

# STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL 2023 SRC ANNUAL REPORT

*In Partnership with*



*Opportunities for Independence*

**Office of Vocational Rehabilitation  
Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind**

2023 SRC ANNUAL REPORT

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MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF  
REHABILITATION SERVICES  
*Opportunities for Independence*

**WELCOME FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
CHRIS M. HOWARD**



***Dear Governor Reeves, Members of the Mississippi Legislature and Fellow Mississippians:***

On behalf of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services' Office of Workforce Development, I thank you for the opportunity to share highlights of our Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (VRB) through our partnership with the State Rehabilitation Council during Federal Fiscal 2023.

The work of our Vocational Rehabilitation teams and the SRC is vital to carrying out our mission of assisting Mississippians with disabilities to gain/retain employment and to provide appropriate and comprehensive services in a timely and effective manner. We are proud to report during PY 2022, we served over **13,486** individuals, helped **2,804** become successfully employed, provided Pre-employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) to **4,791** students, and have **11** partnerships with Pre-ETS providers to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services. We held job fairs in which **100** businesses participated and developed or maintained **22** Project SEARCH sites. We partnered with corporate giants such as Sephora and Fastenal, expanded our internship programs and assisted in the growth of Mississippi State's ACCESS program. The pages ahead will outline our work in these areas more specifically.

Our success is to be credited to our outstanding statewide staff here at MDRS. They work hard every day to make a difference in the lives of those we serve, and regularly consult with the members of the State Rehabilitation Council as a matter of duty and due diligence.

I thank you for your continued support of our mission and look forward to another year of successful outcomes and life-changing work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris M. Howard". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Chris M. Howard  
Executive Director



# MISSISSIPPI STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL CHAIR LETTER

**Dear Governor Reeves and Members of the Mississippi Legislature:**

On behalf of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), I am happy to share the annual report of the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services' Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVR/OVRB).

The SRC is a body mandated by The Rehabilitation Act and its resulting regulations at CFR 361. Members, described in these regulations, represent a broad range of individuals with disabilities across the state, partner agency stakeholders, as well as colleagues from business and industry.

Our mandated functions include:

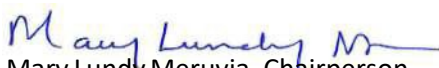
- Reviewing, analyzing, and advising OVR/OVRB on the performance of their responsibilities related to eligibility and order of selection; the extent, scope, and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services; and functions that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes
- Partnering with OVR/OVRB in developing goals and priorities; and evaluating the effectiveness in obtaining these goals
- Advising OVR/OVRB in the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Unified State Plan
- Conducting a review and analysis of consumer satisfaction
- Submitting this report and making it available to the public
- Coordinating activities with other named Councils within the state
- Performing other relevant functions which the SRC determines appropriate consistent with the purpose of OVR/OVRB

The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services' OVR/ OVRB has had strong customer satisfaction ratings in the last year for the services that are provided to the citizens of Mississippi who experience disability; as well as the employment outcomes that are achieved after service provision. Strong collaboration with the business and industry community leads to accomplishments for the citizens served – lives are made better with employment. Businesses are made stronger by having a source for qualified and job-matched candidates to fill their labor forces. OVR and OVRB services are a great investment – making the state of Mississippi stronger, where all citizens are included.

We hope you will continue to prioritize strong funding of this agency for the 20% required state match to federal funds so that it will have the funding levels to remain an essential Mississippi resource for citizens with disabilities seeking employment. We hope that you prioritize competitive staff salaries, a frequent discussion of the SRC, to ensure that highly skilled professionals continue to choose MDRS OVR and OVRB as their employer.

The SRC is happy to continue to advise the agency regarding the individual stakeholder groups who we represent.

Sincerely,

  
Mary Lundy Meruvia, Chairperson  
State Rehabilitation Council

# STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>SRC CHAIRMAN</b></p> <p><b>Mary Lundy Meruvia, M.ED., CRC - Program Director</b>                      Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program                      MS Band of Choctaw Indians                      Choctaw Branch Box #6010 Choctaw, MS 39350                      TEL: 601-650-7333; Fax:601-650-1702 TTY:601-650-7354                      Email: <a href="mailto:mmeruvia@choctaw.org">mmeruvia@choctaw.org</a></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>EX-OFFICIO</b></p> <p><b>Chris M. Howard - Executive Director</b>                      MS Dept. of Rehabilitation Services                      P O Box 1698                      Jackson, MS 39215                      PH: 601-853-5100; 800-443-1000                      Email: <a href="mailto:choward@mdrs.ms.gov">choward@mdrs.ms.gov</a></p>
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*The public is always invited to attend the quarterly State Rehabilitation Council Meetings. Meeting locations, dates and times and are posted at [www.mdrs.ms.gov](http://www.mdrs.ms.gov) and the NFB Newslines.*

# 2023 MISSISSIPPI

## STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES

### **2023 Mississippi - State Rehabilitation Council Activity Report**

The Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) held four (4) quarterly meetings for the Federal Fiscal Year **October 1, 2022 – September 30, 2023**. Utilizing in-person meetings, TEAMS and teleconferencing, the members were able to attend quarterly meetings during the continued pandemic era. During each meeting, everyone was welcomed, introductions were made, and guests were recognized. Agenda topics were centered around the SRC Functions and provided by the Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVRB) and Business Development Services (BDS). The State Rehabilitation Council reviewed and provided input at each meeting on selected topics related to:

- ◆ Reviewing, analyzing, and advising OVR/OVRB/BDS on the performance of their responsibilities related to eligibility and order of selection; the extent, scope, and effectiveness of vocational rehabilitation services; and functions that affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes.
- ◆ Partnering with OVR/OVRB in developing goals and priorities and evaluating the effectiveness in obtaining these goals
- ◆ Advising OVR/OVRB/BDS in the vocational rehabilitation portion of the Unified State Plan
- ◆ Conducting a review and analysis of consumer satisfaction, including a quarterly report from the Client Assistance Program (CAP) as well as a report of Due Process Hearings
- ◆ Submitting the SRC Annual Report and making it available to the public
- ◆ Coordinating activities with other named Councils within the state, with a specific agenda item quarterly for a report from the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)
- ◆ Performing other relevant functions, the SRC determines appropriate consistent with the purpose of OVR/OVRB/OBD
- ◆ The integral responsibility of the Council is to have active participation by responding formally to questionnaires, participating in NCSRC training, asking questions, and providing input reflective of the interest of the stakeholder groups represented.

### **December 2, 2022 Meeting**

**Public Comments:** All attendees were informed that public comments were accepted and that bylaws specify that the SRC needs a two-week notification of a public comment. There were no requests for public comments.

**MDRS Executive Director Comments:** Mr. Bishop, Deputy Administrator-Workforce Development, shared the **attendance of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)** in San Antonio, Texas. This was an opportunity for VR directors to share discussions of various agencies. Mr. Bishop discussed **funding**, why/how many states have returned federal dollars, and the overseer of the federal funding for our programs, the **Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)**. Mississippi has not returned any money. Some were due to a decrease in services, vacancies, and COVID. They met to find ideas and commented that the expenditures would be reviewed to ensure services are being provided to

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

better serve clients. A meeting will take place next week.

**Client Assistance Program (CAP):** Mr. McGinn, Client Assistance Program (CAP) Director, provided the **CAP summary report** in which no cases were reported this quarter. Mr. McGinn presented the process of CAP which included the process of information referrals, signed releases, and contacting counselors. Mr. McGinn visited District IV and provided the CAP's overview. Mr. McGinn attended the **National Conference in D.C.** and shared specific concerns about how air flights **handle chairs and luggage**. Brochures were distributed at the conference in Mississippi to educate individuals about the Client Assistance Program.

**State Independent Living Council (SILC):** Mr. McGinn provided an **update on SILC** and discussed Ms. Smith's **objectives** to ensure SILC's offices are in order. The turnover, lacking counselors, and finding counselors were challenging. Mr. McGinn serves on the nominating committee for SILC.

**Due Process Hearing - Last Quarter:** Ms. Hart presented her first **due process hearing** which included a hearing officer (contracted individual and not an employee of the agency). The hearing regarded the purchase of a specific iPad, although the agency had previously purchased an iPad that met the consumer's needs and the school curriculum's requirements to attend the program. The hearing officer favored the agency's decision. The consumer requested a reconsideration, the hearing officer still favored the agency's decision of previously providing the tools and resources needed for the individual to be successful in the training program. Ms. Hart mentioned that the consumer's additional complaint included the request of changing counselors - although the consumer had previously changed counselors approximately five times prior, with the most recent transfer being prior to the grievance filing. Ms. Hart discussed the attempts to meet and accommodate this individual's needs. Mr. McGinn added that attempts are made to keep complaints from advancing to due process.

**OVR Program:** Ms. Hart presented the **VR Management Reports**. The goal for successful rehab is 2,300. In the first quarter (7/1/22–9/30/22), 550 cases (24%) were closed and from 10/1/22–11/28/22, 357 (16%) cases were closed. The **VR goal** for IPEs is 5202. In the first quarter (7/1/22 – 9/30/22), 1,110 IPEs (21%) were reported. From 10/1/22-11/28/22, there have been 641 (12%). Between 7/1/22-9/30/22, VR served approximately 1,962 potentially eligible students and 1,257 transition students. There are over 20,000 students in the school districts with a disability and they are pushing to increase the number served. From 10/1/22–11/28/22, VR served 1,971 potentially eligible students and 1,328 transition students. The **VR/VRB summary (data dashboard summary)** was discussed and according to the reporting (*Barriers to Employment*), it indicated a combined total of 7,395 individuals with a disability. The negotiated rate was exceeded at 74.5%. **'Skills Gains'** which is when students are enrolled in a training program such as post-secondary training, each semester, the students receive grades and submit grades (documented on the educational goal page). Project Search does not receive a credential but receives a training milestone which is included in the Measurable Skills Gains (MSG). Some trainings are not qualified for MSG due to a non-structured recognized training program. Addie McBryde and AbilityWorks are not recognized training programs. Ms. Hart and Ms. Young are working on getting the community rehabilitation programs (CRP's) in a certification. Ms. Hart discussed when AbilityWorks does a structured curriculum or teaches a structured curriculum, it may be recognized as a skills gain. Mr. McGinn added that the **Mississippi Occupational Diploma** is no longer accepted by community colleges and shared that some students may not be able to obtain a high school diploma yet can still obtain employment in a certain field.

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

**Financial Need Analysis:** Ms. Hart discussed the **Order of Selection**. All priority categories are open under the Order of Selection. There was an inquiry that if VR/VRB had available funding, was there a need for the **Financial Needs Analysis (FNA)**. When the FNA was initiated, it was done when there were not enough funds, or the funds were not as lucrative as they are now. With the approval of the Executive Director, Chris Howard, the FNA will be temporarily suspended until the end of this program year to see the impact of not having an FNA. It was approved for the FNA to be suspended for six months. Ms. Hart discussed once the six-month suspension ends, the FNA will be re-reviewed to determine suspension continuation, re-start utilizing the FNA, or remove it completely.

**Post-Secondary at University/College and Maintenance:** Ms. Hart requested SRC members to make suggestions relating to the maintenance of housing and meals and how they are paid by college students.

**OVRB Program:** Ms. Young discussed the **Community Rehabilitation Program**, Update on **Wage Verification**, and provided statistics on the VRB program. From 7/1/21-6/30/22, OVRB served 1,901 individuals, 492 new IPEs, 70 MSGs were received, and 352 cases were closed successfully. OVRB met the **MSG executive goal** of 21%. MSG is the new common performance measure received from RSA. VRB is measured by the number of blind or visually impaired clients who are placed in training, a recognized credential program, or received a skill. Clients who have received an MSG are probably in college and received their skill gain when they completed college. This year OVRB started with 1901 being served and during the current fiscal year (7/1/22-11/29/22), 1,604 were served, 204 IPEs were written, and 122 cases were closed. Currently, VRB is at 24% of the application goal, 33% of the IPE goal, 4% for the IPE goal, and 23% for meeting the closure goal with 113 closed rehab cases. **Casework and Guidance** training for OVRB was on 11/30/22 and staff was informed to plan **outreach** to locate the students who are not being served and especially the blind or visually impaired students. Ms. Young discussed **Structured Discovery**. Dr. Bell, the Structured Discovery Consultant, visited several locations in Long Beach, Mississippi. Job descriptions for advertisement were submitted to Dr. Bell in October 2022 and the building was advertised in the Sun Herald Biloxi Newspaper in November 2022. The **Business Enterprise Program (BEP)** implemented financial coaching through the Small Business Development program, which is a free one-on-one service. **Wage verification** letters were mailed to clients with 14-20 wage verifications received. Some clients who received a wage verification letter were employed and currently they are unemployed. Suggested verbiage changes were made to the counselor letters.

### **Consumer Satisfaction Review:**

- The **VR Consumer Satisfaction Survey Report** (*rated 1-5, with 5 being excellent*), was presented. The reference to *employment outcome* was 4.58 (based on 536 interviewed consumers); the rating relating to *employment benefits provided by new employer* was 4.06 (318 consumers interviewed); *overall question relating to services received* was 4.76 (996 consumers interviewed); the rating for the *help the VR staff provided at the time applied for VR services* was 4.71 (based on 1003 consumers interviewed); *help from the VR staff during planning of services* was 4.73 (1000 consumers interviewed); *help from the VR staff when receiving your VR services* was 4.77 (991 consumers interviewed); and *help received from other agencies or service providers* was 4.45 (195 interviewed). There were open-ended questions and comments for non-blind consumers registered with VR. This survey was comprehensive, was broken down for VR/VRB, and was completed on consumers whose VR/VRB cases were closed. The survey included comments that were used to determine wages and improve customer service.



## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

—The **Program Evaluation Survey**, presented by Ms. Rushing, provided a summary that was completed on current open cases in VRB North and VRB South. They were able to reach 155 consumers (out of 448 active consumers) in VRB North and 19 of those consumers were in *employed* status. For VRB South, they were able to reach 167 consumers (out of 592 active cases) in which 23 were in *employed* status. The overall satisfaction goal is to remain above 3.0. Overall satisfaction for VRB North was 3.10 and VRB South was 3.08. The *employment* section indicated an overall composite of 3.26 for VRB North and 3.04 for VRB South. The ratings *for involvement in choosing their vocational goal with their counselors* were 3.16 for VRB North and in the South, it was 3.08.

**Office of Business Development (OBD):** Mr. Woodward, OBD Director, shared the **OBD Program Report**. In 10/2022, OBD hosted their first in-person **job fair**, since Covid, at the Mississippi Ag Museum in Jackson. Mr. Woodward discussed efforts to inform schools, colleges, and counselors of OBD's objectives. Thirty businesses participated and 200-300 people attended the job fair. About 50-60 jobs were offered on job fair day and 50-60 anticipated. Some Project Search teachers and students attended the job fair and a company in Gluckstadt, MS said they would hire every Project Student as soon as they could reach them. Seven to eight job fairs are planned for next year with one planned for Southaven in January. Job fairs are planned for Jackson, Tupelo, Meridian, Hattiesburg, and the Gulf Coast. OBD sponsored and hosted a '**lunch and learn**' at Jackson State University (JSU). OBD contacted three businesses to sponsor a lunch and speak to the students. The **Job Extravaganza** was held 11/30/22. The Institute for Disability Studies (IDS) hosted an event and attracted 15 businesses. This was an exploration event to help students participate in a job function. Biloxi High School contacted OBD about the **IDS Program** and is interested in an event. Plans are being discussed to expand the program. OBD communicates the **monthly virtual employment information meetings** via Teams which allow attendees, including staff, to learn about different businesses.

**SRC Reporting:** The SRC Annual Report, due 12/31/22, includes SRC activities and a summary of all SRC meetings. SRC members will receive an email to review the Annual Report. The final report will be submitted to RSA, the Governor, the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils, and it will be uploaded on the MDRS website.

**Inviting Councils to SRC Meetings:** Ms. Meruvia discussed with SRC members about inviting the **DB Council** to the next SRC meeting on March 10, 2023, at the Madison Office Complex.

### **Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities December 2022 Quarterly Meeting**

**Chair Selection:** Ms. Meruvia shared the process for nominating a SRC chairperson for 2023. She encouraged everyone to respond to the request for nominations, especially during the election on the ballot, to determine and select the chairperson for 2023. A link was submitted to SRC members to complete for **Chairperson nominations**.

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

**Nomination Committee** - Mr. Brown noted the **remaining positions** which include one position in the Business Labor Industry and one within the disability classification. Mr. Brown discussed the application for nomination for SRC and the need to have a pool as vacancies occur. Ms. Meruvia informed attendees that the nominations form is available on the MDRS website (Boards and Council tab) and encouraged virtual attendees who are recipients of services to also submit a nomination form.

**Budget Committee:** Ms. Treadway was unable to attend the meeting; therefore, the budget report was planned to be presented at the next quarterly meeting.

**Bylaws Committee:** Mr. Diaz commented that the date to **review the bylaws again remains pending**. Ms. Meruvia added that 12/9/22 is the **projected date that MDRS technical staff can meet**. Discussions were held with attorneys to hear the legal viewpoint, as well as state law standpoint, to see if the bylaws are to be amended because of the changes made due to Covid. The meetings were to ensure the bylaws abided by state law with focus on records management, records retention, recorded meetings, virtual meetings, and how meetings are carried out with the SRC members attending virtually. In relationship to coordinating with other councils and the bylaws, Mr. Butler discussed the **SRC not obtaining reporting from other councils**.

**Project Search:** Mr. Butler inquired into Project Search. On 12/1/22, Mr. Butler visited with Baptist to speak to interns about internships. Mr. Butler toured several departments including physical therapy and Chick-Fil-A. Project Search has a 75% success rate after internship with many hired after completing internships. Mr. Butler plans to tour the University of Mississippi Medical Center before the next SRC meeting.

**Compensation:** Mr. Bishop discussed Mr. Howard (Executive Director-MDRS) having the ability to do an **inline adjustment** of up to 10% of an employee's salary (focusing on the counselor's job class). The MDRS counselor's starting salary is about \$34,000 and many counselors have a master's degree. He said Mr. Howard had already completed a 10% adjustment - half in July and half in November. In July 2023, if funds are available, they will achieve another 10% adjustment. Mr. Butler inquired about the **counselor's pay in neighboring states**. Discussions concluded that the pay is higher in the Southeast region, areas outside the Southeast and, nationally, the average pay is higher.

### **❖ Formal SRC Input: Responses to Questionnaires - December 2022 Meeting**

**Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?**

- *A lot of what I am seeing/hearing that is affecting the service delivery process starts with the MDRS employee (Counselor). Until things in-house are dealt with or addressed, then and only then will we see improvements in the service delivery process.*
- *Reported outcomes indicate success.*
- *The extent, scope, and the effectiveness of the services provided by VR/VRB seem to be working towards enhancing the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving an employment outcome.*

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

- *I think it is going to be helpful toward long term employment and success for the client.*
- *On December 1, 2022, I visited with staff and interns with Project Search at Baptist Hospital. Project Search appears to be a very successful model in finding jobs for people with disabilities. SRC Board members need specific information about the “Best Practices” employment models such as Project Search.*
- *None.*
- *I liked how a person gets credit for obtaining their specific goal each step of the way.*

**Q2: Having heard this quarter’s report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?**

- *A lot of what I am seeing/hearing that is affecting the service delivery process starts with the MDRS employee (Counselor). Until things in-house are dealt with or addressed, then and only then will we see improvements in the service delivery process.*
- *Reports indicate satisfaction.*
- *After listening to the consumer satisfaction survey, consumers seem to be mostly satisfied with the services provided towards achieving an employment outcome.*
- *Keep up the great work.*
- *Reports indicated a high degree of consumer satisfaction.*
- *No.*
- *Sounds good this quarter.*

**Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have in regards to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?**

- *None.*
- *Agree with not having a financial needs analysis.*
- *No comment.*
- *I would like to see a priority on great customer service.*
- *Mr. Bishop supported on the 10% salary increase for VR counselors to be effective during FY 2023. This is good for the MS VR program because it lags behind in VR salaries throughout the South East Region, as it appears. Please continue to support VR counselors by providing incentives and bench marks recruit and retain qualified counselors.*
- *None.*
- *No comment.*

**Q4: The following questions pertains to the Presentation of Information on Policy. Do you have any comments or recommendations concerning the presentation on the Financial Needs Analysis or Structured Discovery?**

- *No.*
- *I hope to see structured discovery in operation soon. It will be beneficial to citizens who are blind or visually impaired.*

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

- *The financial needs analysis needs to be canceled when it affects the services provided to people with disabilities to either obtain or maintain employment. Structured discovery is needed to provide consumers with an informed choice of services that may be more beneficial to a successful employment outcome.*
- *No. I agree with the action that is being taken.*
- *It would be good to periodically invite VR direct service personnel to share their activities and successors, e.g., Shay Jackson Baptist Hospital (Project Search) on the job placement counselors. Perhaps the SRC could have a meeting at one of the 13 Project Search sites. I would also like to visit one of the 10 AbilityWorks sites to see what they do to prepare people for successful employment. Perhaps they could host a meeting.*
- *It would be useful to have a 1 hour orientation for new members to familiarize them with the "system."*
- *This deals with having other agencies come in to educate SRC on how they serve the clients in Mississippi. Therefore, we can refer people to each other to serve that individual better.*

### **March 10, 2023 Meeting**

**Public Comments:** Ms. Meruvia informed attendees there were no public comments and no public attendees.

**MDRS Executive Director Report:** Mr. Bishop, Director Workforce Development, discussed the **MDRS budget**, and the **legislation** is looking favorable. The representative in the Pass Christian area, Ms. Carolyn Crawford, introduced **HB1048** proposing each public building under the power and control of the state have at least one restroom facility with an adult changing station. Upon approval, MDRS will be the state agency to oversee and ensure this is being completed statewide. Mr. Butler commented that it would be beneficial if the **Mississippi Retirees Association (MRA)** would provide the recruitment or HR personnel with information about state retirement benefits. If needed, Mr. Butler would also speak with the MRA board to assist with getting the retirement information so MDRS could incorporate this information into the recruitment process. Mr. Bishop will follow up with MRA to determine what information is provided and may have HR follow up with Mr. Butler to assist with this process.

**Client Assistance Program (CAP):** Mr. McGinn, CAP Director, presented the **CAP summary** report with no new cases reported this quarter. CAP has scheduled three speaking engagements at the **MDRS district monthly meetings** to educate new and existing counselors about the Client Assistance Program. Mr. McGinn stated that more than half of the calls have been for the MDHS MSCAP program. He discussed issues regarding water draining from the roof onto the ramp (which may cause slips) located at the Gluckstadt office (located inside the WIN Job Center). Mr. McGinn commented that it is not a MDRS/WIN Job Center that caused this but about educating *on how* to divert it. In addition, Mr. McGinn attended three **Disability Awareness** days at the State Capitol to educate the legislature, multiple **SEAP** and **MSBIA** meetings, **Trans-con** (area transportation) meeting, **ADA** council meeting, and the **Independent Living (IL) Waiver** meeting. 950 CAP brochures were distributed, 75 CAP business cards, and obtained 123 **information and referrals** this quarter.

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

**Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC):** Mr. McGinn discussed the SILC meeting and the 'black tie' event to raise funds. The Capitol Police visited the LIFE office regarding education on law enforcement conduct on individuals with disabilities. The Capitol Police will set up training.

**Due Process Hearing:** There were no due process hearings for October, November, December, January, or February.

**OVR Program:** Ms. Hart discussed the **VR management report**, comprised of annual goals and percentages achieved for VR Districts 1-10. The report showed VR is progressing to accomplish the **MSG**. The VR goal for **closed rehab** is 2,300 and 1,617 have been closed which is 70%. The **IPE** goal was 5,202 and the total number of IPEs completed was 2,755 (53%). VR does not get credit for closed rehabilitation until a client has been employed for six to twelve months post closed rehab. The preparation of preparing clients for job-readiness and vocational training, if they are to attend a college or university, is important for clients to reach their goal.

**OVRB Program:** Ms. Young presented updates on **transportation** and has remained in contact with MDOT. Ms. Young discussed the March 8<sup>th</sup> meeting which was to inform MDOT of consumer issues relating to transportation needs and to better coordinate transportation options. **Mobility Managers** are listed for different areas and will coordinate transportation services. The updated provider list of transportation services will be sent to SRC members and OVR/OVRB Counselors. The provider list will be mailed to clients in service status and advocacy groups in the community. She discussed MDOT possibly coming to the next SRC meeting to discuss the new transportation system. Ms. Treadway shared concerns regarding transportation issues in Desoto County. Ms. Young discussed the new **structured discovery** facility to be opened in Long Beach, MS. The second type of personal adjustment training is called structured discovery training with training from 6-9 months. Establishing the **Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP)** as an added OVRB goal was reflected in the state plan. The **staff handbook** is completed and consumers will reside in their apartments while in training. The **draft flyer** will be distributed to OVRB consumers when approved by the executive director. The projected date for opening is 7/15/23 and the first class is planned to start 8/1/23. The executive director will make the decision of the date the facility will open in July. The **Moving the Needle** document was presented, which included the OVRB total number of consumers served, employment outcomes, training-Measurable Skills Gains (MSG), and the average hourly wage data. In 2023, OVRB closed rehabilitated 574 consumers rehabilitated with an average of \$11.43 an hour. Currently there are 172 consumers closed rehabilitated and the average hourly wage is \$18.46. A total of 45 consumers have received an MSG as of 02/28/2023.

### **Consumer Satisfaction Review:**

— The **Consumer Satisfaction Survey** for VR was presented by Mr. Fairley. This survey (rated on a scale of 1-5 with '5' being *very good*) resulted in a rating of 4.83 (225 consumers responded) for help the consumer received at the time applied for VR services; help received from planning services resulted in a rating of 4.77 (226 consumers responded); help from staff when receiving VR services resulted in a rating of 4.80 based on 224 surveyed; help received from other agencies or service providers resulted in a rating of 4.58 with 36 consumers surveyed; employment outcomes resulted in 4.71 rating with 171 consumers responding; employment benefits resulted in a rating of 4.06 with 101 consumers responding; overall rating for services received was an average rating of 4.76 with 227 consumers responding.

**Consumer Satisfaction Survey discussion inquiries:** Mr. Brown inquired as to when the survey was being conducted with the response of “after case closure”. Ms. Meruvia asked if Wolfgang Frese could provide a one-page summary or description of the survey. Ms. Hart informed attendees of the introduction to the summary which is found on page two.

- The **Program Evaluation Survey**, presented by Ms. Rushing, was comprised of OVR District 1 and 2. Of the 493 active consumers, the Program Integrity Unit reached 179 consumers in District 1, of which 24 were in *employed* status. Program Integrity was able to reach 223 consumers (out of 433 active consumers) in District 2, of which 54 were *employed* status. The **service section composite average** indicated an overall satisfaction of 2.89 (District 1) and 3.15 (District 2). A significant number of consumers were not satisfied (D1) with services due to consumer reports of misunderstanding of **expectations and services due to poor communication** received from the district office. The survey results indicated that the majority of those in D2 were satisfied with the services received. The overall composite weighted averages in the **employment section** were 3.33 (D1) and 3.20 (D2) which indicated that the employed consumers were satisfied with employment.

The **Consumer Satisfaction Survey** results indicated a significant number of consumers in District 1 were dissatisfied with their services. Every effort should be made to **improve consumer involvement, communication, and timely provision of planned services**. Ms. Rushing will have the auditors capture more specific information when asking the questions and include the comments received from the clients.

***Survey Results Discussions (Consumer Satisfaction Survey and Program Evaluation Survey):***

Ms. Meruvia inquired into both surveys being on the same **rating scale**; Ms. Rushing will explore this option. Consumer dissatisfaction was explored further. Ms. Rushing responded that it was due to consumers’ misunderstanding of expectations and services which was because of poor communication – which could be due to a specific issue or turnover. Ms. Hart discussed **consumer harassment and verbal abuse** towards staff and commented that they are trying to determine how **issues are addressed in the policy and procedures to provide staff guidance**. Mr. Butler discussed having a 1 to 2 question **questionnaire** to determine how the responses compare to the Consumer Satisfaction Survey and/or the Program Integrity Survey. Ms. Meruvia discussed the **external evaluation** which includes the inquiry into how the consumer’s life has changed after receiving vocational rehabilitation services. Ms. Rushing is open to suggestions from the board if questions need to be edited or added. Ms. Nash inquired about **customer service training**. Ms. Young added this will be covered at the manager’s month-end meeting. Ms. Hart added that customer service is an integral part of training to help staff communicate better, provide good customer service, and teach them how to handle situations. Mr. Bishop added that the survey process will be reviewed and are willing to make changes if the committee prefers.

- **Safety:** Mr. Bishop discussed the **high priority** of safety of staff, offices, and lobby areas. The HR Department will have customer service training soon; safety and individual issues will be addressed.

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- **SARA:** Ms. Treadway discussed the time spent explaining **SARA messages** and parents do not understand SARA. Ms. Hart responded that the client is supposed to agree to accept SARA and the counselor is provide a detailed explanation of SARA. Ms. Hart will reiterate this to the staff to provide a **detailed explanation of SARA**. Mr. Bishop added that they will **review the benefits of SARA** at the time the contract is near expiration.
- Ms. Meruvia requested comments from the SRC regarding the **Consumer Satisfaction Survey or the Program Integrity Survey process**. Mr. Brown requested **specific comments regarding the Program Integrity Survey** in relation to the *misunderstanding of expectations and services which the client felt was poor communication*. Mr. Brown discussed identifying the miscommunication issue and documenting that the auditor contacted the staff to handle the situation.

**Office of Business Development (OBD):** Mr. Woodward discussed the process of working with businesses in the community and education on building relationships to connect clients to employment opportunities. A **job fair in Meridian** will be held next week and last month a **job fair was held in Southaven** (37 employers participated) with a waiting list with 15 employers. **Job fairs in Jackson, Tupelo, and the Gulf Coast** will be held next fall. Mr. Woodward discussed that they are trying to obtain opportunities for **internships** and exposure to businesses and interviewing. In April 2023, OBD will host a **Disability Awareness** event at the MS Braves Stadium which will be open to families, independent living, and vocational rehabilitation consumers. Booths and information will be provided for outreach. Mr. Howard will present a video for this fun event. **Virtual workforce tours**, which are live, were improved with better video equipment. They started free virtual tours and will also be available on YouTube channel and open to the public. Mr. Woodward will share the link to the first video at Wade Incorporated in the Delta. **Spotlight luncheons** were held which consisted of visitations to various colleges and speaking to disability support coordinators. Inquiries into the college's top three career goals were made, sourcing of employers, invitations to employers to the colleges, and a luncheon is hosted to provide employers with a chance to speak to students. Currently, luncheons are scheduled at Mississippi State University, University of Southern Mississippi, Pearl River College, and Jones College. Sixteen luncheons are scheduled this year. The **Job Extravaganza**, a person-centered career exploration event for students, is in its pilot phase. This event will provide students with an opportunity to practice doing various jobs to try-out the job.

**Project Search:** Ms. Culpepper presented the **Project Search** program and shared the various location sites. **Recruitment** is the focus because they have existing sites that are not up to capacity. They are considering the **addition of more school districts** to the sites. **North Mississippi Health Services** has a satellite program and will have four sites on the coast. Currently they have all three **Singing River Hospitals** and the **Keesler Air Force Base**. The **curriculum**, derived from the lesson plans, was received from the national and 25 instructors from all over the world. This curriculum is used to get the interns ready, not only for Project Search, but to work independently. The new **alternative diploma** is being discussed to be counted with a proposition that students beginning in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade take all their core courses and Project Search the 12th grade year. Many businesses have changed the qualifications of those who have the diploma, GED, or who are a Project Search graduate. Discussions are anticipated for consideration of bringing back the **occupational diploma**. Ms. Junkin discussed the possibility of asking MDE how many students have received the alternative diploma in the last three years. Conversations

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

about the alternative diploma should be happening sooner, at age 14 due to it is hard for students with an intellectual disability ruling to obtain the alternate diploma in two to three years. Many students could obtain this diploma, but it is not utilized or implemented appropriately.

**Financial Need Analysis:** Ms. Hart discussed suspension of the **Financial Needs Analysis**, effective January 1 because funds are available and need to serve as many consumers as they can. The FNA was a topic at the last SRC meeting. A copy of the document and the memo was submitted was shared with the SRC group.

**SRC upcoming meeting discussions:** Ms. Treadway discussed the **AT Conference** scheduled for June 15th – June 16<sup>th</sup> at the Sheraton. The possibilities are combining the AT Conference with the next SRC meeting was discussed. Other possibilities of having the SRC meeting in Desoto County and to visit the Arc was an option. Discussions were held regarding the SRC meeting to be in Hattiesburg in October and combined with **RAM** (to be held October 4-6). Ms. Meruvia discussed moving the meeting location to have more attendees from the public. Ms. Young informed everyone that letters are mailed, monthly, to every client in service status informing them of the meetings.

### **Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities March 2023 Quarterly Meeting**

**Chair Selection:** Ms. Meruvia asked for the **nomination survey** to be submitted to SRC members to nominate a Vice Chair.

**Nomination Committee:** Mr. Brown stated the **bylaws** referenced having at least **15 people** on the SRC. Mr. Brown shared the **remaining positions** which include one position within the business, industry, and labor and one within the disability classification. Mr. Brown discussed Pat Fountain which was recommended by Ms. Young for business, industry, and labor. Mr. Fountain was sent the nomination form but has not returned the form. Roger Bullock, recommended by Johnny McGinn, is a part of the Special Education Advisory, Life of Mississippi, and Project Start. Mr. Bullock's nomination form was received. Mr. Brown recommended sending all three nominations to the governor at one time. **Amanda Richmond-Johnson was recommended and has been approved in a previous meeting. All were in favor of Roger Bullock and Pat Fountain's nominations.** Ms. Meruvia recommended inviting the three nominees to future SRC meetings. Members were encouraged to continue sending in **nomination forms**. Discussions of **orientation of new SRC members included:** a one-day orientation for new SRC members to know their roles and functions; orientation of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council; the Technical Assistance Center which has a webinar could contribute to this orientation. Ms. Hart discussed having an orientation section discussed in the bylaws that members could utilize for a resource.

**Budget Committee:** The **budget and expenses** are divided into **4 categories** which include travel, contractual, commodities, and SL&G. \$750.00 has been budgeted for MDRS employees for travel and there are no expenditures in this category. Contractual expenses include fees for a speaker, mileage, rentals, lodging, freight postage, shipping, registration fees, conferences, sponsorships, printing charges, etc. for non-employees. A total of \$10,000 has been budgeted and \$1,562.15 has been spent in this category. Commodity expenses include general office supplies, meeting food, chairs, and other furniture



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not classified as equipment, fuel, etc. A total of \$1,500.00 is budgeted and \$562.74 has been expended. A total of \$12,000 is budgeted for the SL&G category which covers the consumer survey fees, SPAHRS, transfers, bank fees, and other types of uncommon charges and a total of \$15,862.33 has been spent in this category. It was discussed to adjust the amount to a more appropriate amount. Ms. Treadway recommended to make a motion to increase the SL&G category to \$17,000.00. It was agreed to **increase the SL&G category to \$20,000.00.**

**Bylaws Committee:** Ms. Hart shared the discussion of the Bylaws Committee, which met on two occasions to **address SRC virtual meetings** in the bylaws. **Restructuring the bylaws** to be more user-friendly was discussed. The **Open Meeting Act** addresses video conferencing or teleconferencing and recommendations were made to revise the SRC Bylaws regarding amendments to include meeting procedures which state the SRC may conduct scheduled meetings via teleconference or video. The SRC shall meet a minimum of four (4) times per year at times and places designated by the Chairperson upon ten (10) days written notice to the members, including meetings held in person, video, or teleconference; Special meetings may be called by the Chairperson and these meetings may be held in person, video, or teleconference at the Chairperson's discretion; minutes of a meeting conducted by teleconference or video means shall comply with 25-41-5 - **Official Meetings of Public Bodies**; a quorum of a public body may be at different locations for the purpose of conducting a meeting through teleconference or video means provided that the equipment used is located at the place where the public body normally meets or at a public location specified in any notice of a special meeting and provided that the equipment allows all members of the public body and members of the public who attend the meeting to hear the deliberations of the public body; votes taken during any meeting conducted through teleconference or video means shall be taken in a manner that is clearly audible or visible to all members of the public body and to members of the public present at the public location; recommendations made to provide a link on the public website for access to the SRC attachments; follow-up will be made to Jennifer Millsaps to determine if the documents that are being sent to the SRC members via email can be placed on the website along with the public notice; Ms. Meruvia will send Ms. Hart the **codes of conduct** information which will be reviewed and presented to the SRC members to determine if this information should be added to the bylaws. The bylaws state SRC members will receive the **agenda a week prior** to meetings. A **tour of Sephora and AbilityWorks** with lunch being held at the Arc could also be included.

**SRC Annual Report:** The SRC Annual Report can be found on the **MDRS website** which captures all the quarterly meetings and responses from questionnaires. SRC members were encouraged to share the report with their local contacts and were informed that they would receive a copy. Ms. Meruvia discussed the minutes are summarized for the annual report and submitted to the governor, the public, and to the Rehabilitation Services Administration. The comments submitted on the surveys are inserted verbatim into the report.

**Orientation Committee:** Ms. Young discussed **OVRB's new employee orientation process** whereas employees get an opportunity to visit other departments. The recommendation was made to establish an **Orientation Committee**; work with Ms. Hart and Ms. Young to initiate the orientation process; inclusion of SRC members in this orientation; and adding Mr. Butler to the agenda to discuss the new orientation process. Ms. Hart, Ms. Young, and Mr. Butler will meet prior to the next SRC meeting to **discuss the orientation process.**

**Compensation Reporting:** Mr. Bishop discussed **changes with the state personnel board** regarding salaries. There was an **adjustment of job classes and job classes** were renamed. Each agency can raise the salary or job class by 10% if the budget allows it. MDRS has been looking at all salaries but are focusing OSDP, VR, VRB and DDS counselors' salary. In the last year, the job class received a 10% increase, and the goal is to raise the salary to \$40,000. It is projected that it will take another 1.5 years of salary increases to get the counselors to \$40,000 and once this goal is met, it will shift to giving performance raises. Increasing the **counselor assistants' salary** is also under review.

**Training:** Ms. Meruvia commented that **Technical Assistance Training** helps SRC members understand the SRC functions and roles. The link is on previous agendas. The **National Coalition** will have an in-person training in April. Ms. Meruvia discussed the possibility of having some SRC members attend the weekend training and, if interested, consider the budget for that category.

### ❖ **Formal SRC Input: Responses to Questionnaires - March 2023 Meeting**

**Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?**

- *VR/VRB are going to have training to help all counselors get the understanding they need to become successful.*
- *The effectiveness of the services provided appears to be obtaining results necessary to assist individuals achieve employment.*
- *More collaboration needed with MDRS/VR partners or external stakeholders like Dept of Mental Health about VR requirements.*
- *None at this time.*
- *It seems the services provided and the functions performed by the Designated State Unit have a positive effect enhancing the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving an employment outcome.*

**Q2: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?**

- *We as SRC are looking at asking different questions to the consumer. The SRC will talk more to get the questions together.*
- *The surveys support that the consumers are satisfied with services provided.*
- *Comprise surveys to Clients requesting open - ended (yes or no) responses. Also ask for feedback as to why they gave specific responses.*
- *None at this time*
- *According to the consumer satisfaction survey, the service delivery process is effective in most cases.*

**Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have in regards to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?**

- *I can't wait to see VRB open on the coast to see the transition that will happen.*
- *The VR/VRB programs appear to be meeting their objectives based on the goals and priorities established.*
- *Along with feedback from Clients about services, I thank the agency for requesting feedback from state employees as well about services, which is vital also.*
- *None at this time*
- *No comment*

***Presentation of Information on Policy***

**Q4: Do you have any comments or recommendations concerning the presentation on the Financial Needs Analysis?**

- *I liked the presentation that was shown today (Project Search).*
- *The presentation was informative and very well presented.*
- *Not at this time.*
- *No.*
- *The financial needs analysis for individuals with disability needs to be terminated.*

**June 14, 2023 Meeting**

Discussions and suggestions were held regarding the **invitations of other councils** such as the Developmental Disabilities Council, DD Council, Department of Education, Transition Coordination Team, Special Education Advisory Panel, Bureau of Intellectual Development Disability, Workforce Development Unified State Plan Group representative, and/or a Transportation Board representative.

**Public Comment:** A **public comment was received** from Sandra Wells of Hollandale, MS in May 2023. Ms. Wells stated that students at Simmons High School deserve to receive services that coincide with their age and last school term, MDRS in Greenville failed to do what is best for students. Ms. Wells **filed two complaints** against one of the staff for failing to do what was best for the students and did not get a response from the agency. On May 20, interactive training was held. Ms. Wells stated that if the school was predominantly white, it would have had different results and asked for more transparency for the 2023-2024 school year so students receive services they richly deserve from MDRS. Ms. Meruvia informed Ms. Wells the VR/VRB Directors were in attendance and Ms. Hart informed Ms. Wells that she would contact her.

**MDRS Executive Director Report:** Mr. Howard provided an overview of **Project Search**. There were 18 sites this past year with approximately 70 young adults served. Graduations were held in May and about 80% have obtained employment. Next year they will expand to 22 sites and hope to have 10-12 young adults per site. Mr. Howard plans to **discuss priorities** at the next SRC meeting. Meetings have taken place with the VRB Director, Office of Special Disability Programs (OSDP), and Disability Determination Services (DDS) to discuss priorities for next year to meet the goals. Ms. Hart is meeting today to **discuss VR/VRB**

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**priorities** during the next SRC meeting. Mr. Howard is working with the governor's office to redesignate the **Client Assistance Program** and as soon as the governor releases it, Ms. Meruvia will be informed.

**Client Assistance Program (CAP): Outreach activities** were provided: speaking engagement at four MDRS Districts monthly meetings, spoke with the hard of hearing counselors, counselor assistants, ILB counselors, and had a speaking engagement at Addie McBryde, and attended multiple SEAP and MSBIA meetings. Brochures and business cards were distributed. CAP had 109 information and referrals this quarter, two new cases, and another reopened case this quarter. Comments were made regarding the **MDRS website numbers**: If retrieving the county or the zip code, the 1-800 number is provided instead of the district office number and if the 1-800 number is called, it only rings and it was recommended to list the local number to district offices. Ms. Hart followed shared that the new numbers listed on the website are the **1-800 numbers** that are directed to the main district office. Testing revealed there were no issues. Ms. Hart mentioned by listing the 1-800 number, if someone calls the district office, they will be directed to the appropriate number. Ms. Young (VRB) shared that the VRB 1-800 number rings to a designated individual and this designated person directs staff to the appropriate office and, if the VRB designated staff is out of the office, the phone rolls over to the assigned staff at the Madison office. SRC was informed all the 1-800 numbers have voice mail access.

**Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC):** The SILC report was not provided. Ms. Meruvia informed attendees that SILC's next meeting is scheduled for the week of June 19 – June 23.

**OVR Due Process Hearings (last quarter):** Ms. Hart reported **no due process hearings** for last quarter. However, they have had a **mediation process**. Attorney Sherry Johnson, previously with MDRS, assisted with leading Ms. Hart to find a qualified mediator and will provide an update on her first mediation at the next SRC meeting. The hearing officer and qualified mediator are two separate processes and the **law is different**. Ms. Hart discussed the **policy and procedures** that will be developed according to the federal guidelines. Ms. Meruvia commented that a function of the SRC members is to review the **impartial hearings officers' contracts** and discussed making this an agenda item to inform the SRC members of the impartial hearing officers. Ms. Meruvia requested Excellanxt submitting a copy of the **law in relation to the SRC and the regulations** to the SRC members. Ms. Meruvia added that in the past a **notebook, containing the minutes**, was provided to reference the guidance documents to inform SRC members of their functions.

**OVR Program:** Ms. Hart discussed the **VR Management Reports** which included a Successful Rehab by District, Individualized Plan for Employment (IPEs) by District, and the Potentially Eligible and Transition Students. The **OVR totals, 7/1/22-5/31/23**, were reviewed for: VR Case Type, PE Case Type, VR Case Type by Region/District, and PE Case Type by Region/District reports. The IPE goal for VR/VRB was 4,500 but in terms of goals for the counselors, VR aimed higher and set their goal at 5,202. As of 5/31/23, 4,008 (77%) IPEs have been developed; Closed Rehabilitated Goal was 2,300; currently closed 2,180 (95%) cases successfully; 1,760 active potentially eligible cases (student referrals); 2,315 clients served; 1,560 active transition cases; and 1,886 transition students were served. Ms. Hart attended the **National Technical Assistance Transition Conference** with the Transition Team and met with the **Mississippi Department of Education (MDE)** representative to discuss ways of increasing the transition number. Ms. Junkin, MS Parent Training & Information Center, provided additional details about the conference, which is to **assist with**

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

creating an interagency coordinating council around transition and post-secondary transition. Many students do not receive transition services and are sometimes introduced to this service a short time before graduation. A coordinated effort is needed to ensure every student receives the same information due to some parents not being aware that there is not a coordinated plan, IEP, or a 504 plan that follows the students when they transition to post-secondary education. This training provided assistance with identifying weaknesses and how to improve **networking capacities within agencies** at the school level. Ms. Hart shared that MDE was open about the difficulties counselors encounter getting into the schools. Local teams are needed in these areas and family input is needed to determine the discovery process and possibilities post high school. Mr. Bower discussed **utilizing peer mentors** who have experienced various programs to share feedback. Ms. Junkin discussed coordinating the delivery of the program and Mr. Bower informed attendees, in their program, each peer mentor works with students that attend their school. Discussion of parents needing to receive services on a consistent basis, not just in January or the last year of school.

**OVRB Program:** Updates were provided on **transportation services** and the upcoming transportation conference to be held in July 2023 in Jackson, MS. The **Structured Discovery Center** diagram was shared with the SRC. Classes will consist of braille; techniques of daily living/kitchen, orientation/mobility (O&M); and a communications class and training will last 6-9 months. Ms. Young will submit the diagram and itemized costs (\$168,000) to **RSA** to determine whether she can proceed with ordering equipment/furniture.

**Structured Discovery** will be completed under **sleep shades**. SRC will be invited to tour the facility upon opening. Bullock inquired if the structured discovery facility will serve VA clients and Ms. Young answered if they are a client, yes. The center will not open in July. Ms. Young discussed the **VRB reporting** which consisted of total consumers served, employment outcomes, and an average hourly wage data report. OVRB has served 1,707 consumers and closed 245 cases. The average hourly wage is \$18.11 and 57 individuals have received a **Measurable Skills Gains (MSG)**. Staff contacted clients in employed status to obtain **wage verifications** to close cases rehabilitated. Issues with obtaining wage verifications continue. Ms. Young and Ms. Hart scheduled a meeting to arrive at different strategies to make it easier to **close cases**. Ms. Meruvia suggested the clients sign a **consent form** during the IPE process to obtain their wages. Ms. Hart shared that **verification of wages** has been added to the OVRB application; however, some cases were already opened prior to it being added so these clients have already moved through the IPE process. Ms. Hart discussed the guidance that was previously sent on obtaining check stubs, but the **law is written for unemployed clients**. The majority of OVRB clients who come into the agency are already employed, some do not have the start date, or do not want the employer to be contacted. One alternative is to retrieve the wage verification and though it goes back one quarter, the client can be documented as working in the previous quarter. To obtain credit for closed rehabilitated, clients must work the first and fourth quarter due to WIOA being informed if the client-maintained employment. Currently, ten students are in the **MS National Federation of the Blind (NFB) Peer Mentoring Program** and students recently participated in the NFB weekend retreat. Students will also have an opportunity to travel to Houston to the **NFB National Convention**. Ms. Young informed attendees the **CWIC grant** has been renewed and she will provide more training for her staff.

**Consumer Satisfaction Review:**

- **Consumer Satisfaction Survey:** Mr. Fairley provided the **consumer satisfaction survey summary**. Each item was rated on a scale of 1 to 5 with '1' being very bad and '5' being very good. The rating for help the VR staff provided at the time applied for services was an average rating of 4.62; VR staff provided services during planning for services was 4.62; VR staff help when receiving VR services was 4.71; and help received from other agencies or service providers was an average rating of 4.38. The employment outcome rating was 4.47 and employment benefits rating was 4.06. Overall services rated an average of 4.70. A new consumer satisfaction report is completed each quarter and is completed via the telephone for consumers whose cases have closed.
  
- **Program Evaluation Survey:** Ms. Rushing provided a summary of OVR District 3 and 4. The Program Integrity Unit attempts to call all cases in service and employed status. In District 3, 180 consumers were reached (out of 535 active consumers) and 34 were in employed status. District 4, they reached 234 consumers (out of the 637 active consumers) of which 22 were in employed status. A summary of the findings for consumers that are in service, meaning they have not entered employment status, was an overall satisfaction of 3.10 in District 3 and 3.31 in District 4. This indicates that most of the consumers in service status were satisfied with services overall. The employment section had overall composite weighted averages of 3.56 District 3 and 3.32 in District 4 indicating employed consumers were satisfied with employment. The rating for services received was 3.07 (lowest rating/District 3) and the rating for District 4 was 3.31.
  
- **Survey Results Discussion:** Ms. Junkin inquired into how many consumers surveyed have an **intellectual disability** and may or may not be able to accurately answer the survey questions. Ms. Rushing informed attendees, these consumers typically fall under the supported employment cases and will provide the number of cases later. Ms. Rushing explained if there is a **designated representative**, they try to speak to the client and the representative at the same time to ensure the client understands. To **clarify their role** to further explain consumer satisfaction, what it entails and the purpose of program integrity, Ms. Rushing plans to send an email to the district managers and deputy managers to inform the district managers about the consumer satisfaction survey and its purpose and inform staff of the Wolfgang Frese Survey. Discussions were shared relating to the **review of the questions used to measure consumer satisfaction** and Ms. Meruvia discussed having a **committee** to review the consumer satisfaction questions.

**Office of Business Development (OBD):** Mr. Woodward presented the **OBD Program report** and a snapshot of OBD's services and how it is applied to the VR process. The OBD team is in the community networking with businesses to make connections for employment opportunities and communicating to businesses the value of clients. When clients are working through the counseling process, the client will eventually move towards job placement and the OBD staff will assist with finding employment. OBD discussed several **job fairs** around the state as people are exiting high school/college and are looking for employment. OBD has had two job fairs since the last SRC meeting; three job fairs (Jackson, Southaven, and Gulf Coast); a job fair in Meridian which consisted of about 18-20 businesses with attendance of 50-100 people with 15-20% received job offers; and a job fair in Hattiesburg with about 20 businesses and about 100 in attendance and 15% receiving offers. **OBD's goal** is to have at least seven smaller job fairs and three large job fairs next year with the goal of having job fairs in the Delta, Brookhaven, McComb,

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Meridian, and possibly Tupelo and Corinth (employers are aware these job fairs are for individuals with disabilities). The job fairs are for all clients and when dates are set, the businesses, schools, and counselors are informed. **Informational meetings** are held via Teams for involvement. Ms. Junkin offered the suggestion of the assistance of **MSPTI** with getting parents involved, providing information about MDRS/OBD, and how the child might benefit from services in the future. This could be done by submitting **job fair information to the parents** via social media and/or via newsletter. OBD provides placards to businesses to inform attendees whether the businesses are looking for internships, hiring part-time or full-time, etc.. With the **summer youth formal experience program**, OBD's goal is to place these students in either job shadowing, or a career exploration type program, or place them in a job to obtain experience. OBD's goal is to receive 15-20 referrals per district and are looking to place around **200 interns in employment this summer**. OBD has **partnered with MS Braves** and were offered employment opportunities that will consist of clients interning at every home game (partnered with Pearl High School). Ms. Junkin requested information to be provided to the **parent groups** this fall (upcoming parent group is in September). Mr. Woodward agreed to provide information and, with adequate notice, staff in those areas could attend. Ms. Junkin discussed the **Rosedale Freedom Project (has IEP bootcamps)** with parents, and she will inform VR/VRB/OBD when the bootcamps will be held so the agency can provide information to the parents or have counselors in the area attend. Ms. Junkin commented on the advantages of the web platform and how it can be used to inform parents of VR services. The agency can complete a series via Zoom, and they will advertise it on their web platform. **MSPTI is a part of the Regional RSA PTI** which could also be a component of the series. **Benefits planning** and the importance of informing families were discussed.

**Financial Need Analysis Report:** Ms. Hart discussed the Financial Needs Analysis (**FNA**) which was **suspended January 1, 2023 to end on June 30, 2023**. All priority categories are open and there are sufficient funds to continue with the suspension. Inquiries were made into **recommendations to continue suspension**. The FNA memo outlines what services do not require a FNA under the suspension. Under the suspension clients are not required to share the cost of tuition, housing, and meals for academic training at a college or university, computers, software, hearing aids, home modifications, vehicle modifications, services to family members and post-employment services. Ms. Meruvia is in **favor of not requiring a FNA if the agency has funds available** due to individuals with disabilities incur a lot of expenses and if services are needs-based, individuals may try to limit their wages to meet the requirements. All SRC members were in favor of continuing **with the FNA suspension** for another six months.

**Additional:** Ms. Meruvia discussed **VR/VRB prioritizing staff or support** to the SRC during all quarters to ensure all action items are completed. If the SRC budget needs to allocate a certain percentage of the staff members' salary, it would be reasonable. The next SRC meeting will be on October 4, 2023, in coordination with the **Rehabilitation Association of Mississippi Conference (RAM)**. Ms. Meruvia informed all attendees it is not a requirement to attend RAM. The fourth quarter SRC meeting (December 8<sup>th</sup>) was held in North Mississippi at the ARC with the possibility of visiting **Sephora and a Project Search site**.

### **Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities June 2023 Quarterly Meeting**

**Chair:** Ms. Meruvia discussed **unfinished business** and per the bylaws, SRC needs to **select a vice chair** for the next calendar year. Nominations for vice chair will be sent to the SRC members with a link sent to complete **nominations for Chairperson**.

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**Nominations Committee:** Attendees received a blank copy of the application to make nominations for the State Rehabilitation Council. Ms. Meruvia encouraged members to continue to make nominations to keep a large pool of nominations to fill positions as vacancies occur. **Two of the recent nominees and presented on behalf of Governor Tate Reeves were announced:** Mr. Roger Bullock and Mr. Pat Fontaine's appointment letter with terms lasting until 12/31/26 and **the third appointee** was Amanda Richmond with the term lasting until 2026.

**Budget:** Ms. Meruvia provided an **update on the budget report** and explained how SRC receive funds for operations. The **budgeted amount for SRC is \$32,250.00 of which \$20,616.26 has been spent.** Travel, Contractual, Commodities, SL&G are the expense categories. The total budget for travel is \$750.00. Contractual which consist of speaker fees, travel related charges for non-employees (i.e., mileage, lodging, rentals, etc.) freight postage and shipping, registration fees, sponsorships and printing charges has a \$10,000.00 budget. Commodities consist of general office supplies, meeting food, chairs, and other furniture not classified as equipment, fuel, etc. has \$1,500.00 budgeted and SL&G which consist of the consumer survey fees, SPAHRS, transfers, bank fees, and a few other types of uncommon charges has a \$20,000.00 budget.

**Bylaws:** Mr. Diaz and Ms. Hart discussed the **open and virtual meetings recommendations** are still ongoing and being updated in the bylaws. Mr. Diaz suggested the **bylaws committee review** the draft and have a **conference call** to ensure they do not have questions on the updates prior to sending the draft to all SRC members. Ms. Hart will provide Mr. Diaz with a copy of the draft and once reviewed by the committee, a draft copy will be sent to all SRC members at least 1 month prior to the next SRC meeting.

**Compensation:** Mr. Howard discussed **raises and adjusting salaries.** When trying to **fill vacancies,** they realized they had to increase wages. He mentioned they **used their 10% authority** this past year to increase the counselors' wages and July 1 they plan to give counselors another 10%. He discussed the importance of adjusting the salaries to try to attract counselors and get people interested in obtaining a career with the agency. With the increase this year, the starting salary will be about \$36,000 and with the 10% next year, the salary should start at about \$40,000. Creating an atmosphere to keep employees with the agency is vital. **In-depth training with the new counselors** has been developed by Mr. Bishop's team.

**Orientation Committee:** Ms. Meruvia shared that the **Orientation Committee** was established in March but has not officially met. Mr. Butler previously agreed to **chair the committee** and additional members are needed. The purpose of this committee is to provide recommendations on how to best **orient new SRC members.** SRC members were reminded this council is a member of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council and the purpose is to orient and educate State Rehabilitation Councils across the nation.

**SRC Annual Reporting:** The SRC Annual Report was completed in December. It captured all the quarterly meetings and included responses from the questionnaires. The report can be found on the MDRS' website and was provided to all attendees. Accessible reports are available upon request.



**Other:** SRC members were reminded of the **National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council training manual** which is accessible on their website. The link to the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Council's was provided with the minutes. Members can also receive materials if needed and can include the law and regulations that are relevant to SRC. Mr. Fountaine agreed to join this committee, but the **committee will remain open** for other members to join.

❖ **Formal SRC Input: Responses to SRC Questionnaires – June 2023 Meeting**

**Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?**

- *There needs to be more conversation about the client survey.*
- *According to the presentations during the SRC meeting, the extent, scope, and effectiveness of services provided by VR and VRB and the functions performed by the Designated State Unit are effective when serving individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes.*
- *I have no further input at this time.*
- *New counselors training needs to be improved so they will be better equipped to serve clients effectively. I have heard several new counselors complain that they need more hands-on training vs. manual training because reading from the manual is "Greek" to them. Their duties are better understood when it is more so hands-on, even though duties are supposed to be practiced after completing each training module, many new counselors are also leaving the agency due to poor training. New counselors also feel the training is not provided in a more timely manner.*
- *More hands on relationships with potential employer/employee relations.*
- *From the information obtained at the meeting, I have no further input regarding the services and the effectiveness of the services provided to clients.*
- *Create options for Pre-ETS eligible students when school districts don't invite VR/VRB to cooperate with them in the transition of students with disabilities.*
- *At this point as a newly appointed member, further analysis is needed per member.*
- *It was discussed, the issue with getting more parents on board with services who still do not understand MDRS services. At IDS, one of the most beneficial ways to get students involved and parents on board is teachers and professors work with the students extensively. If you can get teachers on board who believe in the services and providers, then you will reach more. The school counselors and transition coordinators are stretched too thin along with MDRS counselors to engage the families so extensively. I think the special education teacher should do these things as one of their job responsibilities. A lot of them that we worked with does, but some do the bare minimum.*
- *Additional information on consumer surveys is great. Awareness on VR/VRB services and eligibility.*

**Q2: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?**

- *Not at this time.*
- *No comment.*
- *No.*
- *Customer service training is needed for all counselors and managers. I believe that disability etiquettes training is also much needed to counselors and managers across the board. The effectiveness and timeliness of training to new counselors need to be improved so that the provision of services can be provided.*
- *No.*
- *I believe there should be some additional questions on the consumer surveys to provide more in depth information on delivery of services.*
- *The committee was established to review satisfaction survey questions.*
- *At this point as a newly appointed members, further analysis is needed per member.*
- *No other comments on this topic.*
- *Who are the people surveyed? Do they all answer the questions? Do they have intellectual disabilities. Why do staff make calls vs outside services?*

**Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities?**

- *No comment.*
- *None at this time.*
- *None at this time.*
- *More organization relationship to keep in each other's thoughts.*
- *The state goals and objectives appear to be appropriate.*
- *No comment.*
- *Invite SRC members to staff training for better understanding of services, policies, and procedures.*
- *At this point, as a newly appointed members, further analysis is needed per member.*
- *Business development has amazing outreach or growth in programs. If not being done already, I would recommend getting participants to complete career interest inventory assessments prior to the event as a requirement and it can be on paper, online survey or make it accessible as possible. A lot of students have big dreams of things that they think they would like to do but may not understand the task or qualifications that go into some of these things. So, knowing this aptitude will help guide students to appropriate realistic options or at least understand plan for anything more wanted.*
- *Parents, self-advocates on SRC, how to get information to families, partnering with MSPTI and reach families.*

**What further comment(s) do you have in regard to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?**

- *No comment.*
- *None at this time.*

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- *I believe more attention needs to be paid to the districts covering more rural areas. There is a great need for more business relationships and opportunities for employment in rural areas for clients with most significant disabilities.*
- *None at the moment.*
- *I have no further comments in regards to the effectiveness of the program.*
- *At this point, as a newly appointed members, further analysis is needed per member.*

### **Presentation of Information on Policy**

#### **Q4: Do you have any comments or recommendations concerning the presentation on the Financial Needs Analysis?**

- *No.*
- *All priority categories are open; there the FNA should remain suspended.*
- *None at this time.*
- *No.*
- *No.*
- *No comments.*
- *At this point, as a newly appointed members, further analysis is needed per member.*
- *SRC members approved the recommendations that if sufficient funds are available, VR services shouldn't be based on financial need. People with disabilities often need services over their employment life and shouldn't be encouraged to earn less to keep eligibility for employment.*
- *I agree with not requiring it.*
- *No, I think it's a great opportunity to provide services and support at no cost.*

#### **What further input do you have for the establishment of the Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) for the blind?**

- *Great work.*
- *No comment.*
- *None at this time.*
- *None.*
- *None at the moment.*
- *I definitely see that the establishment of the CRP will be a great asset to Mississippi in providing much needed services.*
- *Increase apartments or dorm numbers, when possible, to allow for statewide coverage.*
- *At this point, as a newly appointed members, further analysis is needed per member.*
- *I look forward to hearing and seeing the center in Long Beach. It will be a great program.*
- *I'm excited to see this center open and provide services to families and communities.*

### **October 4, 2023 Meeting**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> quarterly meeting of the State Rehabilitation Council was held at the University of Southern Mississippi Trent Lott Center in Hattiesburg.

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**Public Comments:** A public comment was submitted prior to the SRC deadline. Ms. Thompson was contacted prior to the meeting and was given the link to join the SRC meeting. She was given an opportunity to announce herself during the meeting, but she did not come forward to let attendees know she was in attendance.

**MDRS Executive Director Report:** Mr. Howard - October is **National Disability Employment Awareness** month, and the agency is promoting it throughout the state. They will also have different speaking engagements and be in commercials. It will be aired on radio stations around the state to raise awareness. The agency has contracted with **Mississippi Public Broadcasting** and they will air the National Disability Employment Awareness Month commercial. They are working on recruiting and realized there is an **issue with finding individuals who want to work** for the agency or state government. He has **utilized his 10% of in range adjustments** to get the counselor's salary up to \$40,000.00. The starting salary is now \$39,600.00. Mr. Howard is advocating getting the salaries to \$40,000.00 but with the State Personnel Board structure, this was the highest he could get the salaries for this year. Mr. Howard also **utilized the 10% in range adjustment** to get the counselor's starting salaries up to \$29,300.00 which as close as he could get to \$30,000.00. They are continuing to work towards increasing salaries, so people seek to have a career at the MDRS.

They are also **recruiting** and reviewing the option of **paying for individuals to return to school** to obtain their bachelor's degree and if the agency pays for staff to return to school, staff must have the understanding that they will have to work for the agency for a specific number of years. **Legislative approval will be required** for this, and we are working for approval in January. The goal is to attend Jackson State, Ole Miss, Mississippi State, Southern Mississippi, etc.. This will be a great opportunity for counselor assistants who want to advance to a counselor position and will be utilized as a recruitment tool. This was brought before the legislature last year but realized language was required that they put in the General Bill and they missed the deadline for the General Bill introduction. Mr. Howard attempted to include it in their appropriation bill, which had a later deadline, but was informed it needed to go into the General Bill. They are looking at **adding nine additional Transition Counselors and seven Youth Counselors**. Ms. Hart and her team will help designate where there is a need for additional counselors. The agency is also looking at **paying for the counselors' CRC** and has received approval to cover the costs so counselors can obtain and maintain their CRC. It will be requested of the legislature for another dollar increase for **Personal Care Attendants**.

Mr. Howard discussed **Project Search** has 18 of their 22 sites located in a hospital. There are two sites located on military bases, one site at Viking Range in Greenwood, and an adult site (five adults) at Milwaukee tools in Jackson. There are also about 139 young adults participating in Project SEARCH which includes nine months of internship and a graduation at the end of the program.

Ms. Meruvia discussed the **educational opportunity** offered through Northwest Indian College. The program is focused on **American Indian Vocational Rehabilitation**, but it also includes general VR. It is distance learning and can result in earning a bachelor's degree.

**Client Assistance Program (CAP):** Mr. McGinn provided the **CAP summary report**. CAP had three new cases this quarter but received 4 new cases. Mr. McGinn spoke at the District 9 monthly meeting and will

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speak at the Starkville District meeting. Mr. McGinn discussed the **turnover ratio** challenges for counselors and counselor assistants. Counselors are supposed to distribute the CAP brochure to VR clients and applicants. He is receiving calls because callers are **not receiving returned calls**. He discussed clients, who have signed a release, will email the counselor and there is no response. Mr. McGinn, Ms. Hart, Mr. Frazier, and Mr. Fairley met to ensure **Harbor House became more educated** on rehabilitation services. Individuals at Harbour House were informed if they are being serviced as a client, they have a plan for employment. Individuals informed him that they did not have a plan and they were educated on their right to request another copy if they have misplaced the plan. Mr. McGinn obtains knowledge from other states' programs. Since Mr. McGinn has been CAP director, the caseload has decreased due to the federal government having a different way of reporting.

**State Independent Living Council (SILC) Report:** Ms. Alsup did not attend the SILC meeting and a SILC report was not provided. The SILC met in September and Mr. McGinn, who is on the nominating committee, provided updates on discussions. He provided an update on **MEMA** and they are still in the process of hiring someone. There have been issues with **Personal Care Attendants (PCAs)** and attempts were made to improve. He explained **LIFE** advocates for individuals living with disabilities.

Mr. Butler discussed the **Direct College or Direct Support Professionals** program (through the **Council on Developmental Disabilities**). This program provided personal care attendants services on **best practices** and how to work with individuals with disabilities. Ms. Hart explained that staff still has to go through **Direct Course** and continue to utilize some of the modules, The course is not designed to teach staff how to do their job duties, but it provides information to become more knowledgeable of working with individuals with disabilities.

**OVR Due Process: Last Quarter Due Process Hearing Decisions-** Ms. Hart discussed in June '23, VR had the **first mediation**. A decision was made on a consumer's case and he appealed the decision. Ms. Hart explained consumers can appeal any decision and once an appeal is made, the agency has sixty (60) days to make a decision. Consumers can choose to do an informal review process, have mediation, meet with CAP, or request a due process hearing. Regardless of which option is chosen, it does not affect the final decision. The consumer requested mediation, and by law, the agency must have a qualified mediator. Ms. Hart informed attendees the agency now has a **qualified mediator**, named Lydia Quarles, who conducted that mediation. The District Manager, consumer, Deputy Manager, and Ms. Hart were also a part of the mediation. Ms. Hart explained what the mediation entailed. The consumer was not following through with the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) but wanted services on the IPE to be executed, which would have been against policy. The mediation was successful and settled to provide the consumer with additional services, to which he agreed. Previously, the consumer interviewed for federal jobs and did not want to provide the information requested by the staff. Immediately after the mediation, the consumer started emailing staff information (that the staff had attempted to obtain previously). Ms. Hart explained it was helpful once the consumer understood, although they had an IPE, they still must do their part. **List of Impartial Hearing Officers** - Ms. Hart explained that they have **one impartial hearing officer** on contract, Dr. Michael Gandy. Dr. Frank Giles, Program Coordinator for the Rehab Counseling Program at Jackson State University and Dr. Ahonle, Program Coordinator for the Rehab Counseling Program at Mississippi State University **are pending**. Ms. Meruvia explained the SCR is supposed to **review the impartial hearing officers** and they may take a further look if anything else is needed.

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**OVR Program:** Ms. Hart discussed the **OVR statistical reports** which reflect end of the year data and the first three months of the current program year. The reports cover 7/1/23 – 9/30 and 4/1/23 – 7/30/23. The VR data is generated from AACE. This report identifies the number of students with a disability, closed rehab, eligibility rates, and IPEs which are all **key components that RSA** observes. The report indicates the types of services clients receive and how many are receiving the services. This data is utilized to monitor progress. The employment rate is currently at 68%. The MSG rate for 04/1/2023 – 06/30/2023 was 75.4% and the target goal was met. The total participants reported was 6,352. There were 1,676 that reported an MSG and they want this number to continue to increase to show the agency is truly serving participants with disabilities and want them to elevate to obtain medium skills. Ms. Hart discussed **Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS)** which are comprised of **nine new providers** throughout the state. A list was provided which showed those working with counselors to provide in-house Pre-ETS. To receive assistance from other providers to provide this service, an **RFP was submitted** around July 2023. **Approved list of providers:** USM Institute for Disability Studies Total Program, The Arc of Mississippi, 360 Degree Academy, Public Consulting Group Incorporated, Western Monroe LLC, Career Development and Training Institute, One on One Life and Career Post Services, Goodwill Industries of Mississippi, Legacy Learning and Career Management, Good Shepherd, and the National Federation of the Blind. These providers can assist with providing the five Pre-ETS which are work-based learning experiences, counseling on post-secondary opportunities, work-readiness training, counseling on self-advocacy and job exploration counseling. Mississippi State University (MSU)-Student Support Services and Northeast Mississippi Community College (NEMCC) will provide peer mentoring services only which fall under self-advocacy. **Outreach meetings**, held last month, included four meetings that included high schools and community college representatives to discuss VR services and Pre-ETS for students with a disability. It is significant that students are aware, prior to transitioning from high school, that VR services are available and schools have the contact and referral information. These services start in high school, but quality transition services are provided once they exit. Jackson State University has a **new peer mentoring program** but is not on the list. Northeast Mississippi Community college also has a peer mentoring program, and two more institutions are also getting ready to start one. This is a good program for students with disabilities on school campuses. At MSU, students with autism receive peer mentoring services and it helps with social skills to integrate into that campus life. VR's goal is to ensure all students with disabilities that need these services receive them. These five Pre-ETS services are provided in combination with the schools. Another **RFP** may be done to reach other providers to target students statewide, including rural areas.

**OVRB Program:** Since the **Reach Center closed** in Tupelo, the blind, deaf/blind, or visually impaired clients who wanted to participate in **Structured Discovery training** had to leave the state. Clients participating were away from their home 6 to 9 months and once training ended, they had to reacclimate to Mississippi. Clients no longer have that barrier due to the **second training center which will be in Long Beach, MS**. Ms. Young discussed the Structured Discovery Center, **Moving the Needle 2.0** document. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) places emphasis on students 14–21 in school, skills, and credentials. She explained OVRB moved the needle for the blind and transformed formational leadership because started offering skills and credentials in our Counseling and Guidance to clients and provided opportunities. Mr. Howard will have a **campaign** for the center's name. The type of training to be provided is the **structured discovery philosophy training method**. Vocational Training Instructors (**VTI**) **will teach VR services**. Individuals participating at the training center will receive a **recognized**

**certification** which will be built into the curriculum. There is a partnership with a **national employment company** for individuals that are blind so if students choose to, they will graduate in **structured discovery training** and **receive a certification in accessibility data** with a starting salary of \$74,000.00. This company will also assist with job placement. There will be four main classes: braille class (technology for braille- i.e., braille embosser and braille display), daily living/kitchen techniques, orientation/mobility (O&M), and a technology class whereas students will learn Jaws and ZoomText and can earn a **Microsoft Technology certification**. Training will be completed under **sleep shades**. Ms. Young explained the **process**: 18 counselors (9-North and 9-South) will refer clients to the student and will receive the handout on how to become a student. Once the counselor makes the referral, the referral will be transferred to the VTI at the structured discovery center. Clients will receive a \$100.00 voucher, which will be loaded on a debit card, to utilize for transportation to/from work, volunteer sites, and training. A driver will transport clients to Addie McBryde to obtain evaluations and Addie McBryde will ensure a room is available for clients who need to stay overnight. This center will serve ten clients and there will be five blocks with at least two clients in each block schedule. Ms. Young and Ms. Hart **attended a workshop** consisting of different SPED programs and vocational rehabilitation programs from MS and AL. They met with the **Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA)** who also attended the workshop and RSA representatives were provided a tour of the training center. The workshop was spearheaded by the **Department of Education** in Washington. They discussed community colleges because everything about workforce is about skills gains and utilizing community colleges and four-year programs to ensure students obtain career skills gains.

**OVRB statistics** were provided. The 2024 OVRB goal for applications is 750 and currently 143 applications have been taken. The eligibility goal is 564 and currently 124 eligibilities have been completed. The IPE goal is 48 with 107 completed. The training IPE goal is 168 and 5 new training IPEs have been completed. The closure goal is 300 and 21 cases have been closed. The **Measurable Skills Gains (MSG) goal** is 108 and 9 clients received an MSG. The **Peer Mentoring Goal** is 22 and currently there are 0 new participants. The peer mentoring contract is with the **National Federation of the Blind** and currently, four participants between the ages of 14-21 are enrolled in college; one college student between the age of 22-24; and two participants between 14-21 not currently enrolled in school. Overall, 55 college students are attending college around the state. OVRB served 1,219 clients and closed 22 cases. The reporting data is through 9/11/23 so the data will change. **Additional Comments**: Mr. Butler inquired about the incident rate of blindness in the state and Ms. Young will provide this data at a later date. In the past, doctors would report this data to the **National Research and Training Center at MSU**. Mr. Butler discussed comparing the number to the national number.

#### **Consumer Satisfaction Review:**

— **Consumer Satisfaction Survey**: Mr. Fairley reviewed the service ratings. The average rating for help the VR staff provided at the time the client applied for VR services was 4.80 (270 consumers responded); the average rating for help from the VR staff during the planning of services was 4.78 (268 consumers responded); the average rating was 4.80 for help from the VR staff when receiving VR services (269 were surveyed); the average rating was 4.51 for help received from other agencies or service providers (88 consumers surveyed); the average rating for employment outcome was 4.67 (238 consumers responded); the average rating for employment benefits provided by new employer was 4.28 (163 consumers responded); and the average rating was 4.77 (270 consumer responded) for the overall rating of services received. Mr. Fairley provided a summary of the non-blind consumer

results which was 4.80 for help the VR staff provided at the time they applied for VR services (220 consumers responded); the average rating for help from the VR staff during planning of services was 4.77 (219 consumers responded); the average rating for help from the VR staff when receiving VR services was 4.78 (219 surveyed); the average rating for help received from other agencies or service providers was 4.48 (73 consumers surveyed); the average rating for employment outcome was 4.63 (195 consumers); and the employment benefits provided by new employer rating was 4.27 (out of 133 consumers responding); and the overall rating for overall services received was 4.76 (220 consumers responded).

— **Consumer Satisfaction Survey Additional Comments:** Mr. Brown asked if an increase in employment benefits is due to people obtaining more full-time jobs as opposed to part-time jobs without benefits. Mr. Fairley discussed in some sectors, such as temp agencies, they are offering benefits now. Ms. Hart discussed one of the common performance measures is skills gains to increase individuals' capabilities to compete for middle skilled jobs which provide more benefits. Ms. Young shared that counselors should be informing clients of different employment options. Ms. Hart discussed wanting clients to increase and elevate to higher skilled jobs. Ms. Meruvia added that doing away with the financial needs analysis has also assisted because it encourages people to earn the most without impacting services. To be successful, some people need services throughout their employment life and if the financial needs analysis encourages them to keep the income low, she does not believe that is the philosophy of the rehab act.

— **Program Evaluation Survey:** Mr. Bishop provided a summary of the Office of Program Integrity Consumer Satisfaction Survey Results for OVR District 5 and 6 which is completed on open cases. *This survey utilized a standard four level Likert Scale system rating with 1 being very dissatisfied and 4 being very satisfied.* The Program Integrity Unit was able to reach 121 consumers of the 510 active consumers in District 5 of which 11 were in *employed* status. Staff were able to reach 238 consumers out of 681 active consumers in District 6 of which 37 were in *employed* status. The services section composite average indicated an overall satisfaction of 3.00 in District 5 and 3.18 in District 6. Regarding the employment section, the overall weighted averages were 3.52 in District 5 and 3.29 in District 6. Regarding the recommendations, although some consumers reported being satisfied with the services provided in District 5, due to the high amount of counselor turnover, improvement in communication with consumers is recommended. Consumers expressed confusion and frustration with not knowing who their counselor(s) were and/or who to go to for assistance. The consumers in District 6 were mostly satisfied with the services provided; however, some consumers reported lack of communication due to counselor vacancies. They expressed concerns with counselors not returning phone calls and/or mails timely. The vacancies appear to be the main reported issues in District 6. The high turnover rate leads to a lapse in communication with established consumers. Vacancies appear to be the main reported issue within District 6 which leads to a lapse in communication established within consumers. He mentioned they are raising salaries to try to retain staff and understand rotating staff to cover caseloads causes confusion.

— **Survey Comments/Discussion:** Ms. Nash mentioned there are several counselor assistants who already have a bachelor's degree. She mentioned she knows they must apply for the position but asked if they could transition to a counselor or have a separate interview. She was informed no,



## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

but a lot of counselor assistants have been hired as counselors and some are even in management now. Mr. Bishop mentioned they have a meeting with the State Personnel Board, and they recognize state agencies have issues with hiring and vacancies. He discussed that they are looking at the rules at a state and personnel level which some will require state legislature approval. Ms. Nash also discussed the eligibility process when it comes to the medical records due to some clients in rural areas may only have access to a Nurse Practitioner. She inquired if the agency would be open to accepting those records. Ms. Young discussed OVRB records must be from an ophthalmologist and Ms. Hart commented that much of it is due to federal law.

**Office of Business Development (OBD) Program:** Mr. Woodward presented the **OBD Program report**. OBD had 2 (Madison County School District and Pearl) job extravaganzas during September 25-29th. These **job extravaganzas** focus on age groups between the age of 16-21 of working age. There was a total of 170 young adults who attended both days. Businesses are asked to bring a 'piece of their business' to the event and allow students to participate. There was a dump truck, forklift simulator, Brown Bottling Company, police officers and firefighters. Participants had an opportunity to tour the extravaganza over the course of 2 days and spent 4-5 hours learning about different businesses. This helps with Pre-ETS and opens young adults to different career goals. They have received feedback from different skills and are working towards a goal of having 15+ events within a year to meet the needs of the state. They are still working on the job fairs and the virtual workforce tours to give career exploration for VR clients and counselors. They are also working on getting the career counselors more involved in the job placement process and making sure clients are VR ready and job ready for employment. Ms. Meruvia asked that SRC members receive an **invitation to the OBD events**.

**Advisory Committee-Coordinate with other councils: Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities Charles Hughes.** Mr. Charles Hughes, Director of the Council on Developmental Disabilities, was invited to participate in the SRC meeting, and his presentation is discussed in detail under *Section V (B), Coordinate with Other Councils/Organizations*. The Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities is a federally funded program through the administration of community living. Mr. Hughes announced they were approved to get a secondary program in Mississippi. Student recruitment will begin next semester and the students will begin the program in the fall of 2024. This program is a certificate program for students with intellectual disabilities. In addition to the classroom hours, students can also participate in an internship, peer mentoring and volunteer work. Students who participate in this program do not have to reside on campus. Ms. Meruvia discussed information received about this program will be given to attendees who can **advertise in their stakeholder groups**.

The next quarterly meeting will be **December 8** in North Mississippi. There was a discussion about **touring Sephora**. Ms. Meruvia requested a **listing of all SRC members** to be sent to SRC members and list the terms for serving.

## **Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities October 2023 Quarterly Meeting**

**Chair Selection:** Nomination Requests and Selection of Vice Chair: On August 17, a survey was sent to SRC members to select a co-chairperson and on August 28 feedback was received. There was a total of 9 votes of which 5 votes were for Mr. Brown, 3 were for Ms. Junkin and 1 vote was for Josh Bower. A motion was made to elect **Mr. Don Brown as the co-chairperson** and Mr. McGinn seconded the motion. All were in favor.

**Action Items – Questionnaire:** Ms. Meruvia asked the SRC members to provide input and complete the surveys. A survey monkey link will be sent to SRC members to **complete the survey** and a link will be sent to **complete nominations for Chairperson**.

**Nomination Committee Report:** Mr. Brown reported that attendees received a blank copy of the application to **make nominations** for the State Rehabilitation. Ms. Meruvia encouraged members to continue to make nominations to retain a pool of nominations to fill positions as they become vacant. Ms. Richmond-Johnson, Pat Fontaine, and Mr. Bullock received the SRC certificates appointing them to a **three-year term as an SRC member**. Their term will last until December 31, 2026. Amanda Richmond was the third appointee, and her time will also end in 2026.

**Budget Committee Report:** Ms. Treadway was not in attendance. Ms. Meruvia provided an **update on the budget report** and explained how SRC receives funds for operation. The budgeted amount for SRC is \$32,250.00. Travel, Contractual, Commodities, SL&G are the expense categories. The total budget for travel is \$750.00. Contractual which consists of speaker fees, travel related charges for non-employees (i.e., mileage, lodging, rentals, etc.) freight postage and shipping, registration fees, sponsorships and printing charges has a \$10,000.00 budget. Commodities consist of general office supplies, meeting food, chairs, and other furniture not classified as equipment, fuel, etc. has \$1,500.00 budgeted and SL&G which consist of the consumer survey fees, SPAHRS, transfers, bank fees, and a few other types of uncommon charges has a \$20,000.00 budget.

**Bylaws Committee Report:** Mr. Diaz was not in attendance. Ms. Meruvia discussed there were **pending discussions regarding the bylaws**. In relation to the public meetings being **open and virtual**, this section remains pending for this update. The committee requested that bylaws be submitted to them first for review prior to sending them to the entire SRC committee who will have at least a month prior to the SRC meeting to review this section.

**SRC Orientation Committee Report:** Mr. Butler provided suggestions for the SRC orientation and discussed the purpose which is to give support to the VR/VRB program staff who strive to provide the best service delivery for individuals with disabilities in Mississippi. Mr. Butler discussed looking at the **best practices**, positive practices, and the art of evidenced-based practices as it is stated in the law. The **must-have documents** are the SRC fact sheet, the Federal Rehabilitation Act, Mississippi VR/VRB goals, objectives, and amendments which include the State Plan and The Comprehensive Needs Assessment.

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

One of the most important documents was the Statewide Needs Assessment which listed demographics of individuals with disabilities throughout the state.

Mr. Butler discussed additional '**must-have documents**' to gain knowledge include consumer satisfaction, best practices, SRC bylaws, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), supported employment, customized employment, Project SEARCH, VR/VRB demographics, coordination with other councils, state agencies, private nonprofit organizations, structure, organization of MDRS, and the SRC meeting agenda and format, person first language, abbreviations, and acronyms, etc.. Mr. Butler also discussed how to do the **orientation** (material presented, one full day, several periodic meetings, video presentations) and who does the orientation (VR/VRB staff, SRC members, support from the National SRC Technical Assistance Services, other councils in the state and the person in the Governor's Office who assists with appointing the council members). He discussed training is ongoing and suggested committee members provide feedback, suggestions, or state whether they would like to be a part of the committee under *question 3 of the SRC questionnaire*. Ms. Meruvia requested that new SRC members become acclimated quickly and inquired into when Mr. Butler's recommendations would be implemented. Mr. Butler said he would implement them soon and will report at the next meeting.

Ms. Meruvia also discussed inviting **SRC members to existing internal trainings**. Mr. Howard discussed ongoing training due to staff turnover and Ms. Meruvia inquired into who would oversee inviting the SRC members to district meetings. Ms. Hart and Ms. Young will handle inviting SRC members to existing internal meetings. Mr. McGinn shared speaking engagements and dates which will be held in Natchez on October 19th (Addie McBryde Training) and October 30th (ILB training) that other members may be interested in attending.

**Satisfaction Survey Committee:** Ms. Junkin addressed the satisfaction survey committee and updates on the committee are detailed under Section V (A), Other SRC Functions Consistent with the Purpose of VR/VRB.

**Consumer Satisfaction Committee:** Ms. Junkin discussed having a greater understanding of **how the consumer survey process works** and will submit an email to committee members and Kelly, and to arrange a meeting. She will provide a report at the next SRC meeting. Ms. Meruvia discussed the consumer satisfaction survey which is contracted to Mississippi State University. The Rehabilitation Act and the regulations for the SRC are similar to the consumer satisfaction questions. As discussed earlier, the SRC council recommended **some interim satisfaction questions to review** not only closed cases but also cases that are still open. Ms. Meruvia discussed questions regarding how the clients with intellectual disabilities participate in surveys. Ms. Rushing provided a list of how many individuals with intellectual disability were surveyed. Ms. Junkin discussed that there are many families who do not understand the process and shared concerns as to - *do the consumers and families understand what is happening meaningfully enough to provide the information that is needed?*

**SRC Annual Report: Ms. Meruvia:** The federal fiscal year ended on September 30, 2023. The SRC Annual Report is due at the end of December and the governor, National Coalition of the State Rehabilitation Councils, and the Federal Funding Agency will receive a copy of the report. This report captures a summary of all the quarterly meetings and includes responses from the questionnaires. SRC members

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

will receive a draft of the report to review at the next SRC meeting. Members can also review last year's report, which is located on the agency website, or a copy can be emailed to those who would like to receive a copy. SRC members who would like to request a change to the report should inform VR/VRB as soon as possible.

### **❖ Formal SRC Input: Responses to SRC Questionnaires – October 2023 Meeting**

**Q1: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for VR/VRB regarding the extent, scope, effectiveness of services provided; and functions performed by the Designated State Unit (DSU) that affect or potentially affect the ability of individuals with disabilities in achieving employment outcomes?**

- *The job MDRS is doing is good with a limited number of employment persons. The individuals being served has increased by the counselors have decreased.*
- *The effectiveness of the programs appears to be increasing. The individuals who receive services appear to achieve good outcomes.*
- *Address the recommendations/findings in the 2021 3 year Comprehensive Needs Assessment focusing on evidence based practices*
- *Staff training should be continual to include both VR technical skills as well as customer service.*

**Q2: Having heard this quarter's report on the results of consumer satisfaction surveys, do you have any comments or recommendations for input into the service delivery process?**

- *I have enjoyed the increase in numbers in a positive way.*
- *The reports were comprehensive regarding input from consumers.*
- *Based on this quarter report of 121 people, most reported to be satisfied with their service. The committee that was formed to review satisfaction surveys should follow through with their assignment.*
- *A SRC committee is studying the current way to measure satisfaction.*

**Q3: After attending the quarterly SRC meeting, what further input do you have for the State Plan goals and priorities? What further comment(s) do you have in regard to evaluating the effectiveness of the VR/VRB Program in meeting the goals and priorities?**

- *I believe it will be great for all to get more education or experiences about the duties the SRC do. Mr. Ed made a good point about having us come and see in person different events.*
- *I believe the establishment of an orientation program will be very beneficial. New members would be able to understand the importance of the SRC.*
- *All SRC members must be informed of the following: Comprehensive Needs Assessment including VR goals, objectives, and priorities. Evidence based or best practices for job development. The SRC Fact Sheet and the Federal Rehab Act (Law) ask new members what information they need. Use the SRC Committee report for SRC orientation as a plan for training.*
- *The SRC Members need more training. VR/VRB should designate a staff member to carry out this function.*

## **CONTINUED, 2023 MISSISSIPPI - STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL ACTIVITIES**

### ***Presentation of Information on Policy***

#### **Q4: Do you have any comments or recommendations concerning the presentation on the Financial Needs Analysis?**

- *None, I liked how the financial was broken down.*
- *The financial analysis was presented in a good understandable format.*
- *Any resources spent on training new SRC members will be a good investment. Continue providing increases for VR counselors.*
- *I agree not to use it unless an order of selection is in place.*
- *What further input do you have for the establishment of the Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) for the blind?*
- *I would like to visit before speaking.*
- *No response*
- *Really liked the “Structured Discovery” process; “Moving the Needle” strategies for wage increases; and “Living with Blindness” training. It appears best practices model for people who are blind.*
- *I would like to see it grow and take more participants.*

### **Additional State Rehabilitation Council Member Activities in Partnership with the Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind**

**OVR and OVRB** are advocates of the State Rehabilitation Council’s mission and assist the SRC with its responsibilities. The offices of OVR and OVRB provide liaison support as well as administrative, technical assistance, and coordination in support of the SRC’s responsibilities.

Support is provided by MDRS-OVR/OVRB to coordinate activities, provide administrative support, and when necessary, to facilitate the work of the SRC and, as requested, to assist the SRC members with specific mandated duties.

### **Administrative, Technical, and Liaison Support offer the following services:**

- ❖ In-person meetings – coordinate dates, times, location, distribute communications and handouts to SRC Council members and attendees
- ❖ Virtual Meetings – provide virtual meeting communications and reference handouts to SRC Council Members and attendees
- ❖ Meals/Refreshments – coordination of meal selection, deliveries, and location
- ❖ Communications/Bulletins – communications are distributed to members regarding quarterly meetings, special meetings, agendas, and follow up agenda items
- ❖ Minutes – meeting recordings, preparation of the official legal record of the council meetings, and coordinate amendments to previous minutes
- ❖ Technical Support – technical assistance is provided during meetings for presentations, etc. and coordination of technical equipment availability
- ❖ Website – preparation and coordination through MDRS personnel for SRC communication uploads to the MDRS website
- ❖ SRC Annual Report – prepare the SRC Annual Report; coordinate SRC Annual Report upload to the MDRS website; submissions to the SRC, to the RSA contact(s), to the Governor and members of the Mississippi Legislature.

# Office of Vocation Rehabilitation (OVR)

## Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVRB)

### CONSUMER SATISFACTION SURVEY – 2023

#### Results for Closed Ended Questions

The ratings for the various services consumers received are presented below using the average (mean) score given to each item by all respondents interviewed. If an item did not apply to a particular respondent or if the consumer did not know or refused to rate an item, the consumer’s response is not included in calculating the average score for that item. The seven items rated are in Table 1 (for verbiage, reference questionnaire.) Chart 1 is included for an easy visual comparison. The respondents were asked to rate the items (Questions Q1 to Q4 and questions Q7 to Q9) on a scale of 1 to 5, with ‘1’ being *very bad* and ‘5’ being *very good*. Thus, a high score indicates that the service was *good* and a low score indicates that it was *bad*.

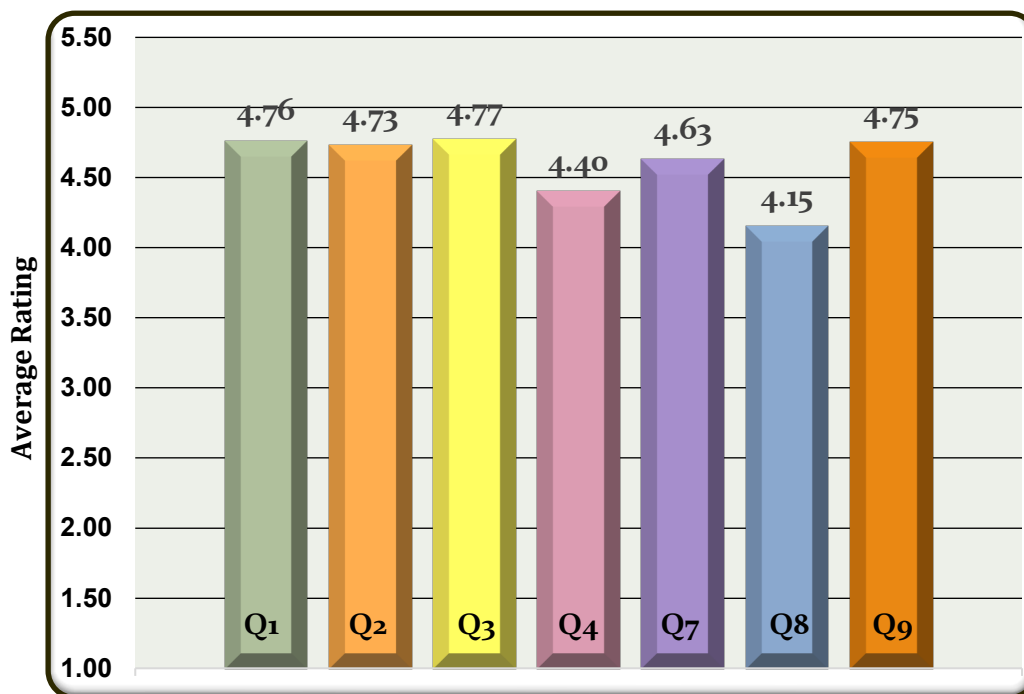
**Table 1 - Service Ratings by Consumer**

Rate the following items on a scale of ‘1 to 5’, with ‘1’ being very bad and ‘5’ being very good.

	# of Consumers	Average Rating (mean)
Q1 The help the VR staff provided at the time you applied for VR services.	1000	4.76
Q2 The help from the VR staff during the planning of your services.	1001	4.73
Q3 The help from the VR staff when you were receiving your VR Services.	998	4.77
Q4 The help you received from other agencies or service providers.	258	4.40
Q7 Your employment outcome.	852	4.63
Q8 Employment benefits provided by your new employer.	543	4.15
Q9 Overall, how do you rate the services you received?	1002	4.75

*Note: The items in Table 1 and Chart 1 are labeled Q1 to Q4 and Q7 to Q9, these are the names of the questions in the above questionnaire.*

**Chart 1 - Average Consumer Ratings**





**LaVonda Hart**  
**Director, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation**

**Dear Fellow Mississippians:**

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) provided services to over **13,486** individuals with disabilities 2023. OVR’s concentration on servicing students with disabilities has developed into progressive relationships with schools, private providers, and community rehabilitation programs throughout the state of Mississippi.

We are pleased to have the Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council as an important partner in the success of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation in Mississippi and the consumers we serve. We appreciate the continued support of our MDRS Executive Director as we continue our mission to provide exceptional vocational rehabilitation services. We look forward to the continued partnership and support as we provide eligible individuals with disabilities with quality VR services that will lead to competitive integrated employment.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "LaVonda C. Hart".

LaVonda C. Hart, MS, CRC  
Director, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services

# OVR: 2023 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

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In PY 2022, **11,738** Mississippians with disabilities received services including, but not limited to counseling and guidance in adjustment to disability, vocational exploration, physical and mental restoration, job training, assistive technology, and job placement.

VR also assisted **2,326** (PY 2022) potentially eligible students with disabilities. Individuals served by VR have a wide array of disabilities including, but not limited to hearing loss or deafness, amputations, mental and emotional disorders, epilepsy, developmental disorders, traumatic brain injuries, orthopedic impairments, speech impairments, etc. The total number of VR consumers that obtained competitive integrated employment in PY 2022 was **2,416**.

OVR services are provided through the federal grant (78.7 percent) through Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), our federal partner, which is state matched with appropriation (21.3 percent) from the Mississippi Legislature. Without these funds, the **11,738** Mississippians with disabilities in need of services would not have had access to VR services. Under Section 116(b)(2)(A) of WIOA, there are six Primary Indicators of Performance.

OVR will continue to submit quarterly 911 data in order to establish baseline information for our common performance measures. OVR received data on the WIOA new performance indicators from the quarterly data dashboard report from the RSA Dashboard. The RSA Dashboard, 1<sup>st</sup> quarter through 4<sup>th</sup> quarter data for period PY 2022 (*July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023*) indicated the following:

- **Employment Rate - 2nd Quarter After Exit: 60.2%** - The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program (for Title I Youth, the indicator is the percentage of participants in education or training activities, or in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit);
- **Employment Rate – 4th Quarter After Exit: 57.8%** - The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program (for Title I Youth, the indicator is the percentage of participants in education or training activities, or in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit);
- **Credential Attainment: 38.7%** - The percentage of those participants enrolled in an education or training program (excluding those in on-the-job training (OJT) and customized training) who attain a recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma, or its recognized equivalent, during participation in or within one year after exit from the program;
- **Measurable Skill Gains: 76.4%** - The percentage of program participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measurable skill gains, defined as documented academic, technical, occupational, or other forms of progress, towards such a credential or employment.
- **Effectiveness in Serving Employers:** WIOA Sec. 116(b)(2)(A)(i)(VI) requires the Departments to establish a primary indicator of performance for effectiveness in serving employers. The departments are piloting three approaches designed to gauge three critical workforce needs of the business community. (*Data is not available yet*)



# OVR: PROGRAM SERVICES & HIGHLIGHTS

- **Deaf Services** assists individuals who are **Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deaf Blind** or **Late Deafened** find employment, attend education and training programs, and learn more about their community resources. The MDRS Deaf Services Program continues to promote excellence by striving to assist new RCD's (Rehabilitation Counselors for the Deaf) to reach the required communications skills level on the Signed Communication Proficiency Interview, an American Sign Language assessment developed by the Rochester Institute of Technology. Adequate communication skills are a prerequisite to meaningful counseling and guidance with people who are Deaf and use manual communication. This skill, along with other specialized training, has been a vital factor in the successful rehabilitation of individuals with deafness or significant hearing loss. In PY2022, Deaf Services were provided to **3,308** Mississippians resulting in **1,393** successful rehabilitations.
- **15 Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) known as AbilityWorks are operated by MDRS.** **AbilityWorks** provides vocational assessment and work adjustment training for individuals with disabilities. This is possible through a wide array of contract and subcontract services provided to local business and industry.
- During PY 2022, **AbilityWorks** served a total of **1,698 individuals** with disabilities. AbilityWorks establishes cooperative agreements with local businesses to provide community-based work experience, customized training, and on-the-job training.

## OVR: SERVING MISSISSIPPI STUDENTS AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

### Pre-Employment Transition Services:

VR works with potentially eligible students with disabilities ages of 14 through 21 to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services, as well as our eligible secondary school students with disabilities, their families, and school personnel, to assure there is an integrated program of education and vocational training available to begin to build a foundation for a career pathway, and then to help provide a seamless transition from school to work. In PY 2022, the number of students that received Pre-Employment Transition Services was 4,791.

Students with disabilities, ages 14-21, receive the Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) listed below (as needed) to help prepare for post-secondary education such as college, vocational schools, etc. Pre-Employment Transition Services are:

- ❖ Counseling on opportunities for post-secondary education such as college, vocational schools, etc.;
- ❖ Work-Based Learning Experiences, including internships and On-the-Job Training;
- ❖ Training in self-advocacy and social skills; and/or
- ❖ Peer Mentoring Programs at MSU, USM and NEMCC, and EMCC.

## **CONTINUED, OVR: PROGRAM SERVICES & HIGHLIGHTS**

### **Supported Employment:**

We assist individuals with the most significant disabilities who require intensive support services to prepare for, secure, retain, or regain employment. Each MDRS district has a Supported Employment Team consisting of a specialized VR/SE counselor, and a Vocational Training Instructor who oversees the work of Job Trainers working on site with our consumers. During PY 2022, **651** individuals received Supported Employment services, **89** resulting in successful employments.

**Project Search:** Project SEARCH Mississippi is administered by the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services and is a joint partnership between MDRS, a business and a school district.

The Project SEARCH Program is a unique, business-led, nine-month employment preparation program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Up to 12 students with disabilities experience total workplace immersion, classroom instruction, career exploration, and hands-on training through three different worksite rotations. The goal for each participant is competitive employment. To reach that goal, the program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent-livingskills to help young people with significant disabilities make successful transitions to productive adult life.



**Project SEARCH Mississippi Success:** **211** individuals with disabilities have graduated from Project SEARCH Mississippi since Project SEARCH UMMC launched in August 2018. **161** of those individuals have gained employment. There are 6 graduates participating in a paid internship that hopefully will lead to employment. **129 interns** will be participating in Project SEARCH across the state and will graduate in May of 2024.

### **What does a good Project SEARCH Candidate look like?**

• Must have a strong desire to work.	• Able to manage their own self-care skills.
• Meet all their high school credit requirements for graduation, certification, or completion.	• Good attendance record.
• Must be 18-21(Transition site), 18-25 (Adult site) years old.	• Able to pass drug test and background check.
• Must be eligible for Vocational Rehabilitation.	• Ability to understand safety.
• Basic and effective communication skills.	• Ability to take directions.
• Basic reading and writing skills.	• Maintain appropriate behavior in the workplace.

**Project Search - Current Sites/Participating Schools**

<p><b>University Medical Center–Jackson</b> Rankin County School District; Pearl School District; MS School for the Deaf/Blind</p> <p><b>Forrest General–Hattiesburg</b> Hattiesburg County School District; Petal County School District; Lamar County School District</p> <p><b>South Central Regional Medical Center–Laurel</b> Jones County School District; Laurel School District</p> <p><b>King Daughters Hospital–Brookhaven</b> Lincoln County School District</p> <p><b>Singing River Health–Ocean Springs</b> Ocean Springs School District; Jackson County School District</p> <p><b>Merit Health-Natchez</b> Natchez-Adams School District</p> <p><b>Singing River Health-Pascagoula</b> Pascagoula-Gautier School District</p> <p><b>Baptist Medical Center-Kosciusko</b> Kosciusko / Attala School District</p> <p><b>Keesler Air Force Base</b> Biloxi Public School District</p> <p><b>Ochsner Rush Health</b> Lauderdale County School District; Meridian School District</p> <p><b>Singing River Health-Gulfport</b> Long Beach School District Gulfport School District</p> <p><b>Neshoba General Hospital–Philadelphia</b> Neshoba County School District; Philadelphia School District</p>	<p><b>Viking Range–Greenwood</b> Leflore Christian School</p> <p><b>Merit Health River Region-Vicksburg</b> Vicksburg–Warren School District</p> <p><b>Baptist Memorial Hospital–Oxford</b> Lafayette School District; Oxford School District</p> <p><b>Columbus Air Force Base</b> Lowndes County School District</p> <p><b>Baptist Memorial Hospital–Olive Branch</b> DeSoto County School District</p> <p><b>Baptist Hospital–Jackson</b> Clinton Public School District; Jackson Public School District; Madison County School District</p> <p><b>North Mississippi Medical Center–Tupelo</b> Tupelo School District; Lee County School District; Nettleton School District; Itawamba County Schools; Pontotoc County Schools</p> <p><b>North Mississippi Health Services-Eupora</b> Adult site</p> <p><b>Milwaukee Tools-Jackson</b> Adult site</p> <p><b>OCH-Regional Medical Center-Starkville</b> Starkville Public School District</p>
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# OVR: DISTRICT MAP

## District I

(Calhoun, Coahoma, Desoto, Lafayette, Marshall, Panola, Tate, Tunica, Quitman, Yalobusha)  
51 County Road 166  
Oxford, MS 38655  
(866) 358-6960

## District II

(Alcorn, Benton, Itawamba, Lee, Pontotoc, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo, Union)  
2620 Traceland Drive  
Tupelo, MS 38801  
(877) 367-4598

## District III

(Bolivar, Carroll, Grenada, Holmes, Humphreys, Issaquena, Leflore, Sharkey, Sunflower, Tallahatchie, Washington, Yazoo)  
104 Professional Plaza  
Greenwood, MS 38930  
(833) 607-1900

## District IV

(Clay, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Lowndes, Monroe, Montgomery, Oktibbeha, Webster)  
317 Industrial Park Road  
Starkville, MS 39759  
(800) 796-8672

## District V

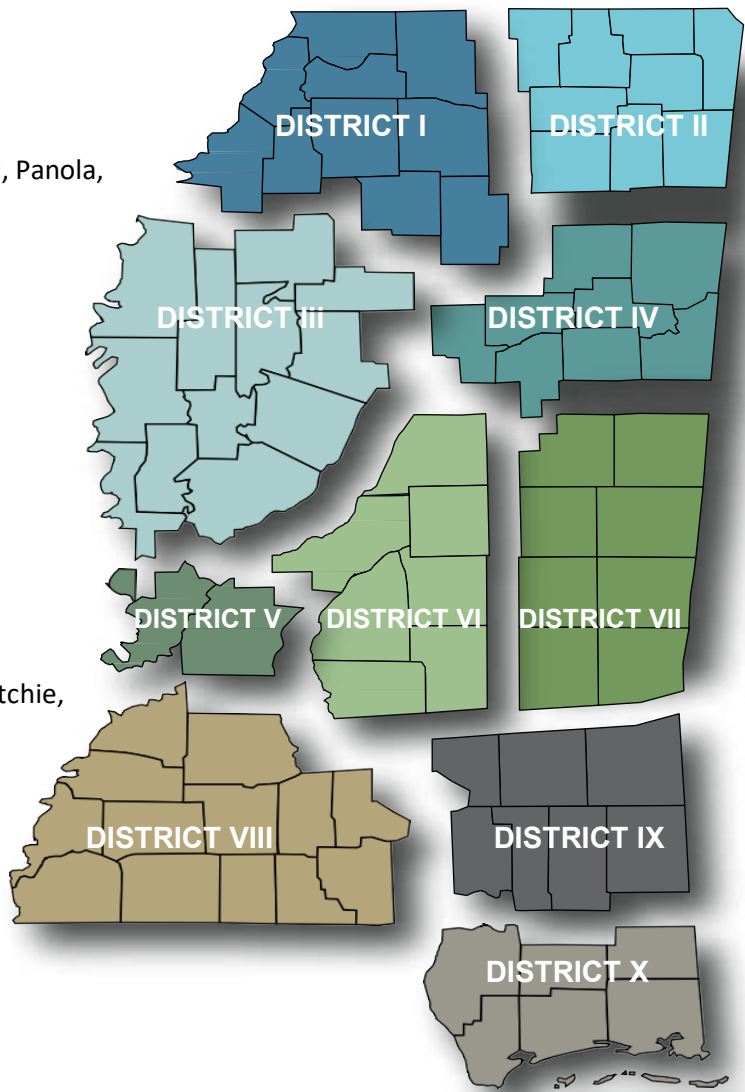
(Hinds, Warren)  
3895 Beasley Road  
Jackson, MS 39213  
(800) 805-3199

## District VI

(Attala, Leake, Madison, Rankin, Scott, Simpson, Smith)  
1032 Center Pointe Blvd.  
Pearl, MS 39208  
(833) 355-5602

## District VII

(Clarke, Jasper, Kemper, Lauderdale, Neshoba, Newton, Noxubee, Winston)  
1003 College Drive  
Meridian, MS 39304  
(866) 689-7926



## District VIII

(Adams, Amite, Claiborne, Copiah, Franklin, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Lawrence, Lincoln, Marion, Pike, Walthall, Wilkinson)  
1221 Parklane Road  
McComb, MS 39649  
(800) 378-6259  
(866) 689-7926

## District IX

(Covington, Forrest, Greene, Jones, Lamar, Perry, Wayne)  
#17 J.M. Tatum Industrial Drive  
Hattiesburg, MS 39404  
(800) 711-4588

## District X

(George, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, Stone)  
13486 Fastway Lane  
Gulfport, MS 39503  
(877) 367-4603



MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF  
REHABILITATION SERVICES  
*Opportunities for Independence*



**Dorothy Young**  
**Director, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind**

**Greeting Friends and Colleagues,**

On behalf of Chris Howard, MDRS Executive Director, we are privileged to present to our fellow Mississippians highlights of success from the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (OVRB). OVRB continues to stand on its goal to provide timely vital vocational rehabilitation services to the communities of the blind.

For the last ten years, OVRB has committed to reaching and changing the lives of our fellow Mississippians living with blindness with the theme "Moving the Needle." OVRB comprises about ninety-plus team members, and we focus on one Mississippian at a time to move the needle in increasing living wages, credentials, training, and other individualized services. Our moving-the-needle living wage numbers demonstrate our commitment for the last ten years. Thank you to each team member, especially our Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors for the Blind, for your work and dedication to increasing wages yearly.

Now for PY23, we have enhanced our theme to Moving the Needle 2.0, where our agency has increased Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind so that our citizens will no longer have to leave our great state to receive the alternative training method (Structured Discovery). Our state can now offer both specialized blindness training. The traditional method will remain at our Addie McBryde Center on the University of Mississippi Medical Center campus. The nontraditional method will be housed at our new Vocational Training site in Long Beach, Mississippi. Our first class will begin January 22, 2024. A special thank you to our Executive and Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA), who believed our state could offer the nontraditional method.

This year, our division served over **1,700** Mississippians with blindness and low vision. Moreover, **388** of those individuals were closed successfully in Competitive Integrated Employment.

At our core, OVRB believes in the abilities of each person with blindness. Our OVRB staff can determine how work changes lives. When connected to the right career, so many other goals we have for our lives become much easier to accomplish.

In line with our annual reports, we are honored to feature our fellow Mississippians who have achieved competitive success in this year's report. Thank you to all OVRB consumers for helping to articulate the importance of employment for all, including those with disabilities, by sharing some of your experiences.

Together, OVRB continues to "Move the Needle 2.0" in careers, training, skills, credentials, and most importantly, OVRB's impact in transforming lives, businesses, and communities. Thank you also to our staff, leadership, stakeholders, and members of the Rehabilitation Services Commission for your continued partnership. I look forward to working with you in 2024!

Happy new year!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dorothy L. Young".

Dorothy L. Young, M.S., C.V.S.

Director, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind

# OVRB: PROGRAM SERVICES AND HIGHLIGHTS

The **Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind** is divided into two regions located in the North and South. Each region is staffed with qualified professionals who provide vocational rehabilitation counseling, education, independent living skills, orientation and mobility training, low vision rehabilitation technology and Deafblind services for eligible Mississippians. Each client works with their OVRB Counselor to develop their Individualized Plan of Services (IPE) to mirror their strengths, abilities, and capabilities for successful employment outcomes.

We specialize in working with individuals who are blind or visually impaired to ensure opportunities for inclusion into the workforce, community, and home. There were **388** consumers who achieved a successful employment outcome through the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (VRB). VRB provided consumer services such as counseling and guidance in adjustment to disability, vocational exploration, orientation and mobility training, job training, and assistive technology. The total number of Mississippians with disabilities served by VRB during PY 2022, was **1,745**.

## Business Enterprise Program (BEP)

**-32 Successful BEP Entrepreneurs-**

The **Business Enterprise Program (BEP)** provides support for self-employment opportunities in the food service industry for Mississippians who are legally blind. These BEP entrepreneurs operate a variety of businesses including vending machine routes, snack bars and cafeterias on military bases. In PY 2022, **32 individuals** operated successful businesses as BEP vendors.

Without Military Bases	2020-2021	2021-2022	
<b>Total Sales</b>	\$879,534.15	\$1,326,223.13	\$1,325,567.94
<b>Sales Tax Paid</b>	\$40,822.00	\$65,103.00	\$61,786.00
<b>Wages Paid</b>	\$55,383.98	\$122,666.94	\$69,990.88
With Military Bases	2020-2021	2021-2022	
<b>Total Sales</b>	\$14,791,047.15	\$15,237,736.13	\$15,603,136.94
<b>Sales Tax Paid</b>	\$40,822.00	\$65,103.00	\$61,786.00
<b>Wages Paid</b>	\$9,107,480.98	\$9,174,763.94	\$9,805,949.88

(military bases do not report their sales tax to us)

## **Addie McBryde Memorial Rehabilitation Center for the Blind**

*-Provided training for **99** consumers-*

The **Addie McBryde Memorial Rehabilitation Center for the Blind** provides traditional intensive evaluation, training, and adjustment services on the campus of the University of Mississippi Medical Center. In PY 2022, the Addie McBryde Center provided training to **99 consumers**.

## **Independent Living Services for the Blind (ILB)**

*-Provided services to **586** consumers-*

We serve individuals who are legally blind and either over the age of 55 or have a significant secondary disability by providing a variety of independent living services. In PY 2022, Independent Living Services (ILB) served over **100+** consumers through indirect services such as health fairs, vision screening, peer groups, and outreach. ILB provided direct services to **166 consumers in Part B and 420 in Older Blind**.

## **Itinerant Teacher Program**

*-Provided services to **17** consumers-*

**Itinerant teachers** work closely with VRB counselors to coordinate services, evaluate client needs, develop living-needs plans and instructional materials, and provide on-site training for consumers who are blind or visually impaired. In 2023, the Itinerant Teacher Program provided services for **17 VRB consumers**.

## **Mississippi Partners for Informed Choice (M-PIC)**

*-**774** consumers referred for WIPA-*

**Community Work Incentive Coordinators (CWICs)** provide benefits planning and assistance to SSI/SSDI beneficiaries between the ages of 14 to 64 with an employment goal. Services are coordinated through referrals from VR/VRB counselors, school counselors, the Ticket-to-Work helpline, mental health counselors, and other service entities that have direct contact with this underserved population. **774 consumers** were referred for **Work Incentives Planning and Assistance (WIPA)** services in FFY 2023.

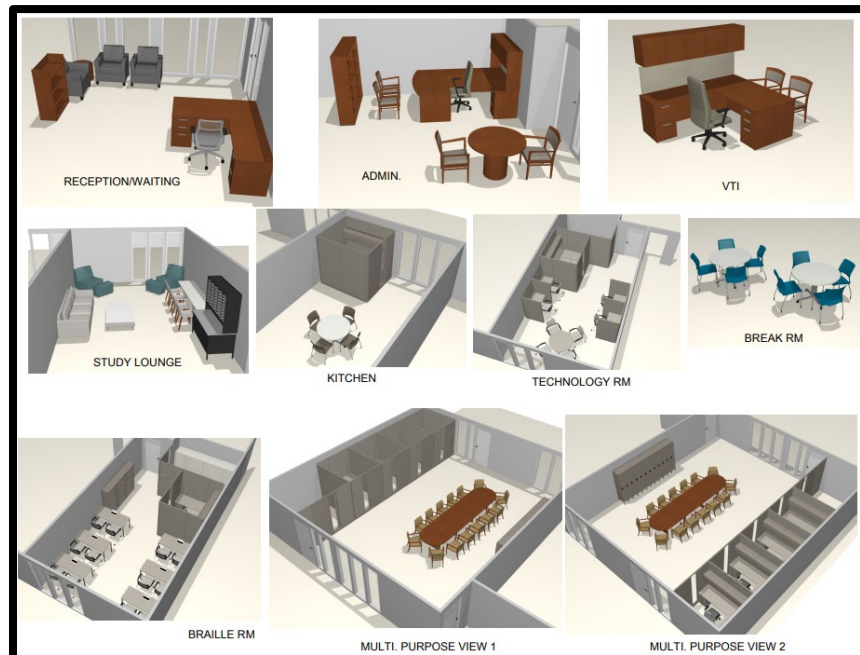
## ***New Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) For the Blind***

Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and our State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) approved for the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind to establish a CRP to provide one or more Vocational Rehabilitation Services that will lead to competitive integrated employment. A brief description of the center is below.

Structured Discovery is a unique blindness skills training model that differs substantially from traditional approaches intended to help blind and low vision people to become self-sufficient. Structured Discovery training programs teach non-visual techniques and encourage problem solving through experiential learning and confidence-building activities. From time to time, the staff wear learning shades (blindfolds) to demonstrate their personal belief in the effectiveness of non-visual techniques. Staff walk the talk and function confidently with or without sight.

The Training Center uses Structured Discovery teaching strategies across all areas of training, including cane travel, Braille reading and writing, home management, and technology. The consistent use of Structured Discovery principles helps the participants confront and challenge the negative social attitudes about blindness that unnecessarily limit the lives of far too many blind people.

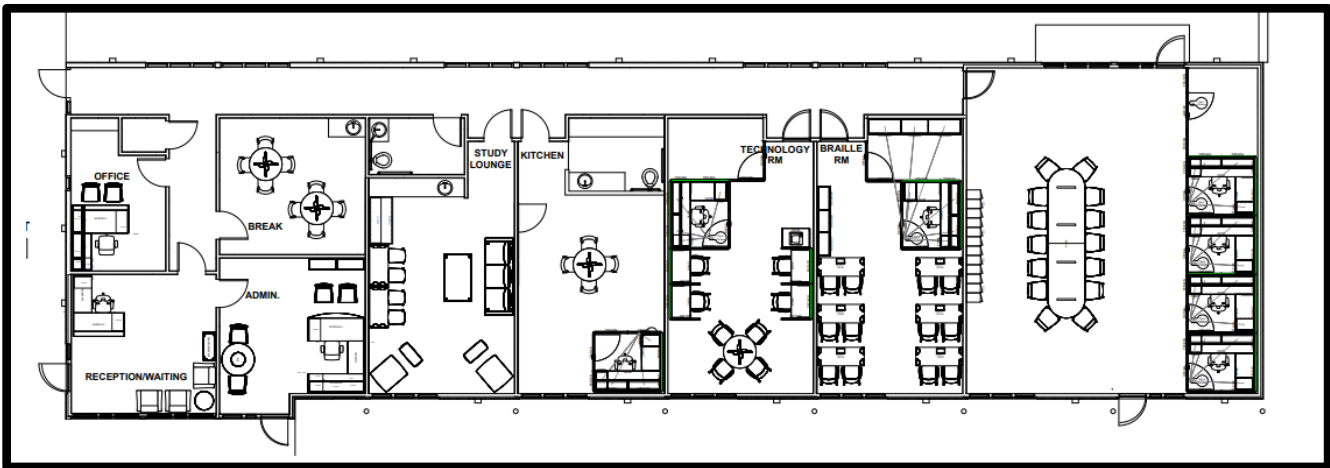
## ***OVRB Structured Discovery Center Moving the Needle 2.0 VRB New Training Center Long Beach, Mississippi***





**CONTINUED, OVRB: PROGRAM SERVICES & HIGHLIGHTS**

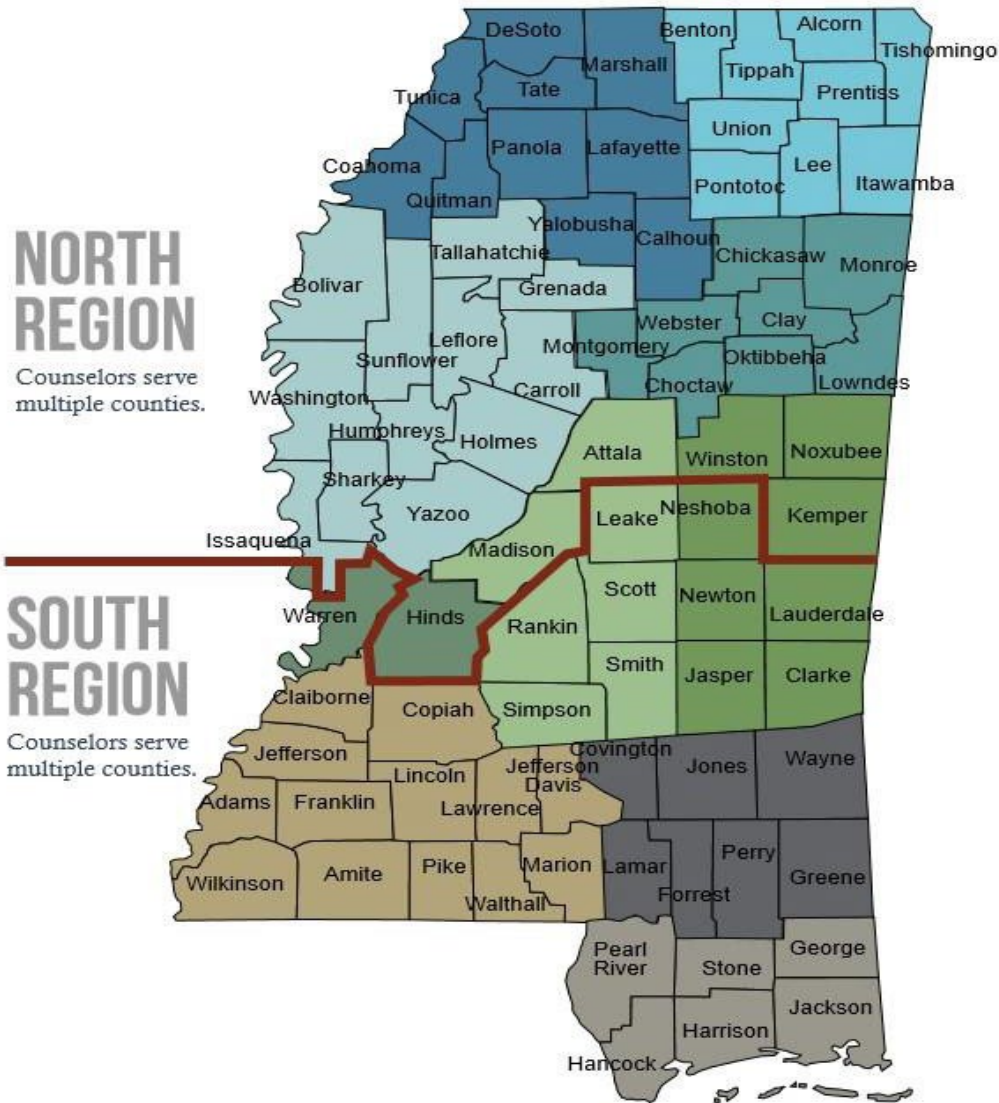
**Cont., OVRB Structured Discovery Center Moving the Needle 2.0  
VRB New Training Center**



**OVRB Moving the Needle Living Wages 2.0**

SFY Year	Consumers	Employment Outcome	Average Hourly Wage	Training
07/01/2022 – 06/30/2023	1,744	388	\$17.88	68
07/01/2021 – 06/30/2022	1,901	352	\$17.91	70
07/01/2020 – 06/30/2021	1,786	239	\$16.75	77
07/01/2019 – 06/30/2020	1,638	352	\$15.02	77
07/01/2018 – 06/30/2019	1,609	350	\$15.65	32
07/01/2017 – 06/30/2018	1,436	371	\$14.24	13
07/01/2016 – 06/30/2017	1,521	462	\$12.85	12
07/01/2015 – 06/30/2016	1,605	486	\$12.02	5
07/01/2014 – 06/30/2015	1,783	544	\$12.13	3
07/01/2013 – 06/30/2014	1,868	585	\$11.33	1
07/01/2012 – 06/30/2013	2,027	574	\$11.43	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,867</b>	<b>4,703</b>	<b>\$14.29</b>	<b>358</b>

# OVRB: REGIONAL MAP



**North Regional Manager**  
**Bryce Upshaw**  
**P.O. Box 5314**  
**Jackson, MS 39296**  
**(601)987-7407**  
**1-800-443-1000 (State Office)**

**South Regional Manager**  
**VACANT**  
**1-800-443-1000 (State Office)**

# OVR/OVRB PROGRAM FUNDING AND SERVICES (SUMMARIES)

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## OVR/OVRB: CLIENTS SERVED SUMMARY

- Clients Served.....**13,486**
- Clients Potentially Eligible ..... **2,326**
- Successfully Employed..... **2,804**
- Individualized Plans for Employment Written.....**4,805**

## OVR/OVRB: PROGRAM FUNDING

### **2023 – Section 110 Amounts**

*(Figures below are based on BY2023 State Budget Year 2023, which is July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023)*

Federal Share:	\$56,648,389	(78.7%)
State Match:	<u>\$15,331,775</u>	<u>(21.3%)</u>
Total:	\$71,980,164	

# OVR / OVRB

## EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES – CONSUMERS 2023

### EMPLOYMENT IN INTEGRATED SETTINGS

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**Top 10 Occupations of VR and VRB Consumers and the number of Clients that were employed in these occupations:**

OCCUPATIONS – CLOSED REHAB (VR/VRB)  <i>(Top Ten Occupations listed)</i>	# CLIENTS <i>(Top Ten listed)</i>	% to <u>TOP TEN</u> OCCUPATIONS (CLOSED REHAB)	% to <u>TOTAL OF</u> <u>ALL</u> OCCUPATIONS (CLOSED REHAB)
Office and Administrative Support	324	18.43%	11.55%
Management	274	15.59%	9.77%
Transportation and Material Moving	175	9.95%	6.24%
Skilled Craft	168	9.56%	5.99%
Education, Training and Library	143	8.13%	5.10%
Production	138	7.85%	4.92%
Building and Grounds Cleaning & Maintenance	136	7.74%	4.85%
Food Preparation and Serving Related	135	7.68%	4.81%
Sales and Related	135	7.68%	4.81%
Healthcare Practitioners and Technical	130	7.39%	4.64%

# OVR / OVRB

## DEMOGRAPHICS – CLIENTS SERVED 2023

### ETHNICITY / RACE

ETHNICITY / RACE	CLIENTS	% to Total
White	7,865	56.99%
Black or African American	5,520	40.00%
Hispanic or Latino	185	1.34%
American Indian / Alaskan Native	96	.70%
Asian	79	.57%
Participant did not self-identify	29	.21%
Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander	18	.13%
Not Completed	8	.06%
<b>TOTAL*</b>	<b>13,800</b>	

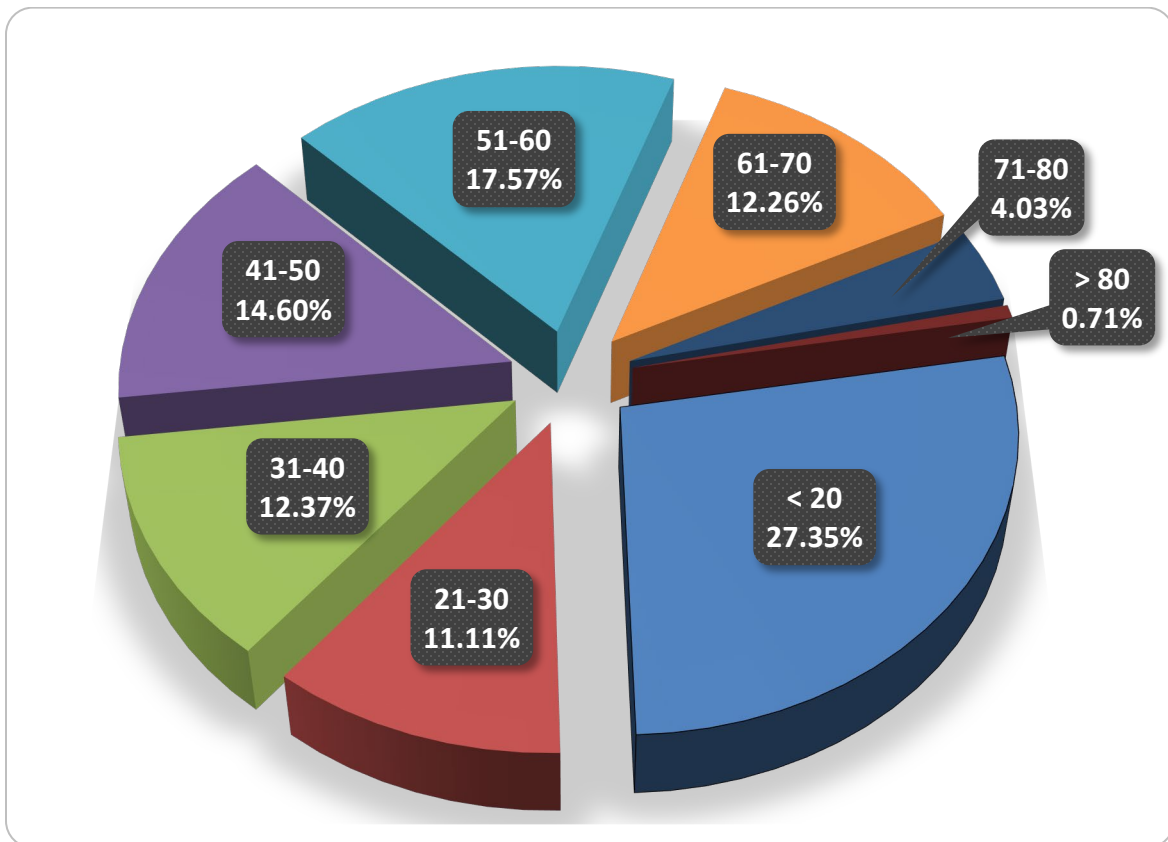
Not Hispanic or Latino	13,301	98.63%
Hispanic or Latino	185	1.37%
<b>TOTAL*</b>	<b>13,486</b>	

*\*Note: Clients can choose more than one race. The 'Multiple Race' category derived from RSA reflected a count of 129 for clients served and includes any and all other races/ethnicity counts that are listed in the above table.*

# OVR/OVRB DEMOGRAPHICS – CLIENTS SERVED 2023 AGE RANGE

AGE RANGE	# CLIENTS	%
< 20	3,689	27.35%
21-30	1,498	11.11%
31-40	1,668	12.37%
41-50	1,969	14.60%
51-60	2,369	17.57%
61-70	1,653	12.26%
71-80	544	4.03%
> 80	96	0.71%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>13,486</b>	

## VR / VRB (Combined) – AGE RANGE



# OVR Success Stories – Client Spotlight

## Just “LOVING” Coffee in Tupelo Client Spotlight: Sandy Morphis

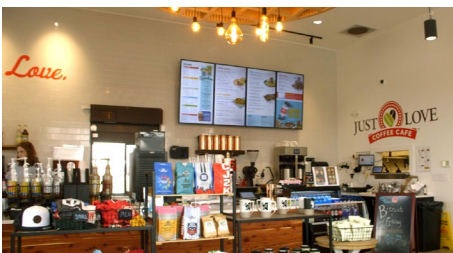
The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS), Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) prepares eligible individuals with disabilities for employment. For most VR clients, a VR Counselor will guide them on their road to employment.

But there are some clients who need additional help and that help comes through the VR Supported Employment Program. These individuals sometimes need ongoing support services to obtain and keep their job.

VR Supported Employment Counselors like Melanie Hickman are experts at helping these clients overcome workplace challenges. “These clients have a little more difficulty comprehending things and they have a harder time remembering and understanding the tasks given them. They may understand the task one day, but they might forget it the next. They have so much in their range of disabilities, but in general, it just takes longer to teach them”.

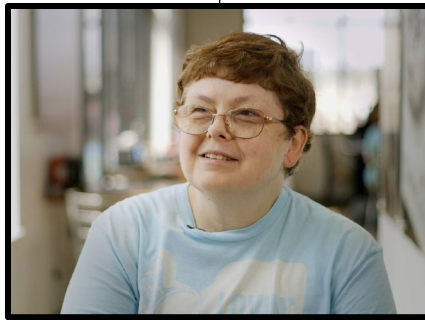
Sandy Morphis is one of Melanie’s clients. She has been hired at Just Love Coffee in Tupelo through the Supported Employment Program.

Sandy has been provided with a job coach who is on the job with her regularly to help her stay on task. KeyAndria Jones identifies the services and ongoing support Sandy needs to maintain employment. Sandy cleans the bathrooms, wipes the tables, and sweeps the floors. She has become a real asset to the Just Love Coffee team and is loved by both employees and customers.



Brent Jackson is the owner of Just Love Coffee and is glad MDRS has worked with him to provide Sandy with this opportunity.

“When I first met Sandy, it was like this instant smile. She was very thankful to be here and was such a happy person who could just brighten your day. We are always excited for those days when she works because she was just going to bring that positive energy and the smiles that we look for around here at Just Love Coffee.”



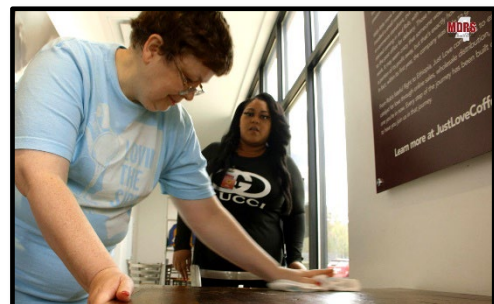
Mallory Alderman is the MDRS Business Development representative in the Tupelo area. She makes connections with local businesses like Just Love Coffee to see if VR clients would be a good fit for employment. “Sandy came to me with a vocational goal of helping with like, sort of house dining, and cleaning. And because I had a relationship with one of the HR people here, I reached out to her and said,

‘Hey, I have this wonderful client who would love to come work with y’all.’ I sat down with them, and they said that there was a need for help with wiping the tables down and sweeping and mopping. And so, they told her to come in! We did an internship for about two and a half, maybe three months and got great hands-on training with our job coach, and because the internship was so successful, they went ahead and hired her.”

Her VR Counselor, Melanie, says Sandy is a great example of a Supported Employment success story, “She fits in so well with the staff here and has a lot of natural support, and they love to look after her. The customers love her too. She is always happy, and always smiling when you come up here”.

Mallory says Sandy’s experience at Just Love Coffee is very similar to many of the successful MDRS job placements, “Most of the clients we work with are just excited to have an opportunity to go to work every day and have a normal life just like anybody else. And the reviews from the employers are always so positive. I’ve had so many people tell me time and again just how great our clients are as staff members.”

Working together, our VR Supported Employment Counselors, our Job Coaches, and Business Development Representatives provide the support needed for clients like Sandy to prepare for, and gain employment. The VR Supported Employment Program offers those with disabilities an opportunity to work in a competitive setting alongside co-workers without disabilities. They receive all the benefits of employment, including competitive wages, while learning the social and work skills necessary for success.



# OVRB – Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center: Success Stories – *Client Spotlight*

## *From Student to Instructor, Teaching Others to Live Again* Client Spotlight: Joshua Upshaw

The Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center for the Blind in Jackson is a comprehensive personal adjustment center for those who are blind, visually impaired, or deaf-blind. Individuals are taught how to overcome the challenges of blindness so they can successfully live and work independently.

It was at the Addie McBryde Center that a young Joshua Upshaw learned how to live life differently after losing his sight. Joshua was born with Microphthalmia which is an eye abnormality that arises before birth. One or both eyeballs are abnormally small. The condition almost always leads to blindness. Although Joshua was born with the disease, he did not lose his vision until he was 15 years old. After 15 years of vision, he had to learn a new way of living.



“I kind of had to not only just relearn how to do basic things, like you know, walking around school, or learning how to read a book or type on a computer, but I also had to learn how to enjoy my time, in different ways, because I basically all my hobbies before that were very visual or active.” But he determined early on that the disability would not define him or his way of life. The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services gave Joshua the program’s the tools and the support he needed to make the transition to this new way of life.

“I attended the Addie McBryde Center where they taught me to learn to use the cane, so I could navigate around independently. MDRS also helped set me up with Braille instructors that would come to my house and work with me. The agency sent me to school, gave me training, and purchased equipment for me, so that I could have the tools I needed to be independent.”



Joshua’s Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, Vanessa Bland shares, “He was so independent and always up for a challenge. I remember when he was getting some additional training at one of the centers, he knew exactly what he needed to be successful, and he requested that the need be met. I liked that he used his voice to get what he needed, and he was never afraid to voice his opinion.”

Joshua has been so successful in overcoming the challenges of blindness that he is now a Braille Instructor at the very place where he learned to live life independently. Rosie Gibson is the Director of the Addie McBryde Center. She remembers Joshua from when he was at the center as a student. “When we began taking applications for the Braille Instructor job I saw his name on the list, and I thought, I must see how this kid has turned out. Well, we interviewed like five people and Joshua was head and shoulders above everyone.”

Rosie said Joshua is living proof that the Addie McBryde Center is helping students learn to live life independently. She is proud of the work done at the Center. “It makes me feel good, and it makes me feel as if we’re doing the right thing, because when a person like Joshua comes back in a totally different role, they have a totally different mindset. When they get back here, as an instructor, they have the knowledge they have the know-how, and they have the heart for the job.”

Programs like the Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center for the Blind are just one of the many opportunities offered by the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services. These opportunities are changing lives every day.

To learn more about the Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center for the Blind visit: <https://www.mdrs.ms.gov/workforce/vrb/addie-mcbryde>





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***Your perspective is extremely valuable, and we greatly appreciate all feedback!***

***Please send direct comments or questions to:***

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