

A hand-up

MDRS helps provide opportunities for people with disabilities

By **Judy Smith**
For the Leader-Call

Many people take basic opportunities in life for granted, not realizing how fortunate they are to be seen, heard and considered for employment to contribute to society. The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services was established to assist Mississippians with disabilities, preparing them for their futures.

“We help Mississippians with disabilities obtain new careers to allow them to overcome obstacles and live more independently as they face new challenges in their lives,” said Jennifer Gray, director of the MDRS Office of Communication.

The staffers at MDRS seek to serve and help provide opportunities for many individuals who would not normally receive primary privileges in society. Under the umbrella of MDRS, there are offices focused on helping people with specific disabilities. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind offer individualized services to those with vision difficulties, helping them to obtain and maintain careers.

“We offer services such as counseling and guidance, assistive technology, training, hearing aids, physical restoration and so much more,” Gray said.

The Office of Special Disabilities Programs specializes in assisting those with traumatic brain injuries or spinal cord injuries. MSDR helps them to reside in their own homes and communities as opposed to long-term care facilities.

“Services include personal care attendants, home and vehicle modifications, and durable medical equipment,” Gray said. “Many accommodations come from our assistive technology program that can provide technology and equipment to help individuals attain their career or daily living goals.”

Job placement services are individualized for each client based on their vocational goals. MSDR partners with large and small businesses around the state to assist businesses and corporations in locating and hiring individuals with disabilities.

“We have clients who prefer to work in a factory setting, while others prefer the hospitality industry, corporate settings, hospitals, and everything in between, just to name a few examples,” Gray said.

A program that MSDR officials are eager to promote is the Project SEARCH Program. It is a unique, business-led, nine-month employment preparation program that takes place entirely at the workplace. Up to 12 students with disabilities can 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,” Gray said. “To reach that goal, the program provides real-life work experience combined with training in employability and independent living skills to help young people with significant disabilities make successful transitions to productive adult lives.”

The Project SEARCH Program has a site at South Central Regional Medical Center that was started in 2019. It started with the Jones County School District, and 14 young adults have participated in the program. In 2021-22, the Forrest County School District joined the program.

“We have 22 sites across the state,” Gray said. “Typically, MDRS and Project SEARCH partner with a school district and a business. Many are at factories or hospitals, but we do currently have two adult programs for those who are out of school.”

The Project SEARCH Program has seen incredible success and progress, and the future looks bright for this innovative program, officials agreed. Gray is honored to be a part of this program and MSDR as a whole, she said. Her favorite part of her work is seeing and being part of the success stories of their clients.

“Helping people find their independence and live more independently is our ‘Why,’” Gray said. “Knowing you made a difference at the end of the day is what matters. From parents thanking you for the Project SEARCH program and what we’ve done in their young adult’s life is a feeling like none other.”

“When you see individuals who have received prosthetic legs from our services and get the chance to observe the full impact that our services have had on the lives of those individuals, helping them change their lives and futures are amazing things to see. Our employees are dedicated to making a difference in the lives of the people we serve each and every day.”

Gray’s love and compassion for others have led her to the perfect career. Her fellow associates also love and cherish each of their clients and often go the long distance to make sure that these individuals are not discriminated against because of their disabilities. MSDR works to ensure that all individuals receive equal opportunities. It brings them joy to help in some way — large or small — to help these individuals with disabilities live full lives with independence and purpose.

“The MDRS works to assist the entire individual in all aspects of life that we can,” Gray said. “These wonderful individuals deserve the right to be seen and heard and given the same opportunities as those who are not disabled. Those are rights that all people deserve despite any differences they possess, and we are working hard to make it a level playing field for citizens with disabilities so that they may receive the same opportunities in this world as everyone else.”

For more information, visit www.mdrs.ms.gov to fill out a referral form or call 1-800-443-1000 to learn more about this organization and to reach out to someone in your county who can assist individuals with disabilities by helping them to map out their career goals based upon their individual needs. Based on the information obtained, a counselor will contact the individual and the family to begin the assessment process to help these individuals find a career path that suits them and helps them to live independent lives.



Seated L to R: T. Larry Dykes, Beat 2 Supervisor & Vice-President, Phil Dickerson, Beat 3 Supervisor & President, Travares K. Comegys, Beat 5 Supervisor

Standing L to R: Joe Berlin, Sheriff, George Walters, Beat 1 Supervisor, Danielle Ashley, CAO & Board Attorney, Concetta Brooks, Chancery Clerk, Joey Bradshaw, Beat 4 Supervisor, Charles Miller, CFO

BOARD of SUPERVISORS




LAUREN ROGERS
MUSEUM *of* ART

MONDAY: CLOSED
TUES - SAT: 10:00 AM - 4:45 PM
SUNDAY: 1 PM - 4 PM

565 N 5TH AVE | LAUREL | 601-649-6374

LRMA.ORG

The ultimate farm tool
is ready to be yours.



M Series 57.9-141.4 Gross HP Wide range of attachments

Kubota

McNeil Tractor and Equipment Company, Inc.

2635 Hwy 15 North • Laurel • 601-425-3158 • mcneiltractor.com

Serving Laurel / Jones County and the Pine Belt since 1952



Ask about our Custom Tractor and Implement Packages, Special Financing and Manager Specials!