employment opportunities of interest, apply for opportunities, conduct interview preparation, and execute final placement into opportunities. The success of Business Employment Consultants is measured by their successful service delivery to enhance competitive integrated employment outcomes for customers.

Vocational Rehabilitation's Business Service Unit works with partners from state agencies such as the Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Department of Economic and Community Development, and Department of Corrections to align efforts in serving business customers and agency customers. Through participation in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development's local Business Service Teams, the Vocational Rehabilitation Business Service Unit's Business Employment Consultant provides education and outreach services to employers offering competitive integrated work environments, enabling Vocational Rehabilitation customers to have an expanded horizon of opportunity with Tennessee employers. Last, the Business Service Unit of Vocational Rehabilitation is leveraged for developing work-based learning sites across the state to promote career exploration for individuals with disabilities receiving services through the Division of Rehabilitation Services. Employer-based training and employment programs across the state enable customers to engage in meaningful work in a variety of industries in an integrated setting where compensation and benefits eligibility for full-time employees is competitive with the local labor market and equally available for Vocational Rehabilitation customers.

**Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC-Smyrna) at Smyrna** is a state operated comprehensive vocational rehabilitation training center that offers person-centered, comprehensive services in a supportive learning environment to individuals with disabilities to help increase independent living skills and employment training. Services are provided on a campus setting that also includes residential living for those students who choose to live on campus while receiving services. In addition to traditional classroom instruction, students participate in community-based work-based learning opportunities and internships as part of their course of study. Students can obtain nationally recognized credentials and/or certificates of completion in the following areas of study:

- Automotive Detailing Technician
- Automotive Maintenance & Lubrication Technician
- Business Education Technology
- Certified Logistics Associate/Technician

- Certified Production Technician
- Customer Care (Retail)
- Food Service
- Pharmacy Technician
- Power Equipment
- Certified Nursing Assistant

In addition to the technical and vocational training, TRC-Smyrna provides an array of rehabilitation support services based on the unique needs and circumstances of each student. Rehabilitation Services offered include:

- **Student Advisors:** assist students in selecting courses in their Area of Study and preparing schedules each quarter.
- **Community Training:** assist in the development and assignment of internship opportunities with employers during the student's last quarter prior to graduation.
- **Employment and Placement:** assist students in identifying employment opportunities and applying for jobs in their home communities.
- **Disability Services:** assist students in obtaining needed accommodations for classroom instruction and employment, provides Orientation and Mobility Services, and prepares students for enrollment in the Tennessee Business Enterprise (TBE) program.
- **Health Services:** provides urgent medical care as needed through a Wellness Center staffed by nurses and offers physician and psychology services on a limited basis; offers health maintenance courses and behavior education for students and provides work conditioning and work hardening courses for students to prepare them for employment.
- **Vocational Evaluation:** assist students in identifying their interests, skills, and abilities through a series of educational, hands-on, and work-based tests.

**Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers (CTRCs)** are a part of the Tennessee Facility Network of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. There are seventeen Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers strategically located throughout the state. The CTRCs provide rehabilitation services for individuals and employers in their surrounding areas including comprehensive vocational evaluation services, employee development services, job readiness training and placement services. The CTRCs are funded with federal and local dollars. As part of its transformation, the Division of Rehabilitation Services is currently transforming the service delivery model of the 17 CTRCs to best meet the needs of the individuals we serve and their communities. More information about this transformation is included below in the 2021 Innovations section.

**Sensory Services** is a specialized unit within VR that addresses the unique needs of individuals who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, deafblind, or hard of hearing.

**Tennessee Business Enterprises (TBE)**, a program within Sensory Services, offers vocational training and employment opportunities for individuals who are legally blind. The mission of this

program is to provide high quality products and customer service while maximizing employment and economic opportunities for legally blind individuals. Federal and State laws grant TBE a priority to operate vending and food service in Federal, State and local government buildings. Tennessee Business Enterprises trains, licenses and places blind individuals in a facility where they function much like an independent business owner. Assistance is provided to these managers by TBE Consultants.

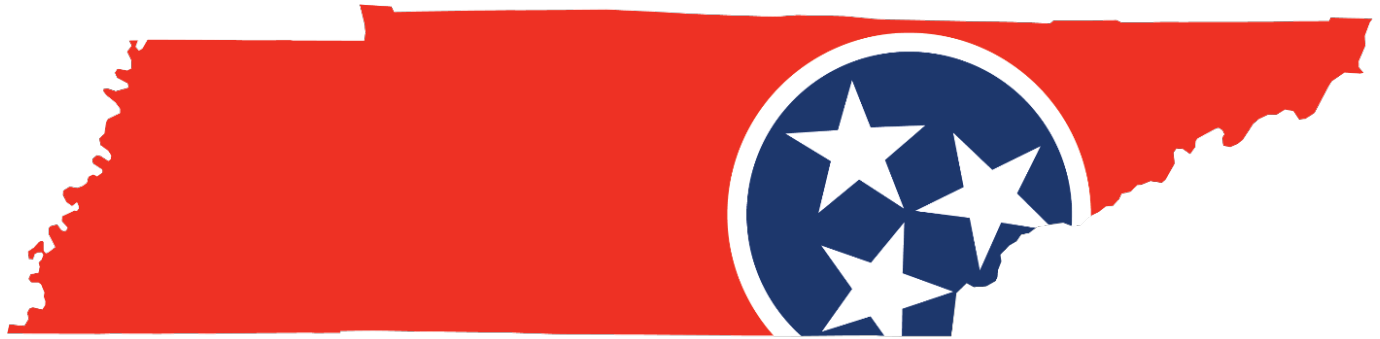
Tennessee Business Enterprises currently operates 110 facilities across the State. These facilities generate over \$20 million in sales annually. The type of facilities managed and operated by the licensed blind vendor include:

- Fully Automated Vending Locations
- Snack Bars
- Cafeterias
- Inmate Commissaries
- Over-the-Counter sales
- Micro Markets



# Key Accomplishments 2021

There were several notable accomplishments by the Vocational Rehabilitation Program in 2021. A few of these accomplishments are highlighted in the sections below.



## ► *Updates from 2020 – Transformation Continues*

As noted in last year's report, the Division of Rehabilitation Services identified five strategic priorities as the foundation to its overall transformation. Each of the priorities aligns with the recommendations of the SRC based on the results of the 2019 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment.

Strategic Priority	Strategic Goal
<b>Communication</b>	Foster trust and credibility with internal and external stakeholders through reliable, accurate, transparent, and timely two-way communication.
<b>Leadership and Talent Management</b>	Support a professional workforce that is organized and structured to deliver high quality services through effective teams.
<b>Modernization of Systems and Processes</b>	Implement integrated systems and business processes that promote operational efficiency and programmatic effectiveness focused on the customer experience.
<b>Revolutionize Service Delivery</b>	Build innovative and effective service delivery models to better support businesses and individuals with disabilities in driving the achievement of their employment goals.
<b>Data Driven Services and Outcomes</b>	Achieve improved employment outcomes for people with disabilities through data driven rehabilitation services and employment initiatives.

Notable accomplishments in the advancement of these strategic priorities for the year include:

- implementation of a new case management system,
- delivery of new staff training,
- complete revision of VR policies and procedures, and
- restructuring of staff classifications and compensation to modernize positions and align with the transformation.

## **New Case Management System – *Aware***

Over the last year, VR staff have been diligently working on the implementation of a new case management software system, called *Aware*, that supports VR business processes and increases efficiency for both staff and customers. Many staff from across program lines were part of the implementation team and worked together, along with the vendor, throughout all project phases including: adaptation, data migration, identifying and designing needed customizations and interfaces, multiple phases of testing, training, and finally preparing for statewide rollout of the system.

On July 7, 2021, *Aware*, went live statewide and serves as the division’s system of record, or authoritative data source. In the months following the rollout of the new system, the team has continued to work diligently to work out the “kinks” of this new system and to support field staff during this transformation by offering virtual office hours, additional training material, and identifying enhancements needed to improve workflow, service, and payment delivery.

## **Policies and Procedures**

To further support the implementation of the new case management system and to advance the person-centered philosophy embedded within VR culture, the division has revised VR policies and procedures to better align with the overall transformation of the VR program. The revised policies and procedures are organized to follow the customer journey through the VR program. In addition, the revisions have eliminated unnecessary restrictions and overly prescriptive language where possible and identified strategies for applying person-centered philosophies to policy. The SRC and other stakeholders were engaged throughout the review process providing input and feedback on policy drafts prior to the official public comment period that opened in April of 2021. Staff and providers were trained on the new policies and business practices in the summer of 2021 prior to the implementation of the new case management system in July 2021.

## **Staff Training**

During the last year, the division has been focused on supporting its staff across the state by implementing various training initiatives. At the end of 2020, the division, in partnership with the TDHS People Operations team, launched the first two modules of the newly created DRS Connecting Opportunities, Resources, and Education (CORE) training. This training replaced the previous New Counselors Institute (NCI) and will be the primary onboarding training for new staff joining the division. The first two modules of CORE are offered to all new division staff, regardless of their role, and the curriculum has been designed to align with the division’s

mission, vision, values, and overall transformation. The training is driven by the principles that Everyone Can Work and that all interactions with customers incorporate the Person-Centered philosophy. Throughout fall 2021 and winter 2022, division leadership are continuing to work with People Operations on the creation of the remaining CORE modules, which will be offered first to VR Counselors and will be focused on service delivery during the various phases of the customer journey within VR.

Additionally, in August 2020, the division kicked off statewide person-centered training for *all* Vocational Rehabilitation staff – Counselors, Business Employment Consultants, Pre-Employment Specialists, Support Staff, Supervisors, TRC-Smyrna, CTRCs, TBE, Independent Living (IL), Central Office staff and Leadership. The initiative, funded by the TN Council on Development Disabilities, was conducted by consultants from Griffin-Hammis Associates, and was broken down into various activities over the last year and a half. The first activity offered an introduction to person-centered thinking, while the second activity offered staff a deeper dive into putting theory into practice. Both activities were offered virtually, with additional online learning modules staff were asked to participate in, as well as additional readings and activities that staff were asked to complete and discuss with their supervisors and teams. Currently, Griffin-Hammis is engaged in a third, follow-up activity for specific teams across the division that aims to truly operationalize the Everyone Can Work training in various settings and work with the teams on continuous quality improvement.

## **Staffing Modernization**

To address high turnover and staff attrition, attract and retain top talent within VR, and improve customer experience outcomes, the division evaluated the existing staffing model and made changes to ensure that classifications align with the roles and responsibilities of a modernized, community-based vocational rehabilitation program and that compensation is commensurate with position qualifications, responsibilities, and fair market value. As a result, five new classifications were created for the division and two existing classifications experienced salary increases. The new classifications create a career pathway with opportunities for growth and advancement within the division. The outcomes of the salary increases include an 8.5% increase in the average salary and an estimated \$700,000 investment in staff pay.

## **2021 Innovations**

### **Windmills**

In 2021, nine VR team members became certified trainers of the Windmills disability awareness training program. Windmills equips business leaders and others with the knowledge, skills, and tools to create a workplace inclusive of individuals with disabilities. Windmills has a proven history of assisting those with and without disabilities to better understand the culture of disability in the workplace. The 12-module curriculum relies on interactive methods to help participants recognize the benefits of diverse experiences and abilities, improve communications with and about people with disabilities, learn about accommodations, and

understand the basics of disability employment law. Training is customized to meet the needs of business leaders or other entities who want to achieve these learning objectives. To date, more than 25 training sessions have been provided to businesses across the state.

## Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers (CTRCs)

Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers (CTRCs) are transforming into community-based resource centers offering community-based employment training, and connecting VR and non-VR customers to education, training, and employment resources.



**R.I.S.E. – Road to Independence, Success, Employment** – is what VR has branded the new community-based service delivery model for the CTRCs. With R.I.S.E. the centers have become community-based person-centered services that prepare and support individuals in going to work. The services are provided within the community with the support of local partners such as businesses, non-profits, city, county, and state agencies, as well as local education agencies.

R.I.S.E. core services are the vocational rehabilitation services that all 17 CTRCs will provide under the service delivery model. Services may look a little different from one county to the next because of unique labor markets and community characteristics, but all 17 CTRCs will provide R.I.S.E. core services.

**Independence** services include assisting a customer with discovery – researching social capital contacts, creating a vocational profile, conducting assistive technology assessments, researching training opportunities like apprenticeships and certification classes, and touring Tennessee Centers of Applied Technology (TCATs), colleges or training schools. Independence services also include community access and inclusion services that assist a customer with exploring transportation routes, drivers' education preparation, locations of food banks and faith-based organizations, and assisting with other TDHS and state services like food assistance, mental health, or housing.

**Success** services include job coaching, job supporting, coordinating job retention assistance or other extended services to support a customer with employment training.

**Employment** services include career readiness and career assessment services like mock interviews, soft skills training, assisting with certification training, conducting job tours, job shadowing, coordinating apprenticeship or pre-apprenticeship opportunities, and work-based learning.

This summer, to help us achieve this new community-based service delivery model and deliver R.I.S.E services, the CTCRs identified and implemented three pilot programs as alternatives to the workshop model. The goal of the pilots was to increase referrals to the VR program, increase competitive integrated employment outcomes for VR customers, and to be replicated at other CTCRs across the state. CTCR Columbia implemented a pilot to develop a competitive integrated work-based learning summer work experience for incoming juniors or seniors with disabilities to promote employment and/or postsecondary educational attainment. CTCR Shelbyville implemented a community-based pilot with a focus on career exploration and independent living in the local Shelbyville community for youth ages 14 – 22 who are at risk to becoming employed or enrolled in an educational program. CTCR Greeneville implemented a job-driven model to strengthen collaboration, communication, and integration of employers, community partners like community colleges, and individuals with disabilities in the local Greene County workforce.

### **Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)**

The Vocational Rehabilitation program continues to make progress in the delivery of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities ages 14-22 across Tennessee, despite the impact COVID-19 had on in-person instruction. Pre-ETS include counseling in post-secondary education, career exploration, self-advocacy, workplace readiness, and work-based learning. Much like the conclusion of the 2020 school year, the 2020-2021 school year had to be approached differently to ensure Pre-ETS were still made available statewide to eligible and potentially eligible students.

In addition to the Pre-ETS services provided by Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs), VR works directly with local school districts through the Transition School to Work (TSW) program. The TSW program focuses on the provision of Pre-ETS to eligible and potentially eligible high school students with disabilities who are interested in employment after leaving high school. During the 2020-2021 school year, VR operated 58 Transition School to Work programs across the state. Additionally, VR was proud to bring on two new school districts who are providing Pre-ETS, bringing the total to 60 school districts. This includes being able to partner with an additional school district that is in an economically distressed county. As of the fall of 2021, there are only three school districts residing within a distressed county who do not have a TSW; however, Pre-ETS are made available through CRPs. During the 2020-2021 school year, the number of individuals receiving at least one Pre-ETS through VR's contracted CRPs and TSW programs was 36,523 with a total of 76,481 units provided.

As mentioned above, the provision of Pre-ETS during the 2020-2021 school year had to look different than previous years to be able to meet the varying school models across the state (i.e., in-person, virtual, and/or hybrid). To meet the needs of the school districts and students, Tennessee VR continued to make available virtual Pre-ETS. As a result, Tennessee VR has been highlighted for the accomplishments made over the past year which saw on average 50% of services being provided virtually. This resulted in as many as 2,000 students in some months able to receive Pre-ETS virtually and saw an increase from 1,715 students in program year

quarter one (PY Q1) receiving Pre-ETS, to 5,538 students in program year quarter four (PY Q4). This was accomplished by providing training, resources, and guidance throughout the year to CRPs and TSWs through online training, the creation of a quarterly *Let's Talk Pre-ETS in Tennessee* newsletter, and new virtual training content and webcasts made possible through VR's partnership with the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center.

In May 2021, VR entered a 5-year contract with the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center to administer Transition Tennessee, a virtual learning platform for educators, students, and families. As a result, a tremendous amount of content and training have been produced and delivered online to Pre-ETS providers and students this year. Over 15,961 unique users have accessed the Pre-ETS portal. Further, a Pre-ETS Manual for providers was developed to provide guidance, resources, and best practices in service delivery. Additional content will continue through the upcoming contract, but the focus will shift from developing content to implementing practices that ensure quality services are provided and student outcomes are positively impacted. This will be done by developing a Pre-ETS Scope and Sequence guide, providing more training opportunities in collaboration with education partners, and establishing model demonstration sites.

Lastly, as research has shown us, a strong predictor for post-school employment outcomes is providing paid work experiences for students with disabilities while still in high school (Carter, Erik, Austin, and Trainer, 2011). Therefore, Tennessee VR sought to provide a structure and process to developing high-quality work-based learning (WBL) capstone experiences for students receiving Pre-ETS. The expectation for the WBL capstone experience is for students to be immersed in a business within the community setting for at least 15 hours each month for a maximum of 90 days. Several CRPs were able to establish summer work experiences for students and that trend has continued into the start of the school year for the fall of 2021. The initial anecdotal information point to this being a very promising practice that can lead to increased employment outcomes.



# Success Stories

## Calvin “Lee” Thomas

Lee completed a VR application with an unknown job goal. At the time of his application, Lee was 47-years-old and had lived his entire life with his parents. Lee’s parents passed away in 2018 and he moved in with his sister, Angi. Lee graduated high school with a special education diploma from Cloudland High School and never worked. He is diagnosed with adjustment disorder mixed with anxiety and depression, intellectual disability, and persistent depressive disorder. Lee participated in regular therapy at Charlotte Taylor Center and began referral services with ECF Choices. Lee does not drive and has low level reading, writing, and math skills.



Lee’s VR counselor developed an employment plan with Lee and Angi, and as a result, Lee received a Benefits to Work referral, Career Readiness Training, job placement services, and training transportation.

Upon successfully completing career readiness training, Lee was referred to a Community Resource Provider for supported employment. Lee began services with ECF Choices in July 2020 and completed all three phases of ECF Choices to begin job searching with a job coach. Lee was hired for his first job on June 21, 2021 at Wendy’s in Kingsport, TN as a dining room attendant. Lee’s employment plan shows his job interest which matches his skills and abilities. Lee’s job duties include cleaning tables and trays 3 days per week, and he earns \$8.50 per hour. Lee enjoys working at Wendy’s and especially likes getting out of the house regularly with his new job.

## Bryce McLain

Bryce McLain completed Paul Kelley Academy in Knoxville and attended college at Pellissippi State Community College for one semester before coming to the Vocational Rehabilitation program in January of 2019. When he met with his VR counselor, Mark Rottero, they talked about several areas of interest. Ultimately, Bryce decided to apply for enrollment at the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC) in Smyrna. Bryce was accepted and became a student at TRC-Smyrna in April 2019. Soon after, he was accepted



into the Pharmacy Tech Program. Bryce successfully completed the prerequisite Customer Care class and started Pharmacy Tech training in July 2019. Bryce worked hard and completed this program in May 2020. The Summer 2019 TRC-Smyrna Newsletter featured a story on the Pharmacy Tech class that Bryce was in, complete with a class picture. Bryce started the program in person, and completed the program by virtual classes due to COVID-19.

The Pharmacy Tech instructor, Arnold Spivey, describes Bryce as an individual who shows up earlier than asked, works hard, and carries himself in a polite, respectful manner. He reported Bryce is gifted in making other students feel comfortable and always helps to keep an atmosphere of positivity. He further expressed it is without a doubt Bryce helped to contribute to the success of his fellow students through his willingness to extend a helping hand. Bryce made straight A's in all of his Pharmacy Tech classes!

As a result of his hard work, Bryce earned his Pharmacy Tech Certificate from TRC-Smyrna. Upon returning home, he obtained a job at CVS Pharmacy making \$12.25 per hour. Bryce is an excellent example of hard work paying off.

### **Jamie Petty**

Jamie Petty's Vocational Rehabilitation story starts with a referral from the Tennessee Department of Corrections. He had some difficult barriers to employment. Jamie was living in his truck and not compliant with medical treatment recommendations. He had concerns about where he could work. Jamie was worried about sustained employment during the COVID pandemic response. He didn't know if a new employer would unexpectedly shut down and leave him without a job.

Jamie and his VR Counselor, Beth Edwards, worked together to develop a plan for employment. He started job readiness services with a Community Rehabilitation Provider, 61 Bound, where he learned how to successfully complete job applications.

The VR Counselor, 61 Bound, and Jamie, came together to decide how to best help Jamie meet his goals. As a result, Jamie earned a forklift driving job making \$13.00 per hour. He is still working today. Jamie is now renting a room with the hopes that one day he can get an apartment. He is happy and thankful for the support he received, and he said he's grateful that people would still help him given his situation.

## **Marsha Hicks**

In collaboration with United Healthcare, the University of Tennessee Center for Literacy, Education, and Employment, and Vocational Rehabilitation, a hiring initiative for individuals with disabilities was developed. Ms. Marsha Hicks's Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Kristee Givens thought the opportunities available through this initiative met Marsha's employment goals. As a result, Marsha was in the first group of applicants to apply with United Healthcare through this initiative. Marsha applied, interviewed, and was hired by United Healthcare as a Customer Service Care Coordinator. With assistance from the Vocational Rehabilitation Business Services team, she worked hard to prepare herself for the application and interview process. Subsequently, the application itself was used by United Healthcare as an assessment tool for new hires. The position required a person who could work independently, show grace under pressure, and demonstrate excellent computer skills. The position was 100% working from home to field calls from United Healthcare customers. Marsha dedicated space in her apartment to use as an office and she also worked with United Healthcare staff to pilot the use of Dragon Naturally Speaking, paving the way for others who might need assistive technology as a United Healthcare employee.



The supervisor at United Healthcare has said that “Ms. Hicks’s is a bright light, someone who stepped into the job and did everything she could to be a success.” He also noted she works harder and longer than anyone else on her team and that United Healthcare is honored to have Marsha work for them. In fact, Marsha was invited to the United Healthcare Corporate Headquarters in Minneapolis, Minnesota for a Quarterly All Employee Meeting in October 2021. As a part of the meeting, she spoke with the Executive Vice President of Operations, and the conversation was broadcasted to over 100,000 employees. Marsha talked about her journey with the company to increase awareness about employees with disabilities.

It seems that Martha has even surprised herself with what she has been able to accomplish. She is earning a good salary, gained immeasurable self-confidence, and is teaching others at her employer about the skills of individuals with disabilities. Through the services from Vocational Rehabilitation and her own self-determination she has changed the trajectory of her life, the lives of her family members, and has touched the lives of her co-workers and peers as well.

## **Amanda Teague**

After incurring a traumatic brain injury in 2007, and 90 credit hours into her undergraduate pursuits, Amanda Teague was paralyzed from the neck down and required an all-power wheelchair for mobility as well as assistance for basic daily activities. After four years of extensive physical and occupational therapy and gaining a sort of acceptance of her condition after relocating to Alabama, she was ready to go back and finish the degree she had started.

Amanda reached out to the local Vocational Rehabilitation office in Dothan, Alabama, and requested assistance to reach this goal. Nearly six years after her injury, and with an incredible support system behind her, she graduated from Troy University in July of 2013 with her Bachelor of Science in Biology. Throughout her 6 semesters at Troy, one of her biology professors saw that Amanda really excelled in organic chemistry, human anatomy and physiology, and suggested that she consider furthering her education at a school of pharmacy. At the time, this was not a feasible option since the closest pharmacy school was over 100 miles away from her house. However, her mother earned a promotion, and this required relocating to Johnson City, TN in June of 2014. Her new home was just five miles from the East Tennessee State University (ETSU) Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy.

Since pharmacy school was now tangible, Amanda met with the Washington County, Tennessee VR team soon after her move. She needed to complete one more class as a prerequisite to the Doctor of Pharmacy program, and since she had not yet been accepted into a program, her VR counselor recommended the tuition assistance program for recipients of government benefits which significantly lowered the cost of the 3-credit hour class. She was then able to check all the boxes on her pharmacy school application, and in February 2015, Amanda was invited to interview for a spot in the Class of 2019. Two days later, the Dean of the College phoned her, and informed her of her acceptance. This was both exciting and overwhelming. The VR team worked hard to make sure she had everything she needed throughout the process and eased many stressors. VR took into account the additional deposit to hold her spot, and made sure that, due to the level of education she was striving towards, they were familiar with requirements and Amanda's needs, so she could meet all deadlines. The VR team understood barriers may exist in Amanda getting transportation to the VR office. Instead, they worked with Amanda to get the information they needed and keep in contact with her as often as needed. "The staff [in Johnson City] went above and beyond for me," she says, "I feel like we did a lot of things online and Helena came to the school a lot for our 'porch dates' for updates, form signing, and supply delivery." The VR team also provided guidance and counseling throughout the process and offered adaptive technology she needed to succeed in school in the form of a laptop, Dragon software, and a LiveScribe pen and notebook. The VR team also assisted Amanda with the cost of transportation to and from school. She used the Johnson City Transit division, ParaTransit, to get her and her chair where she needed to go. "ParaTransit is a curb-to-curb service; they'd pick me up at my house, drop me off wherever I was going, and then pick me back up to return home. To make sure I was on time, I'd schedule my pickups to get me there about 15 minutes early. Usually, I would schedule a return time because if I only called when I was ready to go home, it could be anywhere from 5 minutes to 90 minutes for them to come back, depending on how busy they were."

Amanda's personal goals were to find ways to get around better. She sought out upgrades to her wheelchair so that she could move a little faster, use less of her own energy, and focus less on the chair and more on her accomplishments. She researched modified vehicles that would allow her to drive herself and found an advertisement in New Mobility Magazine for a modified van through a company called RollX. She purchased a van in December of 2017, and is now free

to drive herself wherever she wants, and she can come and go on her own time. Another goal was decided in August of 2015: Amanda, with the help of her now-husband and a walker, stood up to receive her white coat. She had said that day she would walk across the stage at her graduation ceremony. Amanda graduated from ETSU's Gatton College of Pharmacy on May 3, 2019. She did exactly what she said she was going to do, put on her leg braces, used a walker and assistance from her husband, and walked to be hooded and receive her diploma.

After taking some time to get her health back on track, and then waiting for the COVID-19 restrictions to relax, Amanda contacted VR for their employment services. The VR staff provided her with several leads to unique pharmacist positions and set up an appointment for her to meet with a team of employment specialists in September 2020. In their meeting, Amanda's preferences were explored, and a work from home position seemed to be the best fit. She was put in contact with different companies and currently works for one of them in an on-demand pharmacist consultant position that just expanded nationwide in January 2021.

Here's what Amanda has to say about her VR journey: "It's amazing to know that a group of people saw that potential in me, and I really feel like if I had not been made to relearn about my body and myself and use a wheelchair and see things from this perspective, I don't know how I could be at this place. It's so surreal. I don't think there are enough words to express my gratitude to the Washington County Tennessee VR team. You have helped me become the best version of myself and accomplish my dreams. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a doctor or a teacher... Now I'm both!!"

## **Danny Stephens**

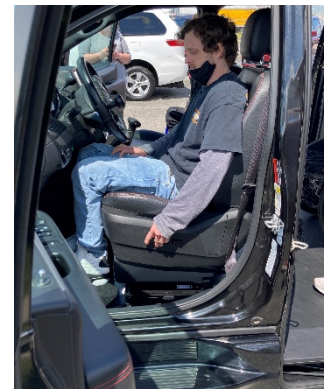
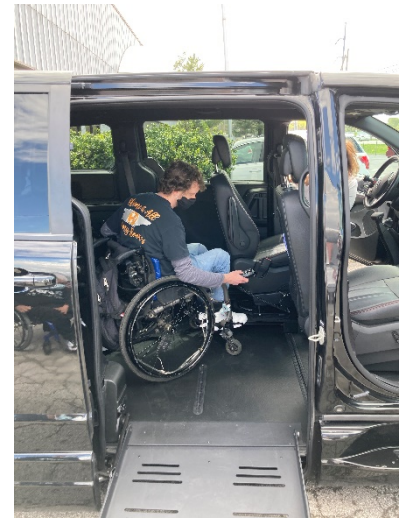


Danny Stephens is 32-years-old and had been unable to drive since April 2011, when at the age 22 he was in a motorcycle accident and sustained a concussion and T6 spinal cord injury. The accident resulted in Danny needing to use a wheelchair. Danny worked at Goodwill and was looking for a dependable, sustainable way to get to and from his job. He feared he may not be

able to keep his job without a reliable way to get to work. He spoke with his VR Counselor about wanting to start driving again and needing a vehicle with modifications to allow him to do so. His VR Counselor worked with him to figure out how to get that done. Danny received a diagnostic evaluation, which included a driving evaluation and identification of the required vehicle modifications. From there, VR worked with a provider agency to complete the modifications.

He had been saving money to get his own car and was finally able to purchase a 2019 Dodge Grand Caravan. In addition to modifications, Danny received driver's training to learn how to use his new van. His driving trainer was also there to meet him when he got his modified van and went with him on his first test drive.

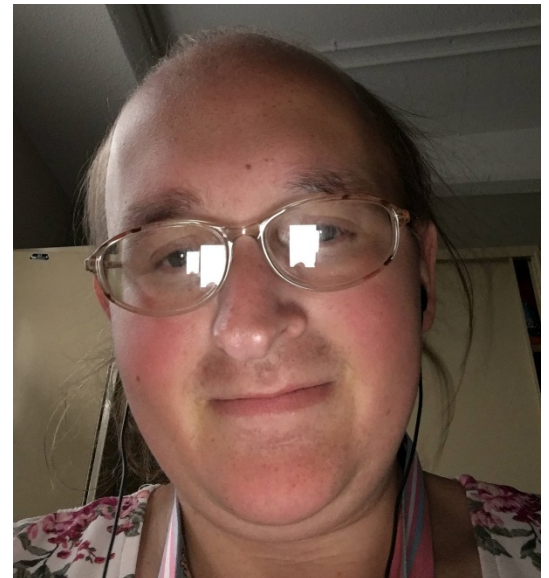
When Danny first came to VR, he was unsure about how to get to and from work and was worried about keeping the job he loved. Since working with VR, he has received an almost \$2.00 per hour raise and works almost 30 hours a week. He said he was very appreciative of the supports from VR, which have helped him gain independence and excel at his job, where he recently earned a raise.



## **Melody Lawrence**

Melody Lawrence came to VR for help finding employment that would fit her skill set and personality. She has an upbeat personality and thinks outside the box when needed. At the same time, Melody is shy with new people, becoming more comfortable and open as she gets to know someone.

She met with her VR Counselor and they discussed what type of job she was interested in. She told her counselor she felt she needed training to gain the skills needed for the workforce. Her counselor told Melody about TRC-Smyrna and when Melody expressed interest in the program, they worked together to begin the process of getting her enrolled. Melody chose to complete the Pharmacy Technician area of study.



Melody completed several courses, including Living Independently, Personal and Professional Development, and Introduction to Customer Care. She was making great progress completing her coursework and received positive reviews from her instructors. Melody, her VR Counselor, and Academic Advisor at TRC-Smyrna, met consistently to answer questions, go over her progress, and provide encouragement.

When COVID hit, TRC-Smyrna made the decision to move to virtual classes. This was a difficult decision for a lot of students, including Melody. After discussing her options and getting some encouragement from the TRC staff and her VR Counselor, Melody chose to continue her work virtually. She was very successful in doing so, staying dedicated to her work during unprecedented and challenging times brought on by the pandemic.

Melody returned to campus in August 2021 to complete her hands-on internship and completed her program in September 2021. She was excited to complete training and is looking forward to finding employment. The VR Business Employment Consultant met with Melody to begin discussing career options and looking for employment. VR will be assisting Melody in obtaining her national certification as a Pharmacy Tech to help her achieve her career goal.

## **Angela Hurston**



When Angela Hurston first met with her VR Counselor, she had been accepted to the University of Tennessee - Knoxville's online program for Social Work. She was interested in becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker, working with cancer patients and individuals who have been diagnosed with Lupus. They talked about her desire to return to the classroom to obtain her degree, the job outlook for that field, her health diagnosis, and her previous time in college when she successfully obtained a bachelor's degree in biology from Tennessee State University. After talking with her counselor, Ms. Hurston understood she had the support of VR Services and decided to continue working with the counselor toward successful completion of the Master's Program at UTK.

Angela had been diagnosed with a blood clotting disorder, seizures, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus and Fibromyalgia.

Each semester, the counselor reached out to Angela to offer encouragement, check in on her wellbeing, understand when financial assistance was needed, and lend a listening ear when she felt things were not going right or were overwhelming for her. Counseling and guidance was provided during this time and when Angela began her internship experiences. During the start of the pandemic, Angela found the process more difficult and experienced uncertainty about the outcome. She still needed to complete her internship hours in person and with her multiple health concerns, she had to be extra careful. Her VR Counselor continued to talk with Angela through this difficult time and kept reminding her she had come very far in her journey and was

almost to the finish line. Angela decided to continue with her education and internships despite the unknowns associated with completing school during a pandemic.

On Friday May 21, 2021, Angela reported the following: “My degree was awarded today! I did not travel to Knoxville for the ceremony. Instead, I chose to celebrate with my mother and family in West Tennessee. The semester went well considering the challenges of the pandemic. I received all A’s for the Spring semester and a 4.0 for the cumulative grade for my program. As a graduate, I was honored with the Volunteers of Distinction Professional Promise Award. I was also nominated for Outstanding Graduate/Professional Student Leader this semester. Although I did not win the individual award, our organization for which I was secretary, the Coalition of Black Social Workers, won the award for Innovative Virtual Programming. I have gone through the steps for the LMSW application.”

Her VR counselor congratulated her on her success throughout the last two years. Angela has been working the last several months on developing her resume, studying for the ASWB exam for the LMSW licensure, and the counselor has been working with her on finding employment as a Social Worker. Angela is extremely grateful to VR and her counselor for helping her obtain her advance degree and looks forward to working in her field and helping others.

### **Tim Fann**

Tim Fann came to the VR program needing training and job placement. He told his VR counselor about his interest in the field of Information Technology (IT). Tim was diagnosed with degeneration of his spine. He says he was never injured, or in an accident. His spine just began to degenerate.

Tim says he always loved IT and that it was his true passion. He worked as a mortgage lender to pay the bills but was unfulfilled in this work. However, he was devastated when he had to quit working. He thought this might be his opportunity to go back to school. With VR’s help, he began the TCAT at McKenzie in August of 2019. Tim was a stellar student. He graduated with a 3.96 GPA.

Tim had a paid internship in spring 2021 and was looking forward to graduation and job placement. However, when he talked with his counselor in August 2021, he had some good news to share. He asked for a referral to the benefits specialist. It turns out, the IT teacher at his TCAT left his position, and Tim was hired for the job! His starting annual salary is \$49,000 with full benefits. Tim says this is his dream job.

VR provided counseling and guidance throughout Tim’s journey toward meeting his career goals. The Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Center in Camden provided vocational services. Other Department of Human Services referrals during the beginning of the pandemic were provided for additional support. Tim provided grades and transcripts each quarter and his counselor followed up with him during his coursework.

His counselor expressed to Tim that she is proud of him and told him he is a great success; even though VR did not fund many things for him. He replied, "VR was instrumental. It took so much pressure off me because I knew I had a safety umbrella when I needed help. I knew I would have the funds and support I needed to finish."

### **Deidre Pledge**

Mrs. Deidre Pledge is a 55-year-old who was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 2011. During that time Deidre had been employed in collections, as a trainer, for more than 20 years. Deidre worked very hard to maintain the life she was used to. In 2016, her condition began to worsen and in 2019 she had relapse which caused her to lose muscle strength. She participated in physical therapy several times each week and worked hard to maintain and improve her strength. Deidre began chemotherapy infusions every 6 months to help her symptoms. It was at that time that she was referred to the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

Deidre came to Vocational Rehabilitation in 2020 when the company that she worked for over 20 years closed. Deidre was devastated with the news and didn't know what to do after working for the same company for over 20 years, especially since her company understood her diagnosis. When Deidre met with her VR counselor they talked about her computer navigation skills, familiarity with most frequently used software, and her experience in data entry. Her VR counselor worked with VR's business employment consultant. They talked about remote-work hiring being conducted by United Healthcare Group in the field of customer service. They thought Deidre would be a great fit in this role. In February 2021, she was hired as a Customer Care Coordinator for United Healthcare Group. She enjoys her work. Deidre was chosen by management to speak to United Healthcare Group leadership about her employment and what it's like to work with a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis. Deidre states that she does not expect the world to revolve around her but wants to evolve in a world where she can adapt.

# Vocational Rehabilitation Program Outcomes

In addition to the success stories shared throughout this report, the tables and figures included below offer additional information regarding the performance of the VR program. In order to align this report with the VR program's federal reporting and the state's Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Combined state plan, we have adjusted the reporting timeframe provided in this report from the federal fiscal year to program year. The table below provides the full year name, year abbreviation, start date and end date for each year.

Year Name	Start Date	End Date
State Fiscal Year 2021 (SFY21)	July 1, 2020	June 30, 2021
VR Program Year 2020 (PY20)	July 1, 2020	June 30, 2021
Federal Fiscal Year 2020 (FFY20)	October 1, 2019	September 30, 2020

## ► VR Program Statistics

Program Participation	FFY2018	FFY2019	FFY2020	PY20/SFY21
New Applications	5,532	5,990	4,448	4,312
Total number of people with disabilities served	14,273	13,434	12,038	11,803
Number of persons obtaining employment/closed successfully	1,620	1,606	1,405	1,383

Measurable Skill Gains	PY19/SFY20	PY20/SFY21
Measurable Skill Gain Rate	35.9%	52.6%

Return on Investment	FFY2019	FFY2020	PY20/SFY21
Average Hours Worked	30 hours per week	30 hours per week	31 hours per week
Average Hourly Wage	\$11.13 per hour	\$ 11.77 per hour	\$12.62 per hour
Total SSA Reimbursements	\$1.6 million	\$1.7 million	\$1.8 million

# Vocational Rehabilitation Satisfaction

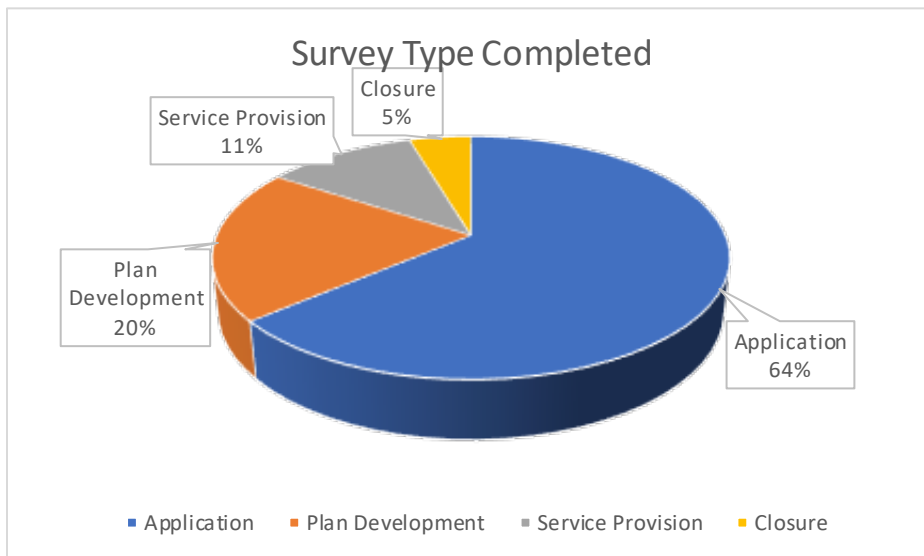
Every three years, the SRC collaborates with the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to determine the vocational rehabilitation needs of Tennesseans with disabilities. The Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) is required as part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act. The CSNA serves as the basis for state plan goals, objectives, and strategies and is used as a tool for informing the public and enhancing community awareness about the VR program. It also provides a means to assess consumer satisfaction with VR services during that particular year. The results of the 2019 CSNA were shared in previous years' reports and can be accessed on the TDHS website at <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/councils-and-committees/state-rehabilitation-council.html>. The SRC and VR are currently preparing for the 2022 CSNA.

Another tool used to assess customer satisfaction are ongoing surveys of VR customers at four significant stages of the VR customer journey – application, plan development, service provision, and closure. Specifically, these surveys are provided to customers through key documents that are mailed to the customer at these stages of their journey. Each survey is a quick five question survey designed to gain essential feedback without overburdening the customer. The complete list of survey questions for each survey are provided in the appendix.

## Trends

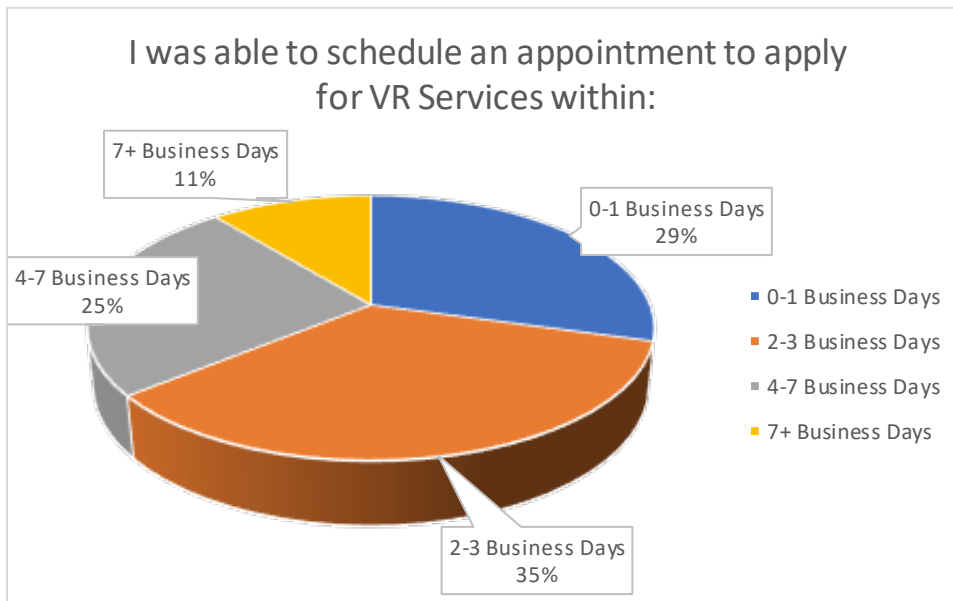
In a review of the surveys completed between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2021, there are several trends worth noting.

**Figure 1**



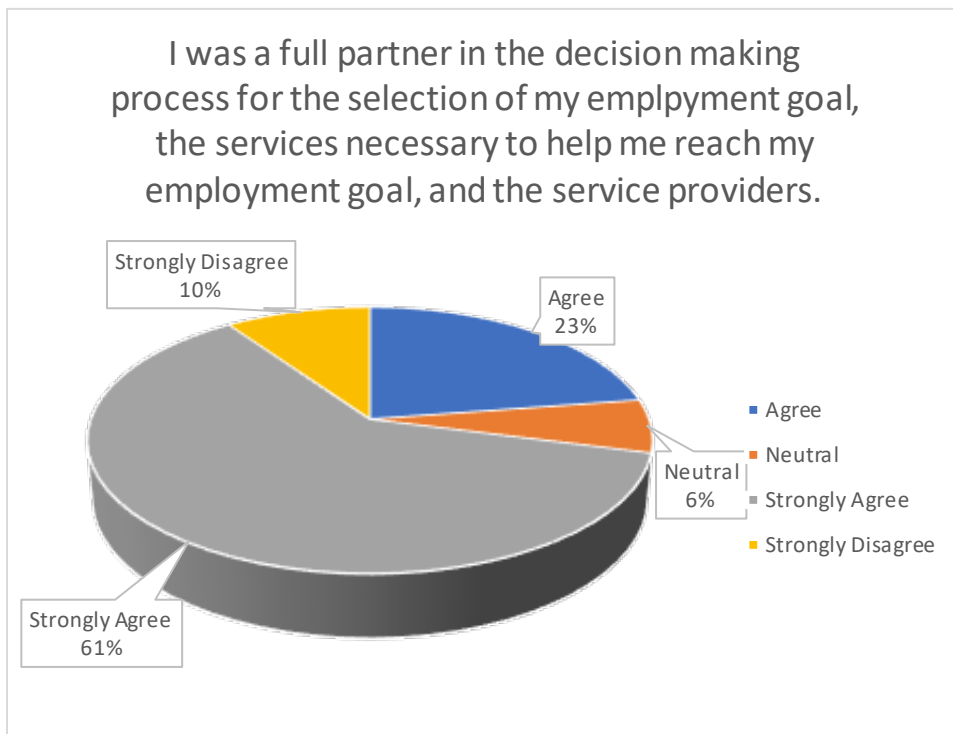
First, VR customer participation in completing the survey is highest at the application phase of the customer journey. As shown in Figure 1, 64% of the surveys completed were completed at the time of application. Participation in completing the surveys drops off considerably after application with plan development, service provision, and closure accounting for 36% of surveys combined.

**Figure 2**



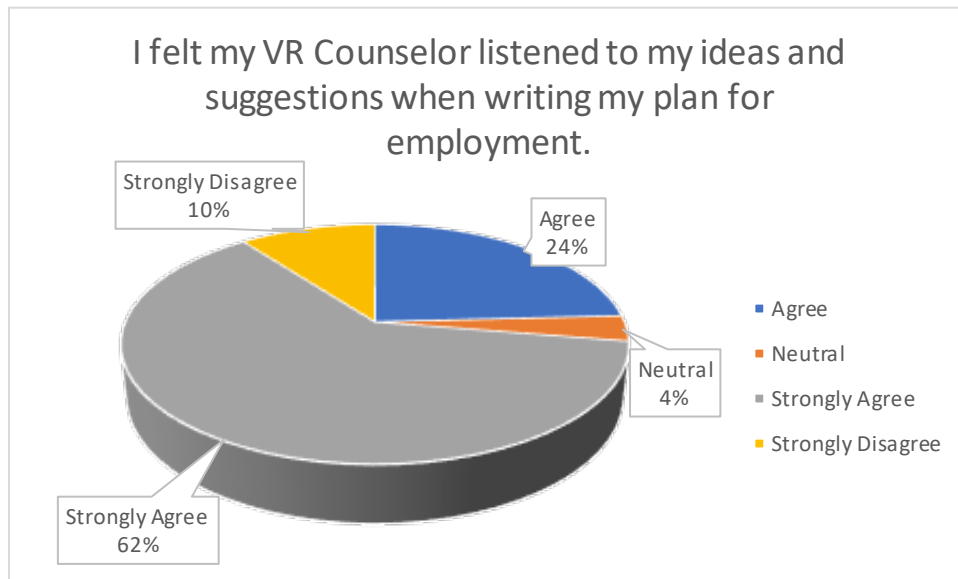
Other trends of note at the application stage include the timeliness with which customers were able to schedule an appointment to apply for VR services. As shown in Figure 3, almost 90% of customers report that they were able to schedule their appointment within 7 business days.

**Figure 3**



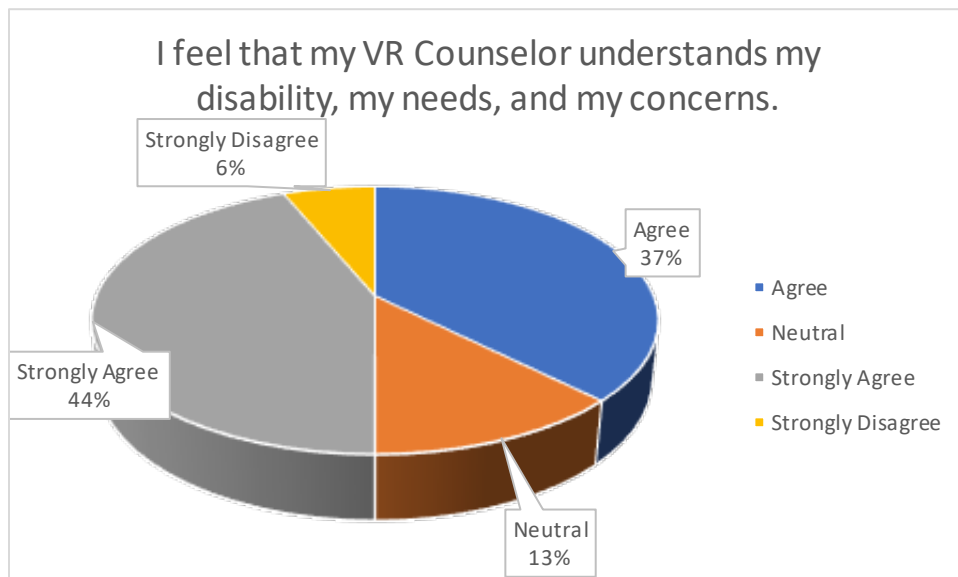
During plan development, two key themes emerged. First, 84% of customers who responded to the survey reported that they were engaged as a full partner in the decision-making process.

**Figure 4**



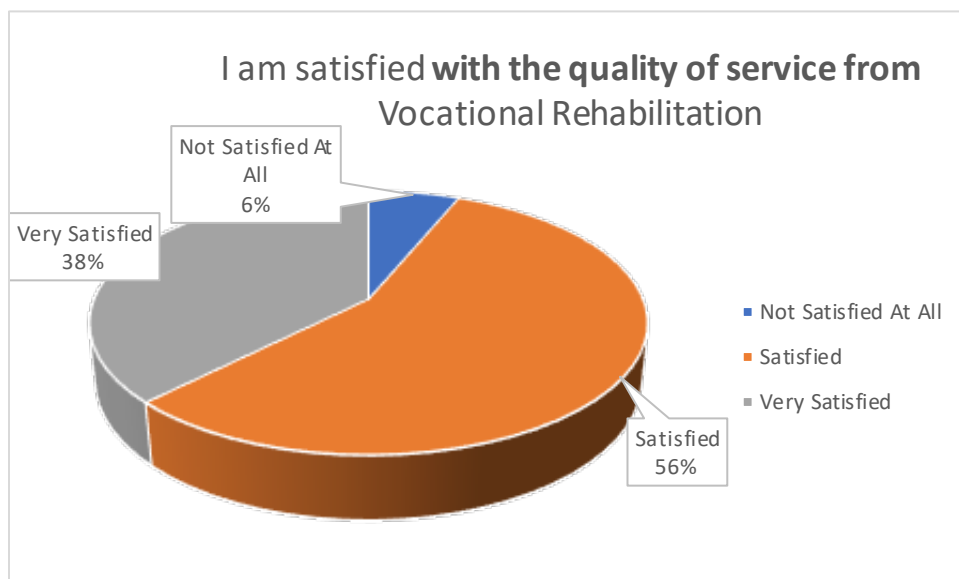
Second, 86% of customers responded that their VR counselor listened to their ideas and suggestions.

**Figure 5**



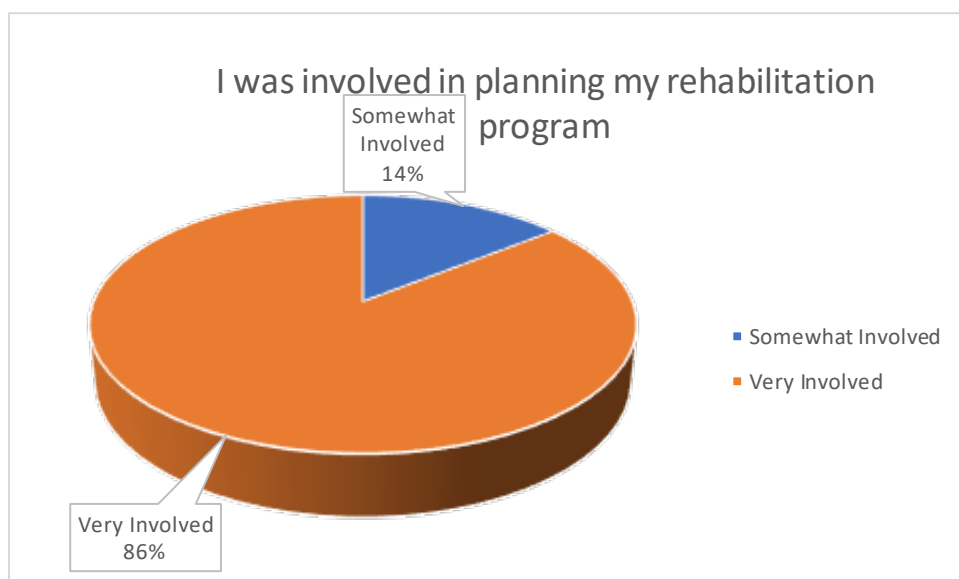
Throughout the provision of VR services, customers reported that they felt their VR counselor understood their disability, their needs, and their concerns.

**Figure 6**



Also, at the time of service provision, 94% of survey respondents reported they were satisfied with the quality of services they received.

**Figure 7**



Finally, at case closure, 100% of survey respondents reported that VR was involved with planning their rehabilitation program. 86% felt very involved and 14% felt somewhat involved.

While these surveys provide a glimpse into the reported satisfaction of VR customers, there is still considerable work for the VR program to do in increasing the number of customers that complete surveys at each stage of the process. Increasing customer engagement and improving the tools available to capture the voice of the customer are strategic priorities for both the Department of Human Services and the Division of Rehabilitation Services. The department will continue to use customer insights to define and prioritize experience requirements and opportunities for improvement.

# Plans for the Future

As noted in last year's report, the information collected in the 2019 CSNA revealed that individuals who interact with the VR program believe that VR provides beneficial and much-needed services to Tennesseans who need it. However, that same information also illustrated that the program has opportunities to improve and strengthen service delivery, internal and external communication, and efforts to train and retain VR's most important asset – its staff.

To that end, the VR program, in collaboration with the SRC, identified the following specific actions for VR to take in the upcoming year.

- *Aware* case management system enhancements to include the implementation of the Quality Assurance (QA) Module, which will be used by field staff for case reviews (target implementation date December 2021), as well as the implementation of a vendor portal, which will allow CRPs to easily submit payment requests and other correspondence to VR staff in a secure and efficient method.
- Review and evaluation of the current Tennessee Blind Enterprise business operations software tool and processes to assess infrastructure stability, capability, growth potential and system support availability.
- Continued transformation of the 17 Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers toward a community-based model by expanding successful pilots and exploring co-location opportunities within communities.
- Implement a statewide cloud-based phone system using the Nice inContact platform to allow a more efficient method of receiving phone calls with the ability to provide real-time response to customer inquiries across program areas. This new system will allow the division to more accurately track, measure and report analytics related to the reason for calling, level of customer service and the type of resolution provided, offering the division a platform for customer service from which to grow moving forward.
- Improve and expand training opportunities for staff through the development and deployment of role specific training to supplement the CORE onboarding training program.

In addition to the on-going efforts listed above, the VR program set specific performance goals for program year 2020 (July 1, 2021 – June 30, 2022) to further its transformation and increase its service to Tennesseans with disabilities.

- Increase the number of customers offered an opportunity to engage in employment, post-secondary education, vocational training, or job readiness training and increase the

number of individuals engaged in VR services working toward employment by increasing the number of VR applications by 5%.

- Increase by 5%, the number of customers engaged in VR who are working towards employment and who exit the program in competitive, integrated employment.

Through these transformation efforts, the Tennessee Vocational Rehabilitation program, together with our community partners and stakeholders, including the State Rehabilitation Council, are transforming the VR program to better meet the needs of the individuals we serve, the businesses we rely on, and the communities we live in.



# State Rehabilitation Council

## ► **Mission**

Serving all citizens of Tennessee, the mission of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) of Tennessee is to advise, evaluate and partner with the public vocational rehabilitation program in support of improving access to employment and promoting a diverse workforce statewide.

## ► **Vision**

The SRC of Tennessee envisions a statewide workforce that values disability and diversity and is committed to full participation of its citizens.

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***As a result of the 1992 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, each state VR agency was required to establish a State Rehabilitation Advisory Committee. The role of the committee was strengthened in the 1998 amendments to the Act when each state was mandated to establish a State Rehabilitation Council.***

***The mandate for the SRC and the definitions of its composition and functions are delineated in Section 105 within Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, as amended, and in Title 34 Parts 361.16 and 361.17 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).***

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## ► **Responsibilities and Functions**

The SRC of Tennessee works in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) Division of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to maximize employment and independent living for Tennesseans with disabilities. The SRC advocates for the Vocational Rehabilitation program as well as advise the division on issues facing consumers of the VR program. The SRC acts as the voice of the consumer and other stakeholders in the VR program.

The SRC's responsibilities and functions, as outlined in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, include:

- Review, analyze, and advise TDHS/DRS regarding responsibilities related to:
  - eligibility, including order of selection;
  - effectiveness of services provided; and
  - functions performed by state agencies that affect the employment of individuals with disabilities.
- Partner with DRS to:
  - develop, agree to, and review VR goals and priorities;

- evaluate the effectiveness of the VR program and submit reports of progress to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) commissioner.
- Assist in preparation of the VR services portion of the combined state plan and amendments to the plan, applications, reports, needs assessments, and evaluations.
- Conduct a review and analysis of the effectiveness and consumer satisfaction with:
  - functions performed by the DRS;
  - VR services provided; and
  - the employment outcomes achieved by eligible individuals.
- Prepare and submit an annual report to the Governor and the RSA commissioner on the status of VR programs in Tennessee.
- Coordinate activities with other councils to avoid duplication of efforts and enhance the number of individuals served.
- Coordinate and establish working relationships between DRS and the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC) and centers for independent living within Tennessee.
- Perform other functions consistent with VR services deemed appropriate by the SRC.

## ► **Membership**

Council members are appointed by the Governor to serve a term of three years and may not serve more than two consecutive terms. When making appointments, the Governor must consider participants representing a broad range of individuals with disabilities and organizations interested in individuals with disabilities. The Governor, to the extent possible, must consider that minority populations are represented on the Council. Most members must be individuals with disabilities not employed by the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services.

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*The council must be comprised of at least 15 members from the following groups/organizations: Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC); Parent Training and Information Center; Client Assistance Program (CAP); VR counselor (ex officio, non-voting member if Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS) employee); community program service providers; business, industry, and labor representatives (at least 4); disability groups; current or former VR recipient; State educational agency, State workforce investment board; and the Director of the DRS (ex-officio, non-voting).*

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## **2021 Officers**

### **Chair**

**Christina Clift**

**Representative of Disability Groups**

**From: Millington**

**VR Region: 9**

### **Secretary**

**Kristin Viscione**

***VR Program***

**From: Nashville**

**VR Region: 5**

### **Vice Chair**

**Lee Brown**

***Community Rehabilitation Program***

**From: Pulaski**

**VR Region: 6**

### **Immediate Past Chair**

**Becky Allen**

***Client Assistance Program***

**From: Knoxville**

**VR Region: 2**

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***CFR Title 34 Part 361.17 contains details on membership, appointments, terms, and electing of a chairperson.***

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## **2021 Members**

**David Cole**

***Business, Industry and Labor***

**From:** Oakland

**VR Region:** 9

**Lou Conley**

***Representative of Disability Groups***

**From:** Memphis

**VR Region:** 9

**Lisa Gosnell**

***Parent Training and Information Center***

**From:** Nashville

**VR Region:** 5

**Rebecca Bordenet-French**

***Business, Industry, and Labor***

**From:** Manchester

**VR Region:** 5

**Greyson Jennings**

***Current/Former VR Applicant/Recipient***

**From:** Johnson City

**VR Region:** 1

**Julie Johnson**

***Director of VR Program***

**From:** Nashville

**VR Region:** 5

**Martina Stump**

***State Education Agency***

**From:** Nashville

**VR Region:** 5

**Laura Payne**

***Current/Former VR Applicant/Recipient***

**From:** Knoxville

**VR Region:** 2

**Jim Sharp**

***Business, Industry, and Labor***

**From:** Corryton

**VR Region:** 2

**CL'audia Anthony**

***VR Counselor***

**From:** Nashville

**VR Region:** 5

**Deniece Thomas**

***Workforce Investment Board***

**From:** Nashville

**VR Region:** 5

**Denise Wardle**

***Disability Advocacy Group***

**From:** Puryear

**VR Region:** 8

**Wanda Willis**

***Representative of Disability Group***

**From:** Nashville

**VR Region:** 5

## ► ***Accomplishments for FY2020***



- Held four SRC quarterly meetings to conduct SRC business.
- Held multiple conference calls to conduct SRC committee business and to prepare for quarterly meetings.
- Held SRC member training sessions for all SRC members to include information regarding VR services as well as training regarding the role and responsibilities of the SRC.
- Prepared Annual Report with the TDHS Division of Rehabilitation Services.
- Partnered with VR to prepare for the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, which will be submitted to RSA in the fall of 2022. This process involves multiple meetings and phone calls for the Consumer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Committee as well as the involvement of the full SRC in the final review of items to be included in the assessment surveys.
- Made contact with the office of Governor Lee via TDHS to monitor the appointment of previously nominated SRC membership positions which were subsequently appointed.
- Educated state legislators during Disability Day on the Hill on the role of the SRC and how increasing funding for the VR program could assist Tennesseans to gain employment as well as the impact that it has on communities across the state.
- Continued participation in the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC) via participation in national quarterly conference calls.
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion committee established and reviewed several areas of VR this year. It was the committee's opinion that an active approach to training, reporting, and efforts to be more inclusive were already underway when the review was completed.
- Updated SRC bylaws.
- Reviewed and provided recommendations on proposed VR policy and procedure manual.

## ▶ **2021 SRC Quarterly Meeting Schedule**

The SRC holds quarterly meetings and the dates, times and locations are posted on the State of Tennessee Public Meetings Calendar at <http://www.tn.gov/meetings> at least 30 days in advance of the meeting.

- December 10, 2020
- March 11, 2021
- June 10, 2021
- September 9, 2021

## ▶ **Join the SRC**

If you are a person with a disability or someone interested in having input regarding employment services to individuals with disabilities, the State Rehabilitation Council of Tennessee may be for you. If you are interested in learning more about this unique opportunity to serve, please visit the SRC website at <https://www.tn.gov/humanservices/ds/councils-and-committees/state-rehabilitation-council.html> for further information regarding the application process. You may also contact the SRC directly at [srctennessee@gmail.com](mailto:srctennessee@gmail.com).

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# VR Customer Service Survey

## Tennessee VR Customer Service Survey - Application

Recently, you applied for services with the Vocational Rehabilitation program. In our ongoing efforts to provide quality services, please take a few moments to answer the questions below. Your honest, thoughtful, and prompt reply will assist us in evaluating and improving our services to you and other VR customers. Have a wonderful day!

1. I was able to schedule an appointment to apply for VR services within:

- ☐ Business Days
- ☐ 2-3 Business Days
- ☐ 4-7 Business Days
- ☐ 7+ Business Days
- ☐ If longer, please specify:

2. I was treated with courtesy and respect during the application process.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. It was explained to me that the purpose of the VR program is to provide opportunities for individuals with disabilities to improve their lives through employment.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

4. The VR office was clean and organized:

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. Overall, I am \_\_\_\_\_ with my experience with Vocational Rehabilitation.

- ☐ Very Satisfied

- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Comments:

### **Tennessee VR Customer Service Survey - Plan Development**

Recently, you developed an Individual Plan for Employment with your VR Counselor. In our ongoing efforts to provide quality services, please take a few moments to answer the questions below. Your honest, thoughtful, and prompt reply will assist us in evaluating and improving our services to you and other VR customers. Have a wonderful day!

1. I was able to reach my counselor or another Vocational Rehabilitation Service staff member within:

- 0 – 3 Business Days
- 4 – 5 Business Days
- 6 – 7 Business Days
- 7+ Business Days
- If longer, please specify:

2. I was a full partner in the decision-making process for the selection of my employment goal, the services necessary to help me reach my employment goal, and the service providers.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

3. I felt my Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor listened to my ideas and suggestions when writing my plan for employment.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. I am \_\_\_\_\_ with the plan my counselor and I developed to meet my employment goal.

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Not Very Satisfied
- Not Satisfied At All

5. Overall, I am \_\_\_\_\_ with my experience with Vocational Rehabilitation.

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Other (please specify)

### **Tennessee VR Customer Service Survey - Service Provision**

Within the last year you began receiving services from the Vocational Rehabilitation program. In our ongoing efforts to provide quality services, please take a few moments to answer the questions below. Your honest, thoughtful, and prompt reply will assist us in evaluating and improving our services to you and other VR customers. Have a wonderful day!

1. My Counselor contacts me on a regular basis, every \_\_\_\_\_.

- 30 Days
- 60 Days
- 90 Days
- 120 Days
- 120+ Days

2. I am \_\_\_\_\_ with the quality of service from Vocational Rehabilitation.

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Not Very Satisfied
- Not Satisfied At All

3. I feel that my Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor understands my disability, my needs, and my concerns.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. I am \_\_\_\_\_ with the quality of services from my service providers.

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Not Very Satisfied
- Not Satisfied At All

5. Overall, I am \_\_\_\_\_ with my experience with Vocational Rehabilitation.

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Neutral
- Dissatisfied
- Very Dissatisfied
- Other (please specify)

### **Tennessee VR Customer Service Survey - Closure**

Recently, your case was closed from the Vocational Rehabilitation program. In our ongoing efforts to provide quality services, please take a few moments to answer the questions below. Your honest, thoughtful, and prompt reply will assist us in evaluating and improving our services to you and other VR customers. Have a wonderful day!

1. My counselor informed me of the roles of the Client Assistance Program at: (check all that apply)

- Application
- IPE Plan Development
- Priority Category Assignment
- Suspension or Reduction of Services
- Case Closure
- All of the Above
- None of the Above

2. I was able to communicate my needs to my counselor.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

3. I was \_\_\_\_\_ in planning my rehabilitation program.

- ☐ Very Involved
- ☐ Somewhat Involved
- ☐ Not At All Involved

4. I feel that Vocational Rehabilitation was committed to helping me obtain employment.

- ☐ Strongly Agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly Disagree

5. Overall, I am \_\_\_\_\_ with my experience with Vocational Rehabilitation.

- ☐ Very Satisfied
- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Dissatisfied
- ☐ Very Dissatisfied
- ☐ Other (please specify)

# 2021 Staff Updates



**Clarence H. Carter,  
Commissioner,  
Department of Human Services**

Clarence H. Carter was appointed to serve as a member of the Governor's Cabinet as the Commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Human Services in January 2021.

Prior to his appointment, Mr. Carter served on the federal level as Director of the Office of Family Assistance and Acting Director of the Office of Community Services within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. While there, Mr. Carter led the administration of seven federal programs including the \$16.5 billion Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Mr. Carter has served his entire career administrating public safety net agencies and programs at the federal, state, and local levels of government, serving two presidents, four governors, and a mayor. Mr. Carter served as the Director of the Arizona Department of Economic Security and Commissioner of the Virginia Department of Social Services. He also managed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and served as the Director of the Office of Community Services during the Bush Administration. On the local level, Mr. Carter served as Director of the Washington, D.C., Department of Human Services, where he led an initiative to transform the District's shelter-based homeless system to one that assisted those served to finding permanent residency.

Mr. Carter also founded the Institute for the Improvement of the Human Condition in 2015. At that organization, he worked with state and local safety net agencies to meet the emergency needs of socially and economically vulnerable citizens.

Mr. Carter earned his bachelor's degree at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Indiana, Pennsylvania. Mr. Carter has an enduring commitment to transform the social services safety net so that services not only support recipients with their short-term needs, but also position them for long lasting self-sustainability.

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**Julie Johnson,  
Director, Vocational Rehabilitation**

Julie joined the Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services as the Vocational Rehabilitation Director in January 2021. Based out of Nashville, she is responsible for the statewide leadership and administration of the department's VR program supporting individuals with disabilities in achieving their career goals. In her role, Julie leads statewide transformation efforts aimed to modernize the VR system, improve service delivery, and enhance the customer experience.

Julie holds a bachelor's degree from Middle Tennessee State University and has close to 20 years of experience leading program redesign initiatives. This includes a key leadership role in designing, implementing and administering both the CHOICES and Employment and Community First (ECF) CHOICES programs at TennCare.

Julie lives in Spring Hill, TN with her family and enjoys camping and hiking at Tennessee State Parks.

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**Lori Allen,  
Superintendent, TRC Smyrna**

On May 17, 2021, Dr. Lori Allen joined the team as the Superintendent of the Tennessee Rehabilitation Center (TRC) in Smyrna.

A native Middle Tennessean, Dr. Allen began her career as a special education teacher with Maury County Public Schools and has served as a teacher in both public and residential settings in Tennessee. She is a former Special Education Supervisor and served as the Director of Assessment Design for Special Populations for ten years with the Tennessee Department of Education.

Prior to this appointment, she served as an Assistant Professor of Special Education and the Associate Dean of Assessment, Accreditation, and Institutional Effectiveness at Austin Peay State University.

Dr. Allen holds a Master's Degree in Special Education with a focus on Autism and Emotional Disturbance from Auburn University and a Doctorate of Educational Leadership from East Tennessee State University.

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## **Raven Pulliam**

### **Director, Tennessee Blind Enterprises**

Raven Pulliam joined the Department of Human Services in October 2021. Raven is responsible for leading Tennessee's Business Enterprises Program, supporting individuals with vision loss in achieving their career goals, to include training, entrepreneurship and continued professional development.

Raven comes to DRS after serving for the past thirteen years as the Illinois Business Enterprises Program Administrator. In this capacity, he was responsible for the planning, organizing, directing and overall day to day administration of the program as well as developing, maintaining, and strengthening community relationships with various partners and businesses.

Raven has a background in the culinary arts and attended the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York Apprenticeship, Johnson Wales University in Classical Pastry, Parkland College IL Nutrition and Management, and American Culinary Federation in St. Augustine Florida where he achieved the status Certified Executive Chef. His culinary leadership experience includes running large profitable food service operations. Raven has relocated to Knoxville, Tennessee with his wife and enjoys biking, fly fishing and a good donut.

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## **Paul Gow**

### **CTRC Area Manager, Region 1 and 2**

Paul assumed this new role within the Division of Rehabilitation Services in November 2021. As a CTRC Area Manager, Paul provides leadership and oversight for the team of Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers in Greeneville, Elizabethton, and Maryville. His team provides services to residents of Greene, Carter, and Blount counties and the surrounding areas.

Paul began his work for the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services in August of 2008. He started as a VR counselor in Washington County, then transitioned to a Vocational Evaluator at the CTRC Greeneville in 2011.

Paul is a Binghamton, NY native. He has also lived and worked in Virginia and Kentucky. Paul holds a Master of Science in Rehabilitation Counseling from the University of North Texas and is credentialed as both a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and a Certified Vocational Evaluator (CVE).

Paul has been happily married to his wife Heather for 23 years and has 2 beautiful daughters, Hayley and Audrey. In his spare time, Paul weight trains, kayaks, bikes, hikes and is an avid fan of college and professional football, and basketball.



**Carol Croney**  
**CTRC Area Manager, Region 3 and 4**

Carol assumed this new role within the Division of Rehabilitation Services in November 2021. As a CTRC Area Manager, Carol provides leadership and oversight for the team of Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers in Cleveland and Cookeville. Her team provides services to residents of Bradley and Putnam counties and the surrounding areas.

Carol Croney began working for the Tennessee Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services, Business Service Unit in December of 2019. She started as a Business Employment Consultant for the 14 counties in the Upper Cumberland. Prior to joining Vocational Rehabilitation, she worked for Roane State Community College, taught at the TCAT-Crossville, was an assistant director of a non-profit in Crossville, and worked for an IPS program employing VR customers.

Carol is a native Tennessean where she earned her bachelor's degree from Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville and her Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Bethel University. She has one daughter, a son-in-law, and three beautiful grandsons that she spends time with. She is an avid football fan for her grandsons and the University of Tennessee (UT). Go Jets! Go Vols!



**Linda Fisher,**  
**CTRC Area Manager, Region 6**

Linda assumed this new role within the Division of Rehabilitation Services in November 2021. As a CTRC Area Manager, Linda provides leadership and oversight for the team of Community Tennessee Rehabilitation Centers in Shelbyville, Manchester, Winchester, and Columbia. Her team provides services to residents of Bedford, Coffee, Franklin, and Maury counties and the surrounding areas.

Linda started her employment with Tennessee State Government with the Tennessee Department of Health in October 1993. She transferred to the Department of Human Services, Division of Rehabilitation Services in May 1997 and found her career. She left Tennessee briefly from 2007-2012 to first pursue further graduate studies in Rehabilitation and Special Education at Auburn University then to work as a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) in Georgia. She returned home to Middle Tennessee in March 2012 to be closer to family and to work for

Tennessee's, VR program. Over the years, Linda has held various positions within the VR program including Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor I, II, and Masters, Instructor for the Blind, Field Supervisor 1, and most recently CTRC Manager for the Shelbyville/Bedford County location.

Linda resides in Shelbyville, Tennessee, with her son, Alex, and mother, Ophelia. She earned a Master of Education in Rehabilitation Services from Auburn University and is pursuing her Master of Science in Management/Organizational Leadership from Middle Tennessee State University. She is a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) and has been since 2007. In her free time, Linda enjoys spending time with her family, reading, and watching football and movies.

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**Jordan Herald,  
Regional Supervisor, Regions 4 and 6**

Jordan Herald joined the Tennessee Department of Human Services team on June 26, 2017 as Field Supervisor for Region 4. In 2021, she was promoted to Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor for Regions 4 and 6. She has 7 years' experience in the mental health field.

Prior to her time with Vocational Rehabilitation, she worked in the Case Management field and as a Program Coordinator with Federally funded grant programs. She has experience working with individuals with all types of disabilities, those experiencing homelessness, and individuals experiencing substance use disorders.

During her time with Vocational Rehabilitation, she has developed a passion for the work that VR does to impact individuals and their families. She values the importance of training and education, believing these tools help individuals reach their full potential and impact generations. During her time with VR, she has assisted VR in relationship building with TNAHEAD, a state affiliate of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)- - the premier professional association committed to full participation of persons with disabilities in postsecondary education. Jordan has adoration for the work VR does and continually advocates for the program with community partners, stakeholders, customers, and educational partners.

Jordan has three young children: Maddison, Hayden, and Jaxon. She loves watching her children play sports and enjoys outdoor activities with her family.

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**Donna Criswell,  
Regional Supervisor, Regions 7 and 8**

Donna Criswell grew up in Dyersburg, TN and attended Bethel University, obtaining her Bachelor of Science Degree in Organizational Management, then went on to complete a Master's in Education majoring in Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling at Auburn University. Donna also completed a Specialist degree at Mississippi State University, with an emphasis on

Assistive Technology.

Before working with the State of Tennessee, Donna worked for the State of Mississippi as a Rehabilitation teacher for the Blind and Visually impaired at the REACH Center for the Blind. She later promoted to Rehabilitation Counselor for the Blind. While in Mississippi, she served as a liaison in the school system, for transition students who were blind or visually impaired. During this time, she also worked as the Regional Trainer for new Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors.

After Donna moved to Tennessee in 2016, she served as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor for customers who were Blind and Visually Impaired and for the customers who were Deaf and Hard of Hearing. In 2019, Donna was promoted to Vocational Rehabilitation Supervisor for Region 8 and then in 2021, Donna was promoted to Regional Supervisor for Regions 7 and 8 in West Tennessee

Donna has three adult children: Taylor, Mason, and Carli, and four grandchildren. She resides in Alamo, TN, where she is an active member of the Exchange Club. Donna loves to travel and is a houseboat enthusiast.

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