



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

**VR PORTION OF WIOA**  
**STATE OF MISSISSIPPI - TITLE IV**  
**2024-2027**

*The Combined State Plan will take effect July 1, 2024, and cover program years 2024 through 2027 (July 1, 2024 through June 30, 2028).*

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**GEPA**

**OMB CONTROL NUMBER 1894-0005 EXPIRATION 02/28/2026**

**EQUITY FOR STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, AND OTHER PROGRAM BENEFICIARIES**

**SECTION 427 OF THE GENERAL EDUCATION PROVISION ACT (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 122a) APPLIES TO A STATE APPLICANT SUBMITTING A STATE PLAN FOR A FORMULA GRANT FROM THE US DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION. THE STATE APPLICANT IS RESPONSIBLE FOR COMPLETING THE GEPA SECTION 427 FORM THAT PROVIDES A DESCRIPTION OF THE STEPS THE STATE PROPOSEDS TO TAKE TO ENSURE ALL PROGRAM BENEFICIARIES HAVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO, AND PARTICIPATION IN, ITS FEDERALLY FUNDED, STATE-LEVEL PROJECT OF ACTIVITY.**

## PROGRAM-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (COMBINED OR GENERAL)

The Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services Portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan must include the following descriptions and estimates, as required by sections 101(a) and 606 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by title IV of WIOA.

### A. STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL

1. ALL VR AGENCIES, EXCEPT FOR THOSE THAT HAVE AN INDEPENDENT CONSUMER-CONTROLLED COMMISSION, MUST HAVE A STATE REHABILITATION COUNCIL (COUNCIL OR SRC) THAT MEETS THE CRITERIA IN SECTION 105 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT. THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY OR DESIGNATED STATE UNIT, AS APPLICABLE, HAS:

Select A or B:

*(A) is an independent State commission*

*(B) has established a State Rehabilitation Council*

(B) has established a State Rehabilitation Council

2. IN ACCORDANCE WITH ASSURANCE (A)(1)(B), IF SELECTED, PLEASE PROVIDE INFORMATION ON THE CURRENT COMPOSITION OF THE COUNCIL BY REPRESENTATIVE TYPE, INCLUDING THE TERM NUMBER OF THE REPRESENTATIVE, AS APPLICABLE, AND ANY VACANCIES, AS WELL AS THE BEGINNING DATES OF EACH REPRESENTATIVE'S TERM.

Select 'Edit' to edit the narrative.

Note, please do not edit the table header or formatting. Only edit the table contents.

If you accidentally edit the table headers and structure, open this link to the blank table. You can copy and paste the table into the narrative field, and start over if needed.

<b>Council Representative</b>	<b>Current Term Number/Vacant</b>	<b>Beginning Date of Term Mo./Yr.</b>
<b>Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)</b>	1st	7/1/24 ** (Nomination for approval will be in March 2024)
<b>Parent Training and Information Center</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Client Assistance Program</b>	Never rolls off due to position.	Never Rolls off due to position.
<b>Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor (Ex Officio if Employed by the VR Agency)</b>	2nd	7/1/21
<b>Qualified Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Counselor</b>	1st	7/1/21

<b>Council Representative</b>	<b>Current Term Number/Vacant</b>	<b>Beginning Date of Term Mo./Yr.</b>
<b>(Ex Officio if Employed by the VR Agency)</b>		
<b>Community Rehabilitation Program Service Provider</b>	Vacant	Vacant
<b>Business, Industry, and Labor</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Business, Industry, and Labor</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Business, Industry, and Labor</b>	2nd	7/1/21
<b>Business, Industry, and Labor</b>	1st	6/8/23
<b>Business, Industry, and Labor</b>	1st	6/8/23
<b>Disability Advocacy Groups</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Disability Advocacy Groups</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Disability Advocacy Groups</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Current or Former Applicants for, or Recipients of, VR services</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Current or Former Applicants for, or Recipients of, VR services</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>Current or Former Applicants for, or Recipients of, VR services</b>	1st	6/8/23
<b>Section 121 Project Directors in the State (as applicable)</b>	Never rolls off due to position.	Never rolls off due to position.
<b>State Educational Agency Responsible for Students with Disabilities Eligible to Receive Services under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>State Workforce Development Board</b>	1st	7/1/21
<b>VR Agency Director (Ex Officio)</b>	Never rolls off due to position.	Never rolls off due to position.

3. IF THE SRC IS NOT MEETING THE COMPOSITION REQUIREMENTS IN SECTION 105(B) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT AND/OR IS NOT MEETING QUARTERLY AS REQUIRED IN SECTION

105(F) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT, PROVIDE THE STEPS THAT THE VR AGENCY IS TAKING TO ENSURE IT MEETS THOSE REQUIREMENTS.

The SRC is currently meeting the composition requirements in Section 105(B) of the Rehabilitation Act and is meeting quarterly as required in Section 105(f) of the Rehabilitation Act. The State Rehabilitation Council has made recommendations to the Governor's office for current vacancies. The appointment process for members and any vacancy occurring of the council shall be appointed by the Governor. The Governor shall select members after soliciting recommendations from representatives of organizations representing a broad range of individuals in disabilities and organizations interested in individuals with disabilities. In selecting members, the appointing authority shall consider to the greatest extent practicable, the extent to which minority populations are represented on the Council.

4. IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE REQUIREMENTS IN SECTION 101(A)(21)(A)(II)(III) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT, INCLUDE A SUMMARY OF THE COUNCIL'S INPUT (INCLUDING HOW IT WAS OBTAINED) INTO THE STATE PLAN AND ANY STATE PLAN REVISIONS, INCLUDING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COUNCIL'S ANNUAL REPORTS, THE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF CONSUMER SATISFACTION AND OTHER COUNCIL REPORTS.

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) provides ongoing input and recommendations to Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (VRB) Programs for every area in the VR process of service delivery. The SRC's overarching goal and input for the state plan is to increase employment outcomes and independence for our fellow Mississippians who are living with disabilities in the communities of their choice.

**Input of the State Rehabilitation Council:**

The SRC will continue to be a strategic partner with VR/VRB to offer a premier program for individuals with disabilities in providing a one-stop service delivery for careers, training, credentials, support, and resources across the state.

A central point for the SRC input was to provide support, guidance, and recommendations to ensure the VR/VRB Program has the necessary tools, resources, and personnel to accomplish the core of WIOA. The SRC recognizes and appreciates the VR/VRB program staff that have worked in various capacities, working double caseloads, and serving clients promptly in other areas of WIOA. However, the SRC wishes to provide input and recommendations on the core staff needed to carry out WIOA and continue retaining dedicated staff to fulfill the WIOA requirements.

**State Rehabilitation Council Recommendations:**

**Recommendation 1: Supported Employment (SE) Services**

The VR/VRB program should offer more training opportunities for specialized services for individuals with disabilities. One of the trainings recommended for Supported Employment (SE) was from the ACRE. ACRE has a Supported Employment (SE) six-week online training program to become certified in Customized Employment. For five workers it costs \$1500. I think this could be beneficial for certain MDRS staff such as case workers, and better impact individuals with disabilities.

**Recommendation 2: Staff Retention and Salary**

The SRC recognizes and commends the VR current staff in providing quality services to individuals with disabilities. The SRC recommends the Designated State Unit (DSU) to continue with the pay increases, as reported to the SRC from prior meetings. The SRC recommends and will support the DSU in working with policy makers, legislators, and the hiring agency for all state employees regarding an additional salary increase to meet or exceed the Southeast average for Certified Rehabilitation Counselors and other specialized professionals such as braille teachers, orientation and mobility instructors, and vocational and evaluators that provide services in the specialized population.

**Recommendation 3: Transition**

The SRC recommends the DSU to continue Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) beginning in middle school and have a strong focus on Transition Services moving forward.

#### **Recommendation 4: Public Awareness of VR/VRB Services**

The SRC recommends more outreach to inform Mississippians that the EMERGE Center is open and to inform all partners to promote the superb services the Center provides to schools and in the community for visually impaired citizens. In addition, the SRC recommends that the VR and VRB programs continue growing connections and take further steps with provider partnerships when communicating with families.

#### **Recommendation 5: Staff Development**

The SRC recommends (due to customer complaints) the need for Customer Service Training to VR and VRB employees. Customer Service Training is recommended to all staff and not only managers. Every quarter, or every 6 months, the SRC recommends the VR program to continue to focus on staff training and to increase staff salaries.

VR and VRB agree with this recommendation and will move forward in coordinating with HRD to provide Customer Service Training and Disability Etiquette Training.

5. PROVIDE THE VR AGENCY'S RESPONSE TO THE COUNCIL'S INPUT AND RECOMMENDATIONS, INCLUDING AN EXPLANATION FOR THE REJECTION OF ANY INPUT AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

List each recommendation/input followed by the VR agency response

The VR and VRB Directors attended all meetings of the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) and responded to questions from the SRC. The VR/VRB Directors have reviewed the recommendations, comments, and input of the Council and agree to provide the SRC with updates regarding the numbers served, overall performance data, and recommendations made by the Council to be implemented. The Designated State Unit (DSU) will keep the recommendations on the forefront of decisions in the categories identified in this report.

#### **DSU Responses to Specific Questions, Recommendations, and Input:**

##### **Supported Employment (SE) Services:**

**DSU response:** In response to offering more training opportunities for specialized services for individuals with disabilities and the recommendation of utilizing the training from ACRE, VR and VRB will evaluate this training opportunity for Supportive Employment (SE) staff and will report the results to the SRC. VR/VRB agrees that this would be beneficial for certain MDRS staff such as case workers and better impact individuals with disabilities. VR and VRB agree with this recommendation and will move forward in coordinating with HRD to provide Customer Service Training and Disability Etiquette Training.

##### **Staff Retention and Salary:**

**DSU response:** Staff vacancies have impacted VR and VRB. We have had an overall sufficient staff to work the individuals we serve. New positions have been requested and the need for new positions have been identified. A vacant Counselor position does have a direct impact of service delivery. MDRS has provided staff in-range adjustments of up to 10% to assist in the retention of Counselors and Counselor Assistants. VR/VRB appreciates the support of the SRC in recognizing the value of the Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and other program staff that are essential in fulfilling the WIOA Requirements. VR/VRB agrees with the recommendations of further exploring the staff salary increases for current staff and will work with the SRC, as a partner, to ensure qualified staff are compensated at a living wage that meets or exceeds the Southeast average.

##### **Transition:**

**DSU response:** VR and VRB will implement outreach meetings and service coordination for local schools within the state. This process will provide more guidance, the staff with the

necessary requirements, and the attendance that is required for individuals obligated to be present. Due to changes in the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) diploma options in our state, additional classrooms hours are required. These outreach sessions will be scheduled during staff development time periods that schools have available. VR and VRB would also like to implement dedicated outreach staff to assist in coordinating these efforts. VR and VRB will also coordinate with the Mississippi Parent Training Center to attend scheduled meetings held at schools where parents will be in attendance, as well as requesting their assistance in disseminating information to parents.

VR has several pilot projects and initiatives spearheaded by the VR and VRB dedicated staff with a goal of meeting middle school students in their community and district areas. The goal of these projects and initiatives are two-fold: (1) increase awareness of VR services to students and families in school; and (2) strengthen the counselor and client relationship in serving students by the counselor leading the project and initiatives in their communities.

#### **Public Awareness of VR/VRB Services:**

**DSU response:** VR and VRB agrees with the SRC recommendation of more outreach to bring awareness of and access to VR services. We are proposing a pilot outreach program to schools and in the community to be performed by a third-party staff. The goal of the third-party providing outreach is to have a more present, consistent, and flexible outreach program that will aim at providing outreach services after the normal state core hours. VR and VRB are also working on more suitable marketing material and to be consistent for our youth and adult audiences. This includes brochures, social media, and informational packets.

#### **Staff Training Development:**

**DSU response:** VR and VRB agrees with the SRC recommendation for more quality training for all staff and not just the managers. VR and VRB agrees with the SRC recommendation for more quality training for all staff - not just managers. VR and VRB has worked with managers and front-line staff in providing Customer Service Training to staff-on-staff development by providing training on several topics. VR and VRB will move forward in coordinating with our Human Resource Development Department (HRD) to provide Customer Service Training and Disability Etiquette Training. VR and VRB will invite SRC members to staff training to better understand our programs, orient SRC members with the Orientation Committee, and inform SRC members through utilization of various resources.

## **B. COMPREHENSIVE STATEWIDE NEEDS ASSESSMENT (CSNA)**

Section 101(a)(15), (17), and (23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to provide an assessment of:

### **1. THE VR SERVICES NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES RESIDING WITHIN THE STATE, INCLUDING:**

#### **A. INDIVIDUALS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES AND THEIR NEED FOR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT;**

VR, VRB and the Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council (SRC), contracted with Public Consulting Group (PCG) and conducted a comprehensive statewide needs assessment that was completed in June 2021. To inform this state plan of the needs of individuals with disabilities in Mississippi, the information used is based on the results of the 2021 statewide needs assessment and has been updated with information from the 2021 Disability Status Report for Mississippi to show a continuation of trends and service needs. VR, VRB and the SRC have contracted with Berry Dunn State Government Practice Group to conduct a new comprehensive statewide needs assessment that will be completed in December 2024.

The 2021 Disability Status Report for Mississippi which is based on the 2021 American Community Survey, indicates that the overall percentage of working aged people with disability in Mississippi was 17.1 percent. In other words, in 2021, 271,000 of the 1.5 million individuals ages 21 to 64 reported one or more disabilities. In Mississippi, this highest prevalence rate was for “Ambulatory Disability” 8.6 percent. The lowest prevalence rate was Self-Care disability, 2.8 percent. According to this information, Mississippi has the second highest prevalence rate for individuals with disability in the United States.

The American Community Survey in 2019 indicates that the Northern District population with a visual disability is 52,606 and the Southern District population with a vision disability is 59,824. Almost 60% of the Mississippi population has a vision disability are age 55 or older and 5.6% are 13 or younger.

The 2021 Comprehensive Needs Assessment and the results of consumer satisfaction information identify the following service needs that continue to reoccur across both assessments related to the needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, including the need for supported employment.

#### **The specific service needs identified are:**

- Provide staff training in multicultural awareness and develop awareness of staff of socio-economic issues that may interfere with a person’s ability to stay engaged in the VR process.
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling and Guidance
- College/vocational training,
- Work experience training, on-the-job training, and social skills training,
- Job Search/Placement Services
- Vocational Assessment/Evaluation
- Transportation



- Continue to develop resources and tools to be able to communicate with individuals who are Spanish speaking.
- Increase outreach and availability of VR Services in areas of the state with the largest populations of African American, Native American, and Hispanic populations.
- Collaborate with minority businesses and service providers that are in the community to develop relationships that lead to employment.
- Staff training and service provider training are needed to serve the increasing number of individuals with significant mental health impairments.
- Social Skills Training and Job Readiness Training for individuals who have Autism and other impairments who need social skills training.
- Since the number of individuals in the state working in subminimum wage employment continues to decrease, VR, VRB and its network of providers need to ensure ongoing capacity to meet the demand by further developing capacity to provide supported and customized employment services.
- Structured Discovery Training for individuals with blindness and other visual impairments
- Additional benefits, resources for individuals with disabilities, education and training funding, more money/higher income and potential loss of benefits as some of the highest financial needs.
- Increase collaboration with the Choctaw Indian Vocational Rehabilitation entity to target services that are not provided by Choctaw VR to assist in increasing employment in the community.
- VR Counseling and Guidance to assist Career Exploration to obtain access to services that will provide support in employment with competitive wages.
- Continue outreach activities to identify the needs of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to ensure the provision of preemployment transition services that will help increase their opportunities for competitive integrated employment including supported employment.
- Individuals with disabilities receive financial literacy, benefits planning and counseling to help them understand work incentives.
- Alternative training for individuals with blindness and other visual impairments such as Structured Discovery Training.

#### **B. INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES WHO ARE MINORITIES AND INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES WHO HAVE BEEN UNSERVED OR UNDERSERVED BY THE VR PROGRAM;**

According to the 2021 Disability Status Report for Mississippi, the prevalence of disability among persons who are minority are as follows: 11.5 percent or 5,500 for people of Hispanic/Latino origin, 18.3 percent or 105,700 people for Black/African Americans, 2.6 percent or 400 people for Asian Americans and 17.7 percent or 1400 for Native Americans. This data indicates that Black/African Americans and Native Americans experience disability at a higher rate than other ethnic groups.

Ex-offenders and youth offenders constitute a growing population in Mississippi. According to statistical reports obtained from the Mississippi Workforce Development System, there are 6,920 ex-offenders, aged 18-64, who have barriers to employment.

In PY 2022, VR and VRB served 51 individuals who identified as American Indian which is 0.7% of the overall number served by both programs, 57 individuals who identified as Asian which is 0.8% of the number served by both programs, 3,171 individuals who identified as Black/African American which is 41.8% of individuals served by both programs and 110 that identified as Hispanic/Latino which is 1.3% of individuals served by both programs. VR and VRB served 4,387 individuals who identified as White which is 57.5% of the number of individuals served by both programs.

VR and VRB will continue to expand the outreach efforts to minorities targeted in the 14 poverty areas in Mississippi to raise awareness and improve accessibility to VR services. The newly implemented VR Pilot Outreach Team, provided by a third-party provider, will help the VR core program staff deliver VR services and outreach. The VR Pilot Outreach Team's efforts will be, but not limited to the following:

- offer outreach at non-traditional times, especially after work hours (weekends) and after the regular core hours of VR;
- meet people *where they are*;
- be respectful;
- listen to the community;
- provide outreach in a non-stigmatizing manner;
- offer outreach in a variety of locations, including home visits, and at non-traditional times, especially after work hours; and
- consistent follow-up after each outreach.

Additionally, this outreach will target community health clinics, health departments, community health advisors, and nursing programs, which are well-known forms of delivery outreach in urban and rural areas. The VR Pilot Outreach Program will provide education and information in different ways, such as one-on-one meetings or group presentations, and distribution of localized information to make a personal connection when the consumer is available in their community.

As the VR Outreach Team connects with the individual with a disability, the VR core staff will follow-up with personal phone calls and meetings to ensure individuals understand and know *how to* use the available VR services. The VR expanded outreach will deliver VR services targeted at the needs of consumers who may have barriers with transportation, low income, lack of health insurance, and cultural differences.

#### C. INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES SERVED THROUGH OTHER COMPONENTS OF THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM; AND

In Mississippi, individuals with disabilities are served in all components of the Workforce Development system, both as universal customers and in eligibility-based programs. Mississippi has developed a Workforce system that identifies consumers by a Workforce ID. This ID is used and is assigned as individuals with disabilities apply for services across all Workforce programs. The goal of this ID, as well as the Workforce HUB, is to share information across programs and

braided resources to provide more effective services, share information, and provide better comprehensive services to individuals with disabilities across the programs.

**D. YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR NEED FOR PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES. INCLUDE AN ASSESSMENT OF THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES FOR TRANSITION CAREER SERVICES AND PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES, AND THE EXTENT TO WHICH SUCH SERVICES ARE COORDINATED WITH TRANSITION SERVICES PROVIDED UNDER IDEA.**

OVR and OVRB have committed considerable time and resources into developing services for youth and students with disabilities. Significant progress has been made in the last two (2) years.

Due to the impact of COVID-19 during PY 2019-2021, OVR and OVRB was impacted significantly in our ability to access and provide services to students with disabilities. After schools opened, the Mississippi Department of Education changed their diploma options that greatly impacted the service delivery to students. The new diploma options required more classroom hours and classes. However, VR and VRB continue to work on outreach to students in order to provide Pre-Employment Transition services to those in need of Pre-ETS. Significant progress has been made in the last two (2) years. The Mississippi Department of Education reports over 20,000 students with disabilities.

According to the 2021 Disability Status Report, the overall percentage of individuals with disability ages 16 to 20 was 9.2 percent or 19,900. Among the six types of disabilities, was Cognitive Disability, 5.7 percent or 12,400, Hearing Disability 1.1 or 2,400, Visual Disability 2.7 or 5,900, Ambulatory Disability 3.29, 3,500, Self-Care Disability 0.7 percent or 1,600 and Independent Living 3.2 or 7,100. OVR and OVRB has in place 143 Memorandum of Understanding with local education agencies in the state, as well as one with the Mississippi Department of Education that is used as a guide to coordinate transition services provided under IDEA.

The 2021 CSNA respondents consisted of potentially eligible students with a disability, VR eligible students, out of school youth, students in training and parents of transition students from four regions of the state. Respondents indicated the following are the most needed services in helping achieve employment:

- Job Search/Placement Services,
- Vocational Rehabilitation Counseling and Guidance,
- Transportation,
- Job Coaching,
- Work experience,
- College/vocational training,
- Work experience training,
- On-the-job training,
- Social skills training
- Vocational Assessment/Evaluation,

- Peer Mentoring
- Pre-Employment Transition Services – Work Based Learning, Job Readiness, Career Exploration and Self-Advocacy
- Work adjustment training for individuals who have Autism and other social skill impairments, and
- Structured Discovery Training for individuals with blindness and other visual impairments

## 2. IDENTIFY THE NEED TO ESTABLISH, DEVELOP, OR IMPROVE COMMUNITY REHABILITATION PROGRAMS WITHIN THE STATE.

Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRP) in Mississippi provide an array of services to adults, students and youth that will assist them in achieving Competitive Integrated Employment.

### **Community Rehabilitation Programs to Provide Pre-Employment Transition Services**

According to the CSNA 2021, when considering the number and capacity of Pre-Employment Transition Service (Pre-ETS) Pre-ETS providers, it is important to recognize that providers are one component of VR Pre-ETS delivery. Given the successes reported by some Pre-ETS providers, they can be part of the solution to addressing unmet needs of youth with disabilities.

VR acknowledges that third-party providers continue to be part of the solution as they evaluate opportunities to enhance and advance opportunities for students with disabilities. CSNA results indicate that there is a need for continued expansion of Pre-ETS, with an emphasis on work-based learning and self-advocacy. Research indicates that participation in Work-Based Learning experiences prior to exiting high school are 4.5 times more likely to be employed after high school.

In 2023, eleven (11) new Pre-ETS providers have provider agreements to provide these services to potentially eligible and eligible students with disabilities: Wesson-Monroe, LLC, Public Consultant Group, Inc. University of Southern Mississippi-ToTAL, National Federation for the Blind-Peer Mentoring, The ARC of Mississippi, Career Development & Training Institute, Legacy Learning, 360 Degree Academy, Goodwill Industries of Mississippi, One-on-One Life Career Services, and Good Shepherd. A new RFQ was advertised in December 2023 in order to obtain new Pre-ETS providers.

### **Office of Vocational Rehabilitation - Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP)**

#### **AbilityWorks, Inc.**

A vital part of the program of services provided by VR is the utilization of a network of CRPs, referred to as AbilityWorks, Inc. (AW). There are currently fifteen (15) facilities located strategically around Mississippi and each location provides intensive Vocational Assessment services, Community-Based Work Experiences, Work Adjustment training, Job-Readiness training, and Counseling and Guidance. The provision of these services along with the business relationships each AW maintains in their respective area makes transitioning from the facility to Competitive Integrated Employment seamless for those served.

**AbilityWorks locations throughout the state and service area are:**

- **Harrison County Service Areas:** Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Pearl River, Stone, George;
- **Olive Branch Service Areas:** Desoto, Marshall, Tate, Tunica;
- **Tupelo Service Areas:** Lee, Pontotoc, Itawamba, Union;
- **Laurel Service Areas:** Covington, Jasper, Jones, Smith, Wayne;
- **Meridian Service Areas:** Clark, Kemper, Lauderdale, Neshoba, Newton, Winston;
- **Jackson Service Areas:** Hinds, Madison, Rankin, Scott, Simpson, Warren;
- **Corinth Service Areas:** Alcorn, Benton, Prentiss, Tippah, Tishomingo;
- **Starkville Service Areas:** Clay, Oktibbeha, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Webster, Montgomery;
- **Kosciusko Service Areas:** Attala, Leake, Neshoba, Rankin;
- **Columbus Service Areas:** Lowndes, Clay, Monroe;
- **Brookhaven Service Areas:** Adams, Amite, Copiah, Claiborne, Franklin, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Lawrence, Lincoln, Marion, Pike, Walthall, Wilkerson;
- **Greenwood Service Areas:** Leflore, Carroll, Holmes, Grenada, Bolivar, Sunflower, Humphreys, Tallahatchie, Yazoo;
- **Washington County Service Areas:** Washington, Sunflower, Bolivar, Issaquena, Sharkey;
- **Hattiesburg Service Areas:** Forrest, Greene, Lamar, Perry; and
- **Oxford Service Areas:** Calhoun, Coahoma, Panola, Lafayette, Quitman, Yalobusha.

### **Mobile Evaluation and Assessments**

AbilityWorks currently makes Vocational Assessment services mobile to students with disabilities who are potentially eligible and eligible for VR by going to the school districts within the AbilityWorks service areas to provide in-depth, comprehensive Vocational Assessments in a short time frame. The need to expand this service has been identified. The objective of a mobile evaluation system is to extend evaluation services to adults and students beyond the transportation range of AbilityWorks and/or be able to work with local education agencies within their schedule for the student without the student having to leave the school. Evaluators currently utilize agency vehicles to make this service mobile. As the number served increases, the need for additional transportation and staff will also increase.

### **Pre-Employment Transition Work Readiness Training – Project GROW (Getting Ready for Opportunities at Work)**

VR has identified the need to provide Pre-Employment (Pre-ETS) non-school based Job Readiness Training to students with disabilities. This Pre-ETS Training will be scheduled and offered to students who are eligible for VR services during times when they are not in school such as summer break, nine-week intersession, spring break, etc.. Participants will receive a training stipend for their participation in the program. When coordinated with the local education agency, the program can also be extended to students in need of the service while they are not in school/class.

## **Community Rehabilitation Programs to better serve individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other individuals with Social Skills Disorders**

Unemployment among individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is approximately 85%. This means that roughly two-thirds (2/3) of people with autism are not working. From fiscal year 2022 to 2023, the number of individuals with ASD closed other than rehabilitated decreased by 37%. The number of individuals with ASD served increased approximately 2 %. Currently, there is no Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) that specifically addresses the extended support needs of individuals with ASD, despite research suggesting the need for more comprehensive services to improve employment outcomes. VR has a Program Specialist for Autism Services.

To ensure that clients with ASD receive the needed services, training courses on working with individuals with Autism are held twice a year. VR AbilityWorks staff and Vocational Training Instructors (VTI) throughout the state participate in training regarding working with clients with Autism. The Supported Employment (SE) Program Specialist and the Autism Program Specialist work together to ensure that new VTIs receive training on working with clients with ASD.

In February 2024, VR hired a Program Specialist that will coordinate services for Vocational Assessment services, Psychological Evaluation services and Pre-ETS Job-Readiness Training at AbilityWorks. VR will enter into contract with a Behavioral Specialist(s) to work with the Autism Program Coordinator, SE Coordinator, and Vocational Assessment Specialist to assist in developing and providing Pre-Employment Transition Job Readiness and Social Skills training for individuals with ASD. This training will be provided at designated AbilityWorks locations. Overall, this training will help enhance the possibility of successful employment opportunities through individualized services to meet workforce demands and improve the lives of individuals with ASD, create a more comprehensive service program through the provision of multiple services such as soft skills training, functional living skills, interviewing skills, Pre-ETS Job Readiness training, and provide direct instruction in social interaction in multiple settings in order to increase the ability of individuals with ASD to participate in Community Based Work Experiences, as well as increase individuals with ASD the ability to obtain and maintain employment.

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

#### **The Addie McBryde Center – Community Residential Rehabilitation Center**

Addie McBryde provides services for consumers who are Blind or Visually Impaired through either a residential or day program where individuals participate in classes such as orientation and mobility, techniques of daily living, and personal management.

The Addie McBryde Rehabilitation Center is a comprehensive personal adjustment center for adults who are Blind, Visually Impaired or Deaf-Blind. Through a program of training offered to both residential and day clients, individuals participate in class learning skills which enable the client to successfully live and work independently. Established in 1972, the center is located on the campus of the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi. The facility has a dormitory capacity for 28 clients, a gymnasium, a client library, and classrooms equipped with specialized technology for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Certified Instructors individualize training to meet the client's needs during the class day from 8:00 AM to 3:00 PM. Clients participate in additional activities in the 'Achieving Milestones' class focusing on adjustment to vision loss, confidence building, resume writing, interviewing, and utilizing resources in the community.

These facilities provide a variety of services including Vocational Evaluation, Work Adjustment Training, Community-Based Work Experiences, counseling, and transportation. All services are individualized to meet the needs of the individual served in preparation for Competitive Integrated Employment.

### **Mississippi EMERGE Center**

Seeing the need for a non-traditional training center to serve Mississippians with visual impairments, the EMERGE Center was established as a companion to the Addie McBryde Center.

The EMERGE Center is located on the Mississippi Gulf Coast (Mississippi Center), provides Structured Discovery Training. In addition, the CSNA identified the need to expand CRPs in capacity and access for non-traditional training, including Structured Discovery methodology. MDRS requested an RSA prior approval for establishing an additional Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) offering the Structured Discovery methodology and was granted the RSA Prior approval in 2023.

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. 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 MS. EMERGE Center is on target to open and begin receiving referrals in March 2024.

VRB will need additional staff positions that are not identified in the CSPD list of the current employees list in this State Plan.

## **C. GOALS, PRIORITIES, AND STRATEGIES**

Section 101(a)(15) and (23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to describe the goals and priorities of the State in carrying out the VR and Supported Employment programs. The goals and priorities are based on (1) the most recent CSNA, including any updates; (2) the State's performance under the performance accountability measures of Section 116 of WIOA; and (3) other available information on the operation and effectiveness of the VR program, including any reports received from the SRC and findings and recommendations from monitoring activities conducted under Section 107 of the Rehabilitation Act. VR agencies must—

**1. DESCRIBE HOW THE SRC AND THE VR AGENCY JOINTLY DEVELOPED AND AGREED TO THE GOALS AND PRIORITIES AND ANY REVISIONS; AND**

The SRC and the VR agency jointly developed and agreed to the goals and priorities and any revisions. VR leadership took into account all recommendations and input from the SRC as well from the public and communities. Additional input and discussion was provided at our March 2024 meeting with the SRC again approving the State Plan.

**2. IDENTIFY MEASURABLE GOALS AND PRIORITIES IN CARRYING OUT THE VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS AND THE BASIS FOR SELECTING THE GOALS AND PRIORITIES (E.G., CSNA, PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES, SRC RECOMMENDATIONS, MONITORING, OTHER INFORMATION). AS REQUIRED IN SECTION 101(A)(15)(D), (18), AND (23), DESCRIBE UNDER EACH GOAL OR PRIORITY, THE STRATEGIES OR METHODS USED TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL OR PRIORITY, INCLUDING AS APPLICABLE, DESCRIPTION OF STRATEGIES OR METHODS THAT—**

**A. SUPPORT INNOVATION AND EXPANSION ACTIVITIES;**

**B. OVERCOME BARRIERS TO ACCESSING VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES;**

**C. IMPROVE AND EXPAND VR SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING THE COORDINATION OF SERVICES DESIGNED TO FACILITATE THE TRANSITION OF SUCH STUDENTS FROM SCHOOL TO POSTSECONDARY LIFE (INCLUDING THE RECEIPT OF VR SERVICES, POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES); AND**

**D. IMPROVE THE PERFORMANCE OF THE VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS IN ASSISTING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES TO ACHIEVE QUALITY EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES.**

List and number each goal/priority, noting the basis, and under each goal/priority, list and number the strategies to achieve the goal/priority

The PY 2024-2027 goals and priorities are based on the 2021 Comprehensive Needs Assessment, in-agency case reviews, VR RSA Data Dashboard information, consumer satisfaction information, suggestions and recommendations from the staff and the SRC. In 2022, VR and VRB met and, in some areas, exceeded its performance goals based on the performance data provided by the RSA - Data Dashboard. Since 2015, the VR and VRB staff performance development system changed as a result of the Common Performance Measures and the RSA 911. We continue to monitor performance information to ensure that VR and VRB are continuing to service individuals with significant disabilities to prepare for, obtain, maintain and advance in employment. A description of the goals and strategies are as follows:



## **A. SUPPORT INNOVATION AND EXPANSION ACTIVITIES;**

### **Support innovation and expansion activities.**

1. Overcome barriers to accessing VR and Supported Employment (SE) services.
2. Improve and expand VR services for students with disabilities, including the coordination of services designed to facilitate the transition of such students from school to postsecondary life (including the receipt of VR services, postsecondary education, employment, and Pre-ETS).
3. Improve the performance of the VR and SE programs in assisting individuals with disabilities to achieve quality employment outcomes.

### **GOAL 1: Improve the employment, economic stability, and self-sufficiency of eligible individuals with disabilities.**

#### **Strategies:**

1. Develop a job placement culture by providing ongoing training in job development and the job placement process at Measure: least annually.
2. Provide consumers served with in-demand labor market information to assist in determining vocational goals that are consistent with their employment factors; this will begin at application, be a targeted focus at IPE development, and continue periodically throughout the life of the case.
3. Increase collaboration within the workforce system and play a stronger role on state and local Workforce Boards to assure that consumers and other individuals with disabilities are better served by the One-Stop system. Measure: To ensure this occurs our Regional Managers will attend at least four Local Workforce Development Area quarterly meetings each year.
4. Increase collaboration with SEA/LEAs to improve the coordination of VR Services and referrals of students with disabilities to VR and VRB. Measure: This will be accomplished by reviewing and updating our MOU's every three years.
5. Increase collaboration with colleges and universities to improve coordination of VR Services and referrals of students with disabilities to VR and VRB. Measure: Increase the number of students enrolled in secondary education
6. Implement written agreements with providers for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to affirm their roles and responsibilities for serving VR and VRB consumers, including their capacity for providing long-term employment supports to individuals after the individual exists the VR or VRB program rehabilitated.
7. Refer individuals receiving SSI/SSDI cash benefits who are interested in earnings that will eliminate their reliance on SSA cash benefits for work incentives Benefits Analysis and Counseling. .
8. Provide summer internship opportunities for out of school youth, students in post-secondary education and adults with disabilities.
9. Develop and implement on-campus work experience training for students who reside in rural communities when Community-Based Work Experience is not available.

10. Continue the referral process between MDRS and DMH to identify youth with the *most significant disabilities* who will require SE services. Measure: The SE coordinator will monitor the process every six months to determine if changes are needed.
11. Continue the referral process between the VR Transition/Youth Counselor and the VR Supported Employment (SE) Counselor for students with disabilities, ages 14-21, who have been determined to need long-term ongoing support services.
12. Develop policies and practices in order to enhance the capacity to meet the competitive employment needs of transition age youth with mental illness using supported employment and/or supported education.
13. Ensure equitable distribution of the funds.
14. Obtain service providers for Supported Employment, including Customized Employment. Measure: We will attempt to add at least two new providers annually.
15. Train VR and VRB Counselors in Supported Employment and the benefit of on the job supports and long-term support services. Measure: Annually.

**GOAL 2: Implement identified improvements to increase statewide consistency and quality of services to individuals with disabilities.**

**Strategies:**

1. Use results of the annual case reviews to determine where additional guidance and training are required. This will be determined by reviewing our program evaluation case work accuracy reports. Measure: As part of a counselor's performance review, they will be required to maintain a 90% accuracy rate; those who score at least 90% will be referred for further, more specific training.
2. Survey VR and VRB staff on an annual basis to obtain self-identified areas that need to be addressed through training.
3. Each Program Coordinator will attend at least one conference to obtain information on best practices from other states and will share what they've learnt with all agency staff.
4. Implement at least two written agreements with providers for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to affirm their roles and responsibilities for serving VR consumers.
5. VR and VRB leadership will work with other core partners in the workforce system to prevent any duplication. This will be achieved by attending and participating in our State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB) collaboration sessions throughout the year.

**B. OVERCOME BARRIERS TO ACCESSING VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES;**

**GOAL 3:** VR and VRB will also continue to target individuals with disabilities who are already working to retain or progress in employment, previous VR and VRB consumers who may have lost employment to become reemployed, college students nearing completion of their academic programs, high school transition age youth with disabilities, individual with blindness and visual impairments, individuals with deafness and hearing impairments and youth and adults with most significant disabilities.

**Strategies:**

1. Through outreach, education and marketing efforts targeted to individuals with disabilities, VR and VRB will continue to broaden the population of individuals with disabilities being served which includes minorities with disabilities and those unserved and underserved as identified in the most recent CSNA. To ensure this occurs, outreach will be added to the staff's performance appraisals and measured bi-annually.
2. Continue the referral process between MDRS and DMH to identify 'youth with mental illness and other psychological conditions.
3. Increase the number of individuals closed rehabilitated with a Supported Employment Outcome by 30% by 2027.
4. Update and distribute vocational rehabilitation brochures to appropriate referral sources, including local education agencies. Annually, our Office of Communication will review all printed and digital media to ensure it remains current.

**C. IMPROVE AND EXPAND VR SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, INCLUDING THE COORDINATION OF SERVICES DESIGNED TO FACILITATE THE TRANSITION OF SUCH STUDENTS FROM SCHOOL TO POSTSECONDARY LIFE (INCLUDING THE RECEIPT OF VR SERVICES, POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES); AND**

**GOAL 4: Implement a statewide model for more effectively serving high school youth and students with disabilities including individuals with visual and/or hearing impairments.**

**Strategies:**

1. Engage with key partners such as the Department of Education, State Rehabilitation Council, high school, community colleges and other training and education program in designing an improved service delivery model that will develop stronger partnerships to place increased emphasis on serving high school students with disabilities who are in transition from secondary education to postsecondary education, employment, and training.
2. Plan and coordinate with the Mississippi Department of Education-Special Education Director, Director of 504 Services and local education agencies to plan and conduct at least annual training and semi-annual work groups for the purpose of cross-training in understanding the services offered by VR and VRB.
3. Annually identify 504 Coordinators and special education staff for each school.
4. Annually identify additional secondary education staff at the local school districts to help bring awareness to VR services that will lead to increasing referrals of students with disabilities in need of VR services including Pre-Employment Transition Services.
5. Develop and implement self-identification tool identifying youth with disabilities who could possibly benefit from transition services that will be used as an outreach tool with local education agencies, as well as other agencies or individuals serving students with disabilities and have the tool vetted, approved, and in use by 2027.
6. Establish relationships with parent training and information groups, advocacy groups and other service providers to encourage referral and parental participation in the development and provision of VR Services, including Pre-Employment Transition services.

7. Designate specific staff persons to receive, provide information and release referrals for students with disabilities to the designated VR or VRB Counselor.
8. Continue the referral process between the VR Transition and Counselor serving out of school youth and the VR Supported Employment (SE) Counselor for students with disabilities, ages 14-21, who have been determined to need long-term ongoing support services.
9. Develop policies and practices in order to enhance the capacity to meet the competitive employment needs of transition age youth with mental illness using supported employment and/or supported education and have these policies officially documented in our Resource Guide for staff by 2025.

**D. IMPROVE THE PERFORMANCE OF THE VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS IN ASSISTING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES TO ACHIEVE QUALITY EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES.**

VR and VRB will work diligently to improve the performance of the VR and Supported Employment Programs by completing the strategies detailed in Goals 1-4. goals

## **D. EVALUATION AND REPORTS OF PROGRESS: VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT GOALS**

For the most recently completed program year, provide an evaluation and report of progress for the goals or priorities, including progress on the strategies under each goal or priority, applicable to that program year. Sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act require VR agencies to describe—

### **1. PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING THE GOALS AND PRIORITIES IDENTIFIED FOR THE VR AND SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAMS;**

List the goals/priorities and discuss the progress or completion of each goal/priority and related strategies

#### **GOAL I: Improve the employment, economic stability, and self-sufficiency of eligible individuals with disabilities.**

##### **Report of Progress:**

- In SFY 2022 (PY21), there were 2,110 VR consumers that obtained an employment outcome and 352 VRB consumers obtained an employment outcome. In SFY 2023 (PY22), there were 2,416 VR consumers that obtained an employment outcome and 388 VRB consumers obtained an employment outcome.
- In SFY 2022 (PY21), the MSG rate was 72.1% and in SFY 2023 (PY22) the MSG rate was 76.4%.
- The median hourly wage for individuals exiting the VR/VRB program with an employment outcome has increased. In 2018 the median wage was \$11.54, and the median hours worked per week was 40 hours. In 2019 the median wage increased to \$12.00 per hour and in 2020 the median wage increased to \$13.00.
- In SFY 2022 (PY21), 4,509 IPEs were signed and in SFY 2023 (PY22), 4,805 new IPEs were signed.
- Three Youth Pre-Employment Transition Conferences were held in Vicksburg on April 26, 2018, Greenwood on May 22, 2018, and Biloxi on April 28, 2018. Due to COVID-19, Transition Conferences were postponed in 2019 -2021.
- In 2021, 363 received job prep and 284 received job search services and 130 received job placement.
- In 2021, 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer Internship for Students with Blindness was completed, and eight (8) students participated. The 2020 Annual Summer Internship was postponed due to COVID-19. Four (4) consumers were hired into competitive integrated employment after completing their internship.
- In PY 2022, 774 referrals were received by CWICS for Benefits Counseling. 133 were VR and VRB Transition students. July 2023 -December 31, 2023, 348 referrals were received by CWICS for Benefits Counseling. 78 were VR and VRB Transition students.
- In PY 2022, 9,861 individual contacts to businesses in the state were made by the BD staff. In PY 2023, 13,106 individual contacts to businesses were made by the Office of Business Development (BD) staff.

- In PY 2022, a total of four Job Fairs were held in Southaven, Jackson, University of Southern Mississippi located in Hattiesburg and The University of Mississippi located in Oxford, Mississippi. In PY 2023, a total of four Job Fairs were held in Southaven, Jackson, Hattiesburg, and Meridian.
- In PY 2022, one Job Extravaganza was held at the Institute of Disability Studies located in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. In PY 2023, a total of four Job Extravaganzas were held at Goodwill Industries, Institute for Disability Studies (IDS), and the Arc of North Mississippi (ANMS).
- In PY 2023, the BD held eight virtual workforce tours.
- In 2023, 148 VR students from across the state participated in the Summer Work Experience Program.
- Fifty-five (55) individuals with disabilities participated in Project SEARCH in 2021-2022. Project SEARCH was expanded by four more locations: Singing River Health-Pascagoula, MS; Keesler Air Force Base; Columbus Air Force Base; and Ochsner Rush Health. Forty-two (42) graduated the program with a 76% placement percentage.
- Project SEARCH was expanded by 4 more locations during the 2022-2023 program year in which two sites were Adult sites: Singing River Health-Gulfport, MS; North MS Health Services-Eupora (Adult); Milwaukee Tools-Jackson (Adult); and OCH-Regional Medical Center -Starkville, MS. Eighty-seven (87) individuals with disabilities participated in Project SEARCH during this time. Seventy (70) individuals graduated from the program with an 80% placement percentage.
- In 2020 -2021, Forty-two (42) individuals with disabilities participated in Project SEARCH and existing and new partnerships were created with the University MS Medical Center, Baptist Jackson, Baptist Attala, Merit Health-Vicksburg, South Central Regional Medical Center, North MS Medical Center, and Forrest General Hospital.
- In 2020, 31 individuals with disabilities received Sephora Distribution Center Training and 15 were hired. In 2021, 25 received training and ten were hired. In 2022 -2023, 18 VR clients with disabilities participated in training at Sephora Distribution Center. Of those 18, 15 were placed into employment. Sephora now conducts their own recruitment, training and hiring for individuals with disabilities.
- In 2018, the Business Enterprise Program (Randolph Sheppard) had five new vendors open businesses. In 2019-2020, five new vendors opened and in 2020-2021, two new vendors opened.
- In Summer 2021, the first Summer Pre-ETS Work-Based Learning Program was implemented. One Hundred-three (103) participated in the program. These students were placed with employers throughout the state in their local communities.
- Between 2019 and 2023, VRB has had 19 clients to receive Structured Discovery Training and of the 19 who received this type of training, 5 are employed and 1 is currently in college.
- VRB Adult Coaching Sessions were added as a service referral for Addie McBryde. There has been a total of 39 sessions. The first practice session was held on March 16, 2021. Adult Coaching Flyers are mailed to every VRB client in service status to notify them of upcoming sessions.

- The VRB Visually Impaired Client Assistance Program (VI-CAP) was initiated in January 2022 to assist clients with navigating, understanding, and adjusting to blindness and visual impairment in the workforce. Since 2022, 4 clients have been referred for this service.
- In 2022, VRB had 50 students receiving college training.

## **GOAL II: Improve the VR Service Delivery System to Individuals with Disabilities**

### **Report of Progress:**

- MDRS contracted with RL Brown Group Inc. to translate client service forms and documents from English into Spanish.
- In 2021, RL Brown Group began translating brochures in Spanish beginning with our Transition and Youth Services Brochure. This contract has continued.
- VR has sixty-seven (67) individuals whose primary language is Spanish because of the outreach and translation of forms and brochures.
- Career Pathways IPEs for SFY 2022 (PY21) was 141 and in SFY 2023(PY22) was 210. This process was designed to provide expedited VR services to clients with *Significant Disabilities* by allowing the counselor to establish an employment goal with a consumer within a specific Career Pathway and provide Vocational/Career Counseling and other designated VR services more quickly after a determination of eligibility has been made. For students with disabilities, a Career Pathway (Fast Track) IPE supports the provision of Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) needed to ensure that the student's specific employment goal is consistent with their strengths, abilities, capabilities, concerns, priorities, interest, and informed choice. VR will provide additional training to counselors in the utilization of this IPE.
- VR updated its Supported Employment Policy and Procedures to increase the focus on clients that need SE services. This process helped increase the number of individuals served in the SE program. In 2020, 548 individuals received SE services. in 2022, 612 individuals received SE services; and in 2023, 730 individuals received SE services. This process helped increase the number of individuals served in the SE program.
- VR staff work in partnership with the Department of Mental Health, Bureau of Mental Health. The Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Mental Health is currently effective through April 30, 2024. Discussions are underway for renewal of this agreement.
- VR staff work in partnership with the Department of Mental Health, Bureau of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. The Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Mental Health was renewed for May1, 2023 through June 30, 2025.
- VR staff work in partnership with all thirteen (13) Community Mental Health Centers in Mississippi. The Memorandum of Understanding with each Community Mental Health Center was renewed for December 1, 2022 through November 30, 2025.
- Autism Spectrum Disorders - Two new providers entered contracts to provide evaluation and assessment services to individuals with Autism and other significant disabilities. These provider contracts have been renewed for 2023 and 2024.

- In 2022, the number served increased to 635 and in 2023 the number served increased to 707.
- In 2023, a new Interagency Agreement was established with the Mississippi Institute of Disability Studies at Mississippi State University to provide assessment services and comprehensive supplemental support services to individuals with autism spectrum disorder and other intellectual and developmental disabilities. This agreement is being renewed for 2024.
- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual VR Deaf Pre-ETS Summer Program was held by the Deaf Services Program at Eagle Ridge in July 2018. In July 2019, the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Pre-ETS Camp was held by the Deaf Services Program at Eagle Ridge Conference Center in July 2019 with 14 seniors and 8 juniors. For 2020-22, the Annual VR Deaf Pre-ETS Summer Program camp was not planned or held due to COVID. In 2023, the Annual VR Deaf Pre-ETS Summer Program was planned; however, due to low enrollment, the camp was cancelled prior to the event.
- VR developed the Outreach and Orientation Program to be utilized by district staff to conduct outreach with other organizations and service providers. Continuing in 2018 and 2019, progress on this has been slow due to other major responsibilities. VR will continue to move toward implementing the Outreach and Orientation Program.
- In 2022, Supported Employment Job Skills Manual and training was provided in three locations throughout the state to VR and VRB staff, IDD Waiver providers and other agencies and organizations that provide Employment Services.
- In 2023, the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Mississippi Department of Mental Health Division of Home and Community-Based Services and other community partners gathered to begin discussing edits for an updated edition of the Mississippi Job Skills Trainer Manual.
- The Interagency Cooperative Agreement with the Department of Education was renewed for January 1, 2023 and will be renewed annually. In 2023, all Memorandum of Agreements with local education agencies were updated.
- In 2019, VR/VRB launched the first Peer Mentoring Pilot Program at the University of Southern Mississippi and Mississippi State University. The guidance and support of the VRTAC Pre-ETS team played a vital role with the implementation of these projects in Mississippi. Given the support of VRTAC and the Pre-ETS team, Mississippi is proud to be one of the first states in the nation to implement a Peer Mentoring project. In 2020 through 2021, Interagency Agreements for Peer Mentoring have been executed with East Mississippi Community College/Student Support Services, August 1, 2020-July 31, 2023; Northeast Mississippi Community College/Success Center-September 1, 2020-July 31, 2023, September 1, 2023-June 30, 2024; Mississippi State University/Disability Resource Center-June 1, 2021-June 30, 2023, September 1, 2023-June 30, 2024, and the University of Southern Mississippi-June 1, 2021-June 30, 2023, September 1, 2024-June 30, 2024.
- Vocational Evaluation and Work Adjustment Services, provided by AbilityWorks staff, have increased. In 2021, 1,027 individuals received services. In 2022, 1,374 individuals received services, and in 2023, 1,698 individuals received services.



### **GOAL III: Implement a statewide model for more effectively serving high school youth and students with disabilities including individuals with visual and/or hearing impairments.**

#### **Report of Progress:**

- The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual VR Deaf Pre-ETS Summer Program was held by the Deaf Services Program at Eagle Ridge in July 2018. In July 2019, the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Pre-ETS Camp was held by the Deaf Services Program at Eagle Ridge Conference Center in July 2019 with 14 seniors and 8 juniors. For 2020-22, the Annual VR Deaf Pre-ETS Summer Program camp was not planned or held due to COVID. In 2023, the Annual VR Deaf Pre-ETS Summer Program was planned; however, due to low enrollment, the camp was cancelled prior to the event.
- 14 Students with Blindness participated in the VRB 6<sup>th</sup> Summer Internship Program.
- In PY 2022 (PY21), VR/VRB (combined) served 2,963 potentially eligible and eligible students with disabilities.
- In PY 2023 (PY 22) VR/VRB served 3,126 potentially eligible and eligible students with disabilities.
- In 2023, a new RFQ was proposed and approved for Pre-ETS providers. Eleven (11) Pre-ETS providers were awarded contracts.
- VR, in collaboration with the Mississippi Department of Mental Health, Division of Children and Youth Services; the Mississippi Department of Education, Transition Services; the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services; the Mississippi Department of Employment Security; the Mississippi Department of Human Services; and the National Alliance on Mental Illness have partnered together to develop a statewide strategic plan to advance policies and practices to enhance the capacity to meet the competitive employment needs of transition age youth with mental illness using supported employment and/or supported education strategies. These agencies are currently developing a cooperative agreement to maximize funding to implement supported employment and supported education programs throughout the state.
- In 2023, a new Pre-ETS referral process and Pre-ETS Student Referral Form was implemented. All Pre-ETS referrals for students with disabilities would be sent to the transition portal email address (vrtransitionservices@mdrs.ms.gov) to be inputted and monitored by the state office and released to the Transition and Supported Employment Counselors in the school area they cover. The Pre-ETS Provision Form for Pre-ETS providers to be utilized when providing Pre-Employment Transition Services to students with disabilities was revised and updated.
- A new Pre-ETS curriculum by Attainment Company was provided to Transition and Supported Employment Counselors to utilize when providing Pre-Employment Transition Services. A newly created Pre-ETS brochure was created and distributed to staff to utilize when providing outreach services in the school for students with disabilities.
- All VRB students will be served by the VRB Counselor and Provider to provide continuous Pre-ETS. VRB in the past had only one Pre-ETS provider that provided in person and remote Pre-ETS services. The results of this partnership between VRB and the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) include 39 participants, ages 14 – 21, served

between 2019 and 2023. Between 2019 and 2023, NFB has conducted 6 retreats. Students have had the opportunity to attend in-state and out-of-state Career Quests Retreats and the NFB National Convention. The outcome of their participation is as follows: Enrolled in a 4 year post-secondary training program (13); Enrolled in a 2 year post-secondary training program (4); Graduated from a 4 year post-secondary training program (1); Graduated from a 2 year post-secondary training program (1); Enrolled in a traditional community rehabilitation training program (1); Enrolled in an online post-secondary training program (1); Currently enrolled in a secondary training program (1); Currently completing an internship (1); Currently employed (3) .

#### **GOAL IV: Implement identified improvements to increase statewide consistency and quality of consumer services.**

##### **Report of Progress:**

- Consumer Satisfaction Survey: Since 2020, approximately 12,000 attempts to contact individuals with open VR and VRB cases have been made. Responses from these contacts and surveys are compiled, calculated and a quarterly report is submitted to the Director of Program Integrity. As of October 2023, the auditors have taken the results of their review and presented the trends for the corresponding district in a five-feedback forum session.
- VR Counselors across the state have reported being more confident in their ability to provide services to individuals with ASD due to the increase in training and their ability to staff difficult cases with the Autism Program Coordinator.
- To enhance the quality of vocational assessment services, in PY 2022, Vocational Evaluators received training by Vocational Research Institute (VRI) on the new Career scope Online Portal. As of PY 2023, approximately 3, 0000 vocational assessments have been provided to individuals to assist them in determining employment goals that are consistent with the strengths, abilities, capabilities, and interest.
- District Training Meetings are held monthly. District Managers agenda topics included case management topics, information received from case reviews, as well, and topics to help ensure Counselors understand the policies and procedures.
- Ongoing staff development training in PY 2021 - 20233 included a variety of topics to improve quality-of-service delivery. Training included, As an overview, the following trainings have been provided designed to increase consistency and quality of consumer services: VRB Counselor Assistant Training August 19, 2022, WIPA Quarterly Training March 24, 2022, VRB Staff Training December 2021, October 18, 2022, VRB Fall Casework Guidance Training November, Optimizing Services with an Eye for Consistency March 14-15, 2023, VRB Counselor Training November 9, 2023, VRB Southern Region Training May 10, 2023, VR/VRB Case review Training , Counselor and Counselor Assistant Training May 23, 2022, May 30, 2021, June 6, 2021, June 2021, VR Measurable Skill Gain Training July 15, 2021, August 19, 2021, September 16, 2021 and October 2021; Case Management Skills Development July 2021, Autism Training July 2021; Mental Health First Aid Training May 2022, VR/VRB Counselor Training May 2022, Counselor Skills Development Training August 2022, Counselor Assistant Training February 2023, VRB Casework Training February 2023; VR/VRB Transition Training May 2023, Supported Employment Job Skills Training September 2023, Creating Your Own Path Autism Training September 2023, MDE/GET 2 College Training September

2023, VR/VRB Staff Development Training November 2023, Employment Success for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum January and February 2024, Mental Health First Aid Training 2021 and 2022, Technology Tools for Today June 2022.

- Staff development and training to improve and increase quality of consumer services for individuals receiving Supported Employment Services: 7/7/2022 – IPE Planning Training, Project SEARCH – via teams 8/2/2022, New Counselor Training with Counselors via Teams 8/3/2022, New Counselor Training with SE Counselors via Teams 8/8/2022, Job Skills Trainer Payroll and Authorization Training via Teams 8/9/2022, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor (Gautier Office) 8/10/2022, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor (Gautier Office) 9/21/2022, New Counselor Training with SE Counselors via Teams 9/23/2022, New Counselor Training with SE Counselors via Teams 9/28/2022, New Counselor Training with SE Counselors via Teams 10/5/2022, New Counselor Training with SE Counselors via Teams 10/7/2022, New VTI Training with VTIs via Teams 10/18/2022, New VTI Training with VTI via Teams 10/20/2022, New VTI Training with VTI (AbilityWorks Jackson), 10/24/2022 - New VTI Training with VTI (AbilityWorks Olive Branch) 10/19/2022, JST Payroll Training Meeting 10/21/2022, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor via Teams 11/1/2022, Supported Employment Meeting Training 11/2/2022, New Counselor Training with SE Counselors via Teams 11/9/2022, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor/DDM via Teams 11/15/2022, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor/DDM via Teams 1/10/2023, Supported Employment Team Meeting with District 5 Training 1/27/2023, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor via Teams 3/28/2023, Supported Employment Meeting Training 5/3/2023, Supported Employment Training VR/VRB Counselor Transition Training (Madison) 6/5/2023, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor (Gulfport Office) 6/9/2023, New Counselor Training with SE Counselor via Teams 6/14/2023, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor via Teams 6/19/2023, IPE Planning Training - Project SEARCH – Project SEARCH 101 Training (Pearl) 6/27/2023, Supported Employment Caseload Training with New Counselor via Teams.
- Pre-Employment and Transition Trainings held in 2023 to improve the quality of consumer services; Transition Counselor Training – 05/02/2023 – 05/03/2023 (In person); Pre-ETS in Timeclock-Recording Time/Adding Measurable Skill Gains Training – 08/10/2023 (TEAMS), VR/VRB Transition Counselor Training – 08/28/2023 (In person), Pre-ETS Providers' Business Practices Meeting – 08/29/2023 (TEAMS). Pre-ETS/Transition Meeting – 09/12/2023 (TEAMS), Provider's Business Practices (Transition Counselors and Managers) – 10/18/2023 (TEAMS), Supported Employment Timeclock Training – 11/17/2023 (TEAMS), Pre-ETS Timeclock Plus Training (Evaluators and Facility Managers) – 12/13/2023 (TEAMS).
- Seven (7) Supported Employment Counselors completed training and received Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) Certification.
- Four (4) Vocational Training Instructors completed Association of Community Rehabilitation Educators (ACRE) Training.
- Monthly in-person or virtual meetings are held with Transition Counselors to discuss the provision of Pre-ETS and any case review findings related to Transition.

- A Transition portal was developed to provide a seamless process for local education agencies to submit referrals and ask questions regarding Pre-Employment Transition Services.
- Multiple data reports have been developed and are reviewed monthly. These reports assist in assessing the accuracy and validity of data, as well as the quality of consumer services. Reports include but are not limited to historical count of new applications, eligibility determinations, IPEs developed, successful case closure.

2. PERFORMANCE ON THE PERFORMANCE ACCOUNTABILITY INDICATORS UNDER SECTION 116 OF WIOA FOR THE MOST RECENTLY COMPLETED PROGRAM YEAR, REFLECTING ACTUAL AND NEGOTIATED LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE. EXPLAIN ANY DISCREPANCIES IN THE ACTUAL AND NEGOTIATED LEVELS; AND

**The Primary Indicators of Performance are:**

1. Unsubsidized Employment During the 2nd Quarter After Exit
2. Unsubsidized Employment During the 4th Quarter After Exit
3. Median Earnings
4. Credential Attainment Rate
5. Measurable Skill Gain
6. Indicator(s) of Effectiveness in Serving Employers

**For PY 2022 the performance is as follows:**

**A. Percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.**

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind has in place a data sharing agreement with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security UI wage, to allow us to capture data for quarterly reporting of earnings and employment. VR/VRB will need to establish additional data sharing agreements to allow us to capture out of state data to ensure the full measuring of earnings for VR/VRB participants who exit the program. VR/VRB has also added a process to allow staff to collect self-employment earnings and employment success.

- Negotiated Level 54.0
- Achieved PY 60.2

**B. The percentage of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program.**

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind has in place a data sharing agreement with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security UI wage, to allow us to capture data for quarterly reporting of earnings and employment. VR/VRB will need to establish additional data sharing agreements to allow us to capture out of state data to ensure the full measuring of earnings for VR/VRB participants who exit the program. VR/VRB has also added a process to allow staff to collect self-employment earnings and employment success.

- Negotiated Level 52.0

- Achieved 57.8

**C. The median earnings of program participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program.**

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind has in place a data sharing agreement with the Mississippi Department of Employment Security UI wage, to allow us to capture data for quarterly reporting of earnings and employment. VR/VRB will need to establish additional data sharing agreements to allow us to capture out of state data to ensure the full measuring of earnings for VR/VRB participants who exit the program. VR/VRB has also added a process to allow staff to collect self-employment earnings and employment success.

- Negotiated Level 6073.00
- Achieved Median Earnings 7158.00

**D. The percentage of program participants who obtain a recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent one year after exit from the program.**

VR/VRB AWARE case management system records and captures Educational/Training goal information that records program participants who have received a recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma. Staff have been training and provided procedures on how to document the Educational Goal page and the documentation that is required. VR/VRB is also registered with and obtains information from the National Student Clearinghouse that provides data and helps confirm academic credentials.

- Negotiated Level 24.7
- Achieved Credential rate 38.7

**E. 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 toward such a credential or employment.**

VR/VRB AWARE case management system allows staff to record Measurable Skill Gain for each participant that is identified in a secondary or postsecondary education or training program. Staff have been training and provided procedures on how to document the individual's Educational Goal record and update this page when Measurable Skill Gains are achieved.

- Negotiated 69.8
- Achieved MSG Rate 76.4

**F. Indicator(s) of Effectiveness in Serving Employers**

- Not Applicable

**3. THE USE OF FUNDS RESERVED FOR INNOVATION AND EXPANSION ACTIVITIES (SECTIONS 101(A)(18) AND 101(A)(23) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT) (E.G., SRC, SILC).**

**Mississippi State Rehabilitation Council**

MDRS continues to use Innovation and Expansion (I&E) funds to assist in carrying out the duties of the State Rehabilitation Council. I&E funds specifically provide for the following:

- Support staff to assist the SRC in carrying out its duties.
- Operational costs which include travel and office supplies.
- Any cost involved in having members attend meetings and trainings.
- The costs associated with the quarterly Annual Consumer Satisfaction Survey.

### **Pre-Employment Transition Services Providers and Services**

Funds will be used to expand pre-employment and transition providers and services to students with disabilities. Additional contract transition staff will help expand services and assist VR/VRB provide access to these needed services. Based on information from the Mississippi Department of Education, there are over 20,000 students in the state with disabilities.

In 2020–2021, over thirteen (13) new Pre-ETS providers were contracted with to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services. The Transition Contract Employees will end effective June 30, 2022. VR/VRB will continue to add new Pre-ET providers. Progress has been made to advertise and hire three Transition Navigators. To date, only two (2) Transition Navigators have started.

### **Social Skills Classes for Individuals with Autism and other related disabilities with social challenges**

Consumers with Autism Spectrum Disorder are having difficulty getting and keeping employment due the deficits in social skills and communication skills. Some can perform job tasks, but do not have appropriate social and soft skills necessary to be successfully employed. Once they have completed high school, many feel isolated due to their lack of structured social interactions like they had in school. Plans are to create a group-based social skills class for students/youth who have Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or related disabilities with social challenges. These classes will assist these individuals in making a smoother transition from adolescents to adulthood, increase peer relations and increase the likelihood of gaining and maintaining employment.

Social Skills Classes are currently being developed and providers being identified. We are planning to have providers and these classes start in 2022.

### **Project SEARCH**

Efforts will continue to be made and funds will be expended to support Project SEARCH sites. Project SEARCH is expanding and has been proven nationally to be a vital program to train and assist individuals with significant disabilities prepare for and obtain employment.

In 2020 – 2021, twelve (12) Project SEARCH sites were added. In PY 2022, 22 Project Search sites were developed or maintained.

### **Customized Training Programs**

Funds will be used to expand working with employers on Customized Training Programs. The first Customized Training program with Sephora was very successful and to date over 100 individuals with disabilities obtained full-time employment with benefits. Collaboration will continue with other employers/industries to train and hire individuals with disabilities. Toyota and Fastenal have started initial conversation and collaboration.

## **E. SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES, DISTRIBUTION OF TITLE VI FUNDS, AND ARRANGEMENTS AND COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS FOR THE PROVISION OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES**

### **1. ACCEPTANCE OF TITLE VI FUNDS:**

(A) VR agency requests to receive title VI funds.

**2. IF THE VR AGENCY HAS ELECTED TO RECEIVE TITLE VI FUNDS, SECTION 606(B)(3) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT REQUIRES VR AGENCIES TO INCLUDE SPECIFIC GOALS AND PRIORITIES WITH RESPECT TO THE DISTRIBUTION OF TITLE VI FUNDS RECEIVED UNDER SECTION 603 OF THE REHABILITATION ACT FOR THE PROVISION OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES. DESCRIBE THE USE OF TITLE VI FUNDS AND HOW THEY WILL BE USED IN MEETING THE GOALS AND PRIORITIES OF THE SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM.**

MDRS, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation and Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind offer statewide Supported Employment services, including Customized Employment, for individuals and youth with the *most significant disabilities* to reach Competitive Integrated Employment outcomes.

Fifty percent of the federal Supported Employment funding is allotted to ongoing Supported Employment services for eligible youth and eligible adults with the *most significant disabilities*. To ensure we obtain the full SE award, we requested and received the 10% state match (\$16,667). Furthermore, MDRS assures only 2.5% of the award is used for administrative expenses:

\$166,667 SE-A

\$166,667 SE-B

Youth under the age of 25 may receive extended services (i.e., ongoing support to maintain an individual in Supported Employment) for up to four (4) years. All Title VI funds are allocated to purchase Supported Employment services and other allowable vocational rehabilitation services as needed by clients served in the SE Program after job placement and before closure. SE funds will also be used to purchase SE services from community rehabilitation programs with Cooperative Agreements with the agency as providers become available in the state.

Title VI funds are supplemented by Title 1 funds and, if possible, VR and VRB will continue the level of Title I monies committed to the Supported Employment (SE) Program. Occasionally, Social Security Reimbursement funds are used to supplement Title VI funds. MDRS plans to continue this process if Title I funds are not available.

**3. SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES MAY BE PROVIDED WITH TITLE 1 OR TITLE VI FUNDS FOLLOWING PLACEMENT OF INDIVIDUALS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES IN EMPLOYMENT. IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 101(A)(22) AND SECTION 606(B)(3) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT, DESCRIBE THE QUALITY, SCOPE, AND EXTENT OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES TO BE PROVIDED TO INDIVIDUALS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES, INCLUDING YOUTH WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES; AND THE TIMING OF TRANSITION TO EXTENDED SERVICES.**

The service approach for SE eligible clients emulates the nationally accepted 'best practices' models of SE service delivery. Central to each of these approaches is an emphasis on Person-Centered Planning and facilitation of natural supports. Individualized job development is

conducted by SE staff based on job matching assessment information and the client's informed choice. SE clients are assisted with employment planning and placement by VTIs, and job skills training is provided at the job site either by Job Skills Trainers or through natural support.

The SE Program is administered by the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. SE services can be provided to eligible individuals served by the VR program and VRB program. VR Counselors, assigned to SE caseloads, have the same duties and responsibilities as those in the VR and VRB programs. SE personnel are trained in general VR case management techniques and VR federal regulations and are held to the same procedures and standards of performance as all other VR Counselors. The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation has designated a statewide Supported Employment (SE) Program Coordinator.

Counselors are assigned to serve SE eligible individuals in each of the ten districts to ensure statewide coverage. The SE staff includes 14 counselors, 11 VTIs, and a pool of available Job Skills Trainers who are assigned to work with a Supported Employment (SE) client.

The caseloads of VR Counselors assigned to SE caseloads consists of only those clients who meet Title VI eligibility criteria. Therefore, in addition to general agency policy and procedures, VR Counselors must be knowledgeable about Title VI regulations and the unique requirements for SE eligibility.

When individuals apply for VR Services, the VR Counselor determines eligibility for VR. If it is determined that the individual will also require SE services after placement to retain employment. The individual's case is staffed with the SE Counselor. It simply offers additional services to individuals that meet the criteria for eligibility for SE services. SE clients are eligible for any of the traditional VR services available. Any traditional VR services the SE client needs are paid for with regular VR (Title I) funds.

SE services are authorized, coordinated and, in most instances, delivered by VR staff. Counselors who specialize in SE perform the functions of case management, job development, and supervision of overall SE service delivery in their respective districts. They are assisted by Vocational Training Instructors (VTIs) who perform a variety of functions including but not limited to assessment, job development and placement, job training, job skills trainer supervision, and facilitation of natural supports. Job Skills Trainers are employed on an "as needed" basis. The use of Job Skills Trainers at the worksite is an integral part of SE services. This individual is responsible for learning the job prior to the client coming to work, then teaching the job to the client. The Skills Trainer not only teaches the work skills needed at the job site but will help the client become adjusted to the new work environment. The job trainer will help the client develop relationships with coworkers and supervisory staff. If the client cannot meet the job standards, the trainer is there to assure the employer that the work will be done to the business' quality and quantity levels. As the client becomes more independent at the worksite and can perform most of the job tasks with minimum intervention by the trainer, the trainer will fade assistance until the case can be closed and the extended service provider assumes the extended long-term support.

### **Timing of Transition to Extended Services**

Job Stabilization is determined for each client in SE based on his/her unique circumstances. The Counselor determines the client's work performance is stabilized with input from the client, Job Skills Trainer, VTI, employer and extended service provider. Stabilization occurs when the client has demonstrated that he/she can perform the job to the employer's expectations. In addition, there should be a concurrent agreement between client, parent/legal representative, SE Counselor, Vocational Trainer Instructor, Job Skills Trainer, and Extended Service provider that



the client can perform the essential functions of his job with the provisions of Extended Services. The agreement should be the outcome of a meeting between the above parties. The Extended Service Support Plan Agreement (MDRS-SE-02) should also be signed during this meeting.

When stabilization occurs, the client is ready to transition from VR-funded SE services to the appropriate source of ongoing support from the *Extended Service* provider. This transition must not occur until all aspects of the client's placement indicate that the employment situation is secure and consistent with the client's functional capabilities and employment factors. It is at this point, the SE Counselor enters the job stabilization date on the AACE Employment page, moving the client's case into *Employed* status.

Upon completion of time-limited SE services, the ongoing job skills training assistance and other necessary long-term support is transitioned to a third party, group or individual through a Cooperative Agreement or Extended Services Support Plan Agreement. WIOA increased the maximum amount of time for SE staff to provide time-limited Supported Employment services to 24 months. However, the rate of transitioning a client to extended services is dependent upon the needs of the individual, his/her family, the employer, the third-party agency, and other involved individuals. Since SE staff and the extended service provider would have been collaborating in the provision of SE services throughout an individual's VR program, such transitions are normally smooth and do not cause job disruptions.

Transition to *Extended Services* must take place no later than 24 months after the initial job placement. If there are exceptional circumstances that require ongoing support services to be provided longer than 24 months, the counselor should justify this in a case note.

Individuals with chronic mental illness who need special support services, but not job skills training services provided either at the work site or away from the work site to obtain employment, perform work skills and maintain employment are provided VR employment services. These services are coordinated with the DMH Case Manager to ensure the individual receives the support and can maintain employment.

VR may provide extended service support to youth who have a most significant disability and are eligible for SE services. Extended support services provided to youth with the most significant disabilities can continue for a period not to exceed four (4) years or until the youth reaches the age of 25 and no longer meets the definition of a youth with a disability (or whichever comes first). VR can begin providing extended support services once initial job stabilization is achieved.

4. SECTIONS 101(A)(22) AND 606(B)(4) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT REQUIRE THE VR AGENCY TO DESCRIBE EFFORTS TO IDENTIFY AND ARRANGE, INCLUDING ENTERING INTO COOPERATIVE AGREEMENTS, WITH OTHER STATE AGENCIES AND OTHER APPROPRIATE ENTITIES IN ORDER TO PROVIDE SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES. THE DESCRIPTION MUST INCLUDE EXTENDED SERVICES, AS APPLICABLE, TO INDIVIDUALS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES, INCLUDING THE PROVISION OF EXTENDED SERVICES TO YOUTH WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH 34 C.F.R. § 363.4(A) AND 34 C.F.R. § 361.5(C)(19)(V).

A Memorandum of Agreement with the Mississippi Department of Mental Health, Bureau of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities is maintained to ensure individuals who are duly eligible for both agencies' programs have collaborative supports and services needed to reach

their goal of competitive integrated employment. The Memorandum of Agreement outlines the coordination of services, including Extended Services for individuals eligible for home and community-based waiver programs, Supported Employment, and Customized Employment. VR SE staff collaborate intensively with local mental health centers, school districts, businesses and industries, the Council for Individuals with Development Disabilities, parents, advocacy groups and other relevant third-party providers and resources.

The collaboration with DMH has resulted in a formalized referral process between the two agencies to ensure VR services including those with serious mental illness. The OVR Supported Employment Program Coordinator receives the referral from the DMH Mental Health Support Coordinator/Targeted Case Manager. After review, the SE Program Coordinator then forwards the referral to the SE Counselor in the appropriate OVR District Office for application for VR services. Upon completion of the time-limited Supported Employment services, the ongoing job skills training assistance and other necessary long-term support is transitioned to a third party, group, or individual through a Cooperative Agreement or Extended Services Support Plan Agreement. The primary provider of extended services is the DMH-Bureau of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities through its network of local community service programs.

An increasing number of individuals and other community organizations are accepting the role of providing extended services. Employers are encouraged to do so since it is the most natural arrangement for the client.

VR has entered into 163 new Extended Service Support Plan Agreements from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2023. These 163 new agreements are in addition to the agreements previously established and are ongoing.

Providers of long-term support are required to document twice monthly contact with each consumer successfully working in the community, and to maintain this documentation in case files for the duration of that consumer's job. This information is reported monthly to the VR Supported Employment Coordinator for tracking purposes.

Expansion of the SE Program is expected because of extensive outreach, staff development, interagency training, dissemination of information, identification, and dissemination of information about best practices, technical assistance, and an emphasis on interagency collaboration for identification of potentially eligible individuals and service delivery to clients. VR and VRB continue to emphasize Person-Centered Planning by partnering with the Mississippi Council on Developmental Disabilities, Mississippi Department of Education, and other entities in promotion of this service provision.

Additional program and services designed to support the provision of SE Services are as follows:

**Mississippi Job Skills Training Manual** - The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, and the Mississippi Department of Mental Health Division of Home and Community-Based Services serve as the two primary providers of job Skills Training services. In 2018, both agencies along with other community partners worked together to ultimately create a Job Skills Training Manual. In 2023, both agencies along with other community partners gathered to begin discussing edits for an updated edition of the Mississippi Job Skills Trainer Manual. This manual was designed to review best practices in job skills training to develop a specific Mississippi job skills trainer curriculum. The new curriculum is competency-based, and the intent is for it to become a required training regime for all persons in any job skills trainer or related position in Mississippi. Prior to this project, training for job skills trainers ranged from none to out of State correspondence programs to agency

training so specific it did not translate to general use. The goal of the job skills trainer manual project is to increase the level of competency for job skills trainers in the state and have a mutually agreed on curriculum in the state. This curriculum-targeted audience of all job Skills Trainers in the state is a collaborative effort between The Arc of Mississippi, Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Mississippi Department of Mental Health, Institute for Disability Studies, and self-advocates.

**Supported Employment for Transition Age Youth** – The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation; the Mississippi Department of Mental Health, Division of Children and Youth Services; the Mississippi Department of Education, Transition Services; the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services; the Mississippi Department of Employment Security; the Mississippi Department of Human Services; and the National Alliance on Mental Illness have partnered together to develop a statewide strategic plan to advance policies and practices to enhance the capacity to meet the competitive employment needs of transition age youth with mental illness using supported employment and/or supported education strategies. These agencies are currently developing a cooperative agreement to maximize funding to implement supported employment and supported education programs throughout the state. This curriculum-targeted audience of all job coaches in the state is a collaborative effort between The Arc of Mississippi, Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Mississippi Department of Mental Health, Institute for Disability Studies, and self-advocates.

## F. ANNUAL ESTIMATES

Sections 101(a)(15) and 101(a)(23) of the Rehabilitation Act require all VR agencies to annually conduct a full assessment of their resources and ability to serve all eligible individuals before the start of the Federal fiscal year. In accordance with 34 C.F.R. § 361.29(b), annual estimates must include the following projections:

### 1. ESTIMATES FOR NEXT FEDERAL FISCAL YEAR—

#### A. VR PROGRAM; AND

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If you accidentally edit the table headers and structure, open this link to the blank table. You can copy and paste the table into the narrative field, and start over if needed.

Priority Category (if applicable)	No. of Individuals Eligible for Services	No. of Eligible Individuals Expected to Receive Services under VR Program	Costs of Services using Title I Funds	No. of Eligible Individuals Not Receiving Services (if applicable)
1	7,078	7,078	\$57,307,500.95	N/A
2	5,911	5,462	\$49,111,894.30	N/A
3	2,557	2,761	\$97,383,59.74	N/A

#### B. SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM.

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If you accidentally edit the table headers and structure, open this link to the blank table. You can copy and paste the table into the narrative field, and start over if needed.

Priority Category (if applicable)	No. of Individuals Eligible for Services	No. of Eligible Individuals Expected to Receive Services under Supported Employment Program	Costs of Services using Title I and Title VI Funds	No. of Eligible Individuals Not Receiving Services (if applicable)
1	624	624	\$3,313,670.31	N/A

## **G. ORDER OF SELECTION**

1. PURSUANT TO SECTION 101(A)(5) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT, THIS DESCRIPTION MUST BE AMENDED WHEN THE VR AGENCY DETERMINES, BASED ON THE ANNUAL ESTIMATES DESCRIBED IN DESCRIPTION (F), THAT VR SERVICES CANNOT BE PROVIDED TO ALL ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE STATE WHO APPLY FOR AND ARE DETERMINED ELIGIBLE FOR SERVICES.

\* VR agencies may maintain an order of selection policy and priority of eligible individuals without implementing or continuing to implement an order of selection.

The VR agency is not implementing an order of selection and all eligible individuals will be served.

2. FOR VR AGENCIES THAT HAVE DEFINED PRIORITY CATEGORIES DESCRIBE—

### **A. THE JUSTIFICATION FOR THE ORDER**

The VR agency is not implementing an order .

**B. THE ORDER (PRIORITY CATEGORIES) TO BE FOLLOWED IN SELECTING ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS TO BE PROVIDED VR SERVICES ENSURING THAT INDIVIDUALS WITH THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES ARE SELECTED FOR SERVICES BEFORE ALL OTHER INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES; AND**

We are not implementing the order.

**C. THE VR AGENCY'S GOALS FOR SERVING INDIVIDUALS IN EACH PRIORITY CATEGORY, INCLUDING HOW THE AGENCY WILL ASSIST ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS ASSIGNED TO CLOSED PRIORITY CATEGORIES WITH INFORMATION AND REFERRAL, THE METHOD IN WHICH THE VR AGENCY WILL MANAGE WAITING LISTS, AND THE PROJECTED TIMELINES FOR OPENING PRIORITY CATEGORIES. NOTE: PRIORITY CATEGORIES ARE CONSIDERED OPEN WHEN ALL INDIVIDUALS IN THE PRIORITY CATEGORY MAY BE SERVED.**

The VR agency is not implementing the order.

3. HAS THE VR AGENCY ELECTED TO SERVE ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS OUTSIDE OF THE ORDER OF SELECTION WHO REQUIRE SPECIFIC SERVICES OR EQUIPMENT TO MAINTAIN EMPLOYMENT?

OVR and OVRB will elect to provide services, regardless of any established Order of Selection, to eligible individuals who require specific services or equipment to maintain employment. Specific services or equipment includes Assistive Technology Services.

## **H. WAIVER OF STATEWIDENESS**

The State plan shall be in effect in all political subdivisions of the State, however, the Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration (Commissioner) may waive compliance with this requirement in accordance with Section 101(a)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act and the implementing regulations in 34 C.F.R. § 361.26. If the VR agency is requesting a waiver of statewideness or has a previously approved waiver of statewideness, describe the types of services and the local entities providing such services under the waiver of statewideness and how the agency has complied with the requirements in 34 C.F.R. § 361.26. If the VR agency is not requesting or does not have an approved waiver of statewideness, please indicate “not applicable.”

*not applicable*

## I. COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT

In accordance with the requirements in Section 101(a)(7) of the Rehabilitation Act, the VR agency must develop and maintain annually a description (consistent with the purposes of the Rehabilitation Act) of the VR agency's comprehensive system of personnel development, which shall include a description of the procedures and activities the State VR agency will undertake to ensure it has an adequate supply of qualified State rehabilitation professionals and paraprofessionals that provides the following:

1. ANALYSIS OF CURRENT PERSONNEL AND PROJECTED PERSONNEL NEEDS INCLUDING—

A. THE NUMBER OF PERSONNEL CURRENTLY NEEDED BY THE VR AGENCY TO PROVIDE VR SERVICES, BROKEN DOWN BY PERSONNEL CATEGORY; AND

B. THE NUMBER AND TYPE OF PERSONNEL THAT ARE EMPLOYED BY THE VR AGENCY IN THE PROVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES, INCLUDING RATIOS OF QUALIFIED VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELORS TO CLIENTS;

C. PROJECTIONS OF THE NUMBER OF PERSONNEL, BROKEN DOWN BY PERSONNEL CATEGORY, WHO WILL BE NEEDED BY THE VR AGENCY TO PROVIDE VR SERVICES IN 5 YEARS BASED ON PROJECTIONS OF THE NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS TO BE SERVED, INCLUDING INDIVIDUALS WITH SIGNIFICANT DISABILITIES, THE NUMBER OF PERSONNEL EXPECTED TO RETIRE OR LEAVE THE FIELD, AND OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS.

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**A. THE NUMBER OF PERSONNEL CURRENTLY NEEDED BY THE VR AGENCY TO PROVIDE VR SERVICES, BROKEN DOWN BY PERSONNEL CATEGORY; AND**

OVR Personnel Category	No. of Personnel Employed	Current + Vacancy	No. Personnel Needed in 5 Years
VR Interpreters	2	6	14
VR Psychometrist	4	4	10
VR Administrative Support – Administrative Assistant: District and State Office	17	18	48
VR Administrative Support – Ability Works	15	18	39
VR Rehabilitation Specialist – VR Vocational Evaluator	21	24	26
VR Rehabilitation Specialist – VR Counselor	112	153	203
VR Rehabilitation Associate – VR Counselor Assistant	67	75	101
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Deputy District Manager	10	10	24
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR District Manager	10	10	24
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Regional Manager – Client Services	2	2	6
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Regional Manager – Ability Works Services	2	2	4
VR Facility Manager CRP (AbilityWorks)	14	15	29
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Pre-ETS and Transition Services	1	1	2
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Post Secondary Education and Training	1	1	3
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services	1	1	2
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Interpreting Services	1	1	2
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Autism Services	1	1	2
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Supported Employment	1	1	3
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Substance Abuse Services	0	1	2
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – AACE Training and Rehabilitation Counseling Internship Coordinator	1	1	2
Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist – Vocational Assessment Services	1	1	2



<b>OVR Personnel Category</b>	<b>No. of Personnel Employed</b>	<b>Current + Vacancy</b>	<b>No. Personnel Needed in 5 Years</b>
<b>Rehabilitation Training Coordinator – AACE and Rehabilitation Practicum and Internship</b>	1	1	2
<b>VR/SE Vocational Training Instructors</b>	5	8	10
<b>VR Project Manager</b>	1	1	2
<b>VR Work Adjustment Instructor – AbilityWorks</b>	35	40	75
<b>VR Account Auditor and Technicians AbilityWorks</b>	7	7	14
<b>VR Industrial Engineer – AbilityWorks</b>	1	2	2
<b>Pre-ETS and Transition Referral Coordinator</b>	0	0	8
<b>Pre-ETS and Transition Project Manager</b>	0	0	3
<b>Pre-ETS and Transition Services Account Manager</b>	0	0	2
<b>Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VR Program Specialist Vendor and CRP Provider Registration and Monitoring</b>	0	0	5

<b>OVRB Personnel Category</b>	<b>No. of Personnel Employed</b>	<b>Current Vacancy</b>	<b>No. Of Personnel Needed in 5 Years</b>
<b>VRB Admin Support - Administrative Assistant</b>	7	8	16
<b>VRB Admin Support - Teacher Assistant</b>	2	2	4
<b>BEP – Consultant</b>	2	2	4
<b>BEP – Program Director</b>	2	3	5
<b>BEP – Trainer</b>	1	1	2
<b>BEP – Warehouse</b>	1	1	2
<b>Compliance Officer - BEP Consultants</b>	2	2	5
<b>Ground &amp; Maintenance Technician - BEP</b>	2	2	4
<b>Ground &amp; Maintenance Technician Manager - Facility Support Manager</b>	1	1	2
<b>VRB Program Specialist - Program Coordinator</b>	1	1	2
<b>VRB Program Specialist-BEP Training Director</b>	1	1	2
<b>VRB Rehab. Associate - VRB Counselor Assistant</b>	13	18	36
<b>Rehab. Specialist – VRB Case Worker</b>	2	2	4
<b>Rehab. Specialist – VRB Counselor</b>	15	19	43
<b>Rehab. Specialist – VRB Evaluator</b>	1	1	2
<b>Rehab. Specialist Supervisor-VRB Manager</b>	3	3	6
<b>Rehab. Specialist Team Lead – VRB Deputy Regional Manager</b>	2	2	5
<b>Rehabilitation Specialist Team Lead – VRB Regional Manager</b>	3	3	7
<b>Support Care-Dorm Supervisor</b>	4	6	12
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Braille</b>	2	3	6
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Communication</b>	2	4	8
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Daily Living</b>	1	1	2
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Leisure Education</b>	1	1	2
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Orientation and Mobility</b>	3	5	10
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Personal Management</b>	1	1	2
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Technology</b>	1	1	2
<b>Vocational Training Instructor (VTI) - Typing</b>	1	1	2
<b>Rehabilitation Associate - VRB Counselor Assistant</b>	13	14	30

B. THE NUMBER AND TYPE OF PERSONNEL THAT ARE EMPLOYED BY THE VR AGENCY IN THE PROVISION OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES, INCLUDING RATIOS OF QUALIFIED VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION COUNSELORS TO CLIENTS;

Please reference above "i.1.A"

C. Projections of the number of personnel, broken down by personnel category, who will be needed by the VR agency to provide VR services in 5 years based on projections of the number of individuals to be served, including individuals with significant disabilities, the number of personnel expected to retire or leave the field, and other relevant factors.

Please reference above "i.1.A"

D. Ratio of qualified VR counselors to clients:

Although caseload sizes vary depending on the type of caseload and services that are provided, the ideal client to counselor ratio is 1:75 – 80 clients per counselor.

E. PROJECTED NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS TO BE SERVED IN 5 YEARS:

In 5 years, PY 2028 – 2029, VR is projected to serve 18,970 individuals with disabilities and VRB is projected to serve 2, 125 individuals who are blind and/or visual impairments. The total that VR and VRB is projected to serve is 19, 323 individuals with disabilities.

2. DATA AND INFORMATION ON PERSONNEL PREPARATION AND DEVELOPMENT, RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION, AND STAFF DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING THE FOLLOWING:

A. A LIST OF THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE STATE THAT ARE PREPARING VR PROFESSIONALS, BY TYPE OF PROGRAM; THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED AT EACH OF THOSE INSTITUTIONS, BROKEN DOWN BY TYPE OF PROGRAM; AND THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WHO GRADUATED DURING THE PRIOR YEAR FROM EACH OF THOSE INSTITUTIONS WITH CERTIFICATION OR LICENSURE, OR WITH THE CREDENTIALS FOR CERTIFICATION OR LICENSURE, BROKEN DOWN BY THE PERSONNEL CATEGORY FOR WHICH THEY HAVE RECEIVED, OR HAVE THE CREDENTIALS TO RECEIVE, CERTIFICATION OR LICENSURE.

Select 'Edit' to edit the narrative.

Note, please do not edit the table header or formatting. Only edit the table contents.

If you accidentally edit the table headers and structure, open this link to the blank table. You can copy and paste the table into the narrative field, and start over if needed.

Mississippi has two (2) graduate programs that award master's degrees that prepare individuals to work as Vocational Rehabilitation counselors:

1. Jackson State University
2. Mississippi State University

The number of students enrolled at each of those institutions, broken down by type of program.

#### **Jackson State University – Rehabilitation Counseling**

- Students enrolled: 20
- VR staff sponsored by agency or RSA: 3
- Graduates sponsored agency and/or RSA: 4
- Number of Graduates from Previous Year: 7

#### **Mississippi State University – Rehabilitation Counseling**

- Students enrolled: 4
- VR staff sponsored by agency or RSA: 2
- Graduates sponsored by agency or RSA: 0
- Number of Graduates from Previous Year: 4

<b>Institute of Higher Education</b>	<b>Type of Program</b>	<b>No. of Students Enrolled</b>	<b>No. of Prior Year Graduates</b>
Jackson State University	Rehabilitation Counseling	20	7
Mississippi State University	Rehabilitation Counseling	4	4

**B. THE VR AGENCY’S PLAN FOR RECRUITMENT, PREPARATION AND RETENTION OF QUALIFIED PERSONNEL, WHICH ADDRESSES THE CURRENT AND PROJECTED NEEDS FOR QUALIFIED PERSONNEL; AND THE COORDINATION AND FACILITATION OF EFFORTS BETWEEN THE VR AGENCY AND INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS TO RECRUIT, PREPARE, AND RETAIN PERSONNEL WHO ARE QUALIFIED, INCLUDING PERSONNEL FROM MINORITY BACKGROUNDS AND PERSONNEL WHO ARE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES.**

OHRD, VR and VRB seek to hire individuals who meet the requirements of Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD). If OHRD, VR AND VRB determines there is not an applicant who is qualified in the field of vocational rehabilitation, the vacancy may be filled by an individual from a related field if the individual meets the national certification standards for a vocational rehabilitation counselor which is to be eligible to sit for the CRC exam.

VR and VRB maintain close relationships with universities including minority institutions such as historically black colleges and universities, and disability specific organizations. Designated staff collaborate with universities in securing grant funding; invite university employees to help with training and education activities; and provide practicum and internship slots for students. OHRD acknowledges that it is not able to easily recruit an adequate number of qualified VR Counselors to replace those retiring and departing for other reasons. OHRD, VR and VRB are currently engaged in the activities indicated below to address recruitment, preparation and retention of counselors.

OHRD, VR and VRB staff work with the graduate programs in Rehabilitation Counseling at both Mississippi State University and Jackson State University by establishing placement opportunities for intern and practicum students, and actively participating in university career development activities, including participation in Career Days and Job Fairs. Representatives from OHRD, VR and VRB meet with the graduate students from each program annually to explain career opportunities and the state employment application process.

The VR and VRB staff are requested by the university to serve on each program’s Advisory Council. The VR Director has also been invited to speak to graduate students during class. VR designates a staff person to serve on each program’s Advisory Council. Working with Jackson State University provides significant opportunities for recruitment of minorities, and VR and VRB work closely with disability support services on both campuses to recruit graduates with disabilities.

In January 2022, the Mississippi State Personnel Board implemented a new State Employee Classification and Compensation System, SEC<sup>2</sup>. With SEC<sup>2</sup>, every state employee was assigned a new classification and assigned to a pay plan and pay grade. Each pay grade consists of a minimum, market, and maximum salary. With SEC<sup>2</sup>, the agency's Executive Director has the authority to award employees in-range salary increases not to exceed 10% per fiscal year, if funds are available. Counselors, counselor assistants, interpreters, psychometrists, evaluators, work adjustment instructors and instructors at the Center for the Blind were awarded up to a 10% increase for FY 2023 and FY2024, barring the employee's salary did not exceed 10% of the set market salary for each classification. MDRS has established educational requirements of a master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling with a continuing education component to address these issues.

Although staff listed received the in-range adjustment, the current salary for VR Counselors in Mississippi remains below that of other southeastern states.

### **VR and VRB Student Practicum/Internship Programs**

VR and VRB have an ongoing working relationship with Jackson State University and Mississippi State University to provide practicum and internship training to college students. Practicum and internship trainings are coordinated through the VR Program Coordinator and the VR and VRB District or Regional Manager. A list of all practicum and internship students is provided to the MDRS Office of Human Resources Department (HRD) by the VR Program Coordinator.

In SY 2023, VR and VRB had five (5) interns from Jackson State University and (2) interns from Mississippi State University who were receiving Master of Science degree in Rehabilitation Counseling.

The following procedures are used when arranging student practicum or internship training:

1. Students requesting to participate in a practicum or internship placement with VR and VRB must be referred to VR and VRB by their college or university's department advisor.
2. The department advisor must contact the designated Program Coordinator to request student placement at an VR/VRB site.
3. The VR Program Coordinator will provide the department advisor with a Practicum/Intern Application form for the student to complete. The application will be emailed to the department advisor within 1-3 business days of initial contact.
4. Once the application is reviewed by the Program Coordinator, the District or Regional Manager at the appropriate site will be notified by the Program Coordinator.
5. Students who are seeking a practicum/internship in rehabilitation counseling or a related field must be assigned to work with a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor senior or a certified Rehabilitation Counselor.
6. The District or Regional Manager will determine the appropriate MDRS student supervisor for their office.
7. The Program Coordinator and designated MDRS student supervisor will schedule a date and time for an initial interview with student.
8. Upon a contingent internship offer, a background report will be conducted for all potential interns. Intern Students must comply with the agency's policies pertaining to

these issues outlined in Section 8.7 Background Reports on New Employees, of the MDRS Policy and Procedures Manual.

9. Once approval has been given, the department advisor and student will be informed of the start date by the Program Coordinator.
10. The student will be required to complete the MDRS Confidentiality Certification Statement form and the Computer Rules and Policy Agreement on the first day they report for training. This form will be returned to the Program Coordinator and a copy of the MDRS Confidentiality document will be given to the student.
11. Upon completion of the practicum/internship training, the MDRS student supervisor will complete the Exit Evaluation for Practicum and Intern Student form. The form shall be submitted to the designated program coordinator. The Program Coordinator will forward the Exit Evaluation form to the HR Training Department.

C. DESCRIPTION OF STAFF DEVELOPMENT POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND ACTIVITIES THAT ENSURE ALL PERSONNEL EMPLOYED BY THE VR AGENCY RECEIVE APPROPRIATE AND ADEQUATE TRAINING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR PROFESSIONALS AND PARAPROFESSIONALS:

I. PARTICULARLY WITH RESPECT TO ASSESSMENT, VOCATIONAL COUNSELING, JOB PLACEMENT, AND REHABILITATION TECHNOLOGY, INCLUDING TRAINING IMPLEMENTED IN COORDINATION WITH ENTITIES CARRYING OUT STATE PROGRAMS UNDER SECTION 4 OF THE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY ACT OF 1998; AND

II. PROCEDURES FOR THE ACQUISITION AND DISSEMINATION OF SIGNIFICANT KNOWLEDGE FROM RESEARCH AND OTHER SOURCES TO VR AGENCY PROFESSIONALS AND PARAPROFESSIONALS AND FOR PROVIDING TRAINING REGARDING THE AMENDMENTS TO THE REHABILITATION ACT MADE BY THE WORKFORCE INNOVATION AND OPPORTUNITY ACT.

**i. Particularly with respect to assessment, vocational counseling, job placement, and rehabilitation technology, including training implemented in coordination with entities carrying out State programs under section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998; and**

**VR and VRB Counselors/Evaluators Graduate Training in Rehabilitation Counseling**

Since there are no VR funds solely allocated to support CSPD activities as in the past, MDRS, VR and VRB has encouraged Counselors that do not have a master's degree in VR counseling to apply for RSA stipend/program either Jackson State University or Mississippi State University, or any Rehabilitation Counseling program they choose. The elimination of the in-service training grant to states has severely reduced the ability to continue to support these activities. It is not currently clear how much of the Basic VR grant will be available to support this activity. VR and VRB Counselors or Evaluators are encouraged to apply for RSA stipends at a university with a graduate program in Rehabilitation counseling.

For those that are not sponsored by RSA, MDRS on a case-by-case basis determines if funds are available to sponsor the Counselor or Evaluator in a graduate program. Counselors that are approved for sponsorship in graduate training are eligible for reimbursement of tuition, book costs and approved educational leave. The employee is required to enter into a contractual agreement with MDRS for service repayment. MDRS requires three years of continued employment in return for expenses reimbursement and education leave.

### **VR and VRB Counselor/Evaluator CRC Certification Expenses**

To encourage VR staff that are eligible to sit for the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor examination, MDRS will provide financial assistance for CRC certification and renewals through reimbursement. Prior to taking the CRC examination, Counselors will be required to take the CRC Examination Preparation Workshop which is coordinated and paid for through the Office of Human Resource Development- Training Director. The CRC examination is administered three times a year. The certification application fee and the Pre-review service fee are submitted at the time of application. The Counselor must provide documentation of a “pass or fail” grade report to the OHD-Training Director for reimbursement of the certification application and pre-review service fee. If the Counselor fails the certification examination, MDRS will pay a one-time re-examination (retake) fee through reimbursement with documentation of the certification examination grade report.

MDRS will also encourage VR staff to maintain their credentials as a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) by providing financial assistance with certification renewal fee. The Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (CRCC) requires all CRCs to renew their certification at five (5) year intervals. The Counselor must provide a copy of their receipt of payment for renewal fee to the OHD-Training Director for reimbursement.

### **VR and VRB Counselor Assistant Graduate Training in Rehabilitation Counseling**

Some Counselor Assistants may have obtained a bachelor’s degree from an accredited institution that is above the minimum education requirements for the Counselor Assistant position. After working as a Counselor Assistant for one year or more, a Counselor Assistant is encouraged to apply for entrance into a master level Rehabilitation Counseling program and apply for the RSA Scholarship should they aspire to become a vocational rehabilitation counselor. For those that are not sponsored by RSA, MDRS on a case-by-case basis determines if funds are available to sponsor the Counselor Assistant in a graduate program. Counselor Assistants that are approved for sponsorship in graduate training are eligible for reimbursement of tuition, book costs and approved educational leave. The employee is required to enter into a contractual agreement with MDRS for service repayment. MDRS requires three years of continued employment in return for expenses reimbursement and education leave.

### **VR Interpreters**

As per Mississippi State Law, the Office on Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) is the registering authority for all interpreters within Mississippi who interpret for pay to be registered with ODHH. As such, they are the authority who determines what certifications or credentials which they will recognize to grant the registration to each interpreter. At this time, the in-state credentialing test which has been used in Mississippi for credentialing interpreters has been determined by ODHH to no longer be recognized for the purposes of registration. There is currently no in-state replacement for the previous test. As such, the closest testing system that would not require a bachelor’s degree in order to sit for the evaluation would be the Board of Interpreters Evaluation (BEI) which is in Texas or the Arkansas state Quality Assurance Test. MDRS will provide financial assistance for Staff Interpreter certification and renewals through reimbursement. The Staff Interpreter must initially submit documentation through their immediate supervisor for approval to take the test at the agency’s expense. Documentation of a pass or fail must be submitted after the test is taken. This information will be maintained in the employee OHD staff training file. MDRS will pay a one-

time re-examination (retake) fee with documentation of the certification examination grade report.

### **Core Curriculum Training**

The Division of Training within the Office of Human Resource Development (OHRD) serves as a centralized unit to plan, implement, and coordinate training activities for all VR and VRB staff. VR Program staff have also been designated to work together with OHRD designated staff, to facilitate and coordinate on-going staff development training for new VR and VRB Counselors and Counselor Assistants.

The core curriculum training contains a variety of training opportunities which include, but are not limited to, staff attending training conferences, educational assistance, ongoing staff development provided by agency staff and the core curriculum class. The core curriculum is designed as a set of training courses that are designed to assist in ensuring that VR Counselors and staff receive on-going staff development in order to maintain and enhance their skills to be equipped with a 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge of the current labor market. Training is provided annually to Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors, Counselor Assistants and Vocational Evaluators. These trainings are coordinated with OHRD, VR Program Specialist. This training is provided in-person training, via TEAMS and/or district offices. These training sessions can include a variety of topics but generally include the following: Medical Aspects of Disability to help understanding the functional limitations of various disabilities and the vocational implications of functional limitations on employment, especially with regard to individuals whose disabilities may require specialized services or groups of individuals with disabilities who comprise an increasing proportion of the VR or VRB caseloads, such as individuals with Autism, cognitive impairments, mental illnesses, blindness or deafness; Vocational assessment tools and analysis of transferrable work skills; Counseling and guidance skills, including individual and group counseling and career guidance; Effective use of practices leading to competitive integrated employment, such as supported employment, customized employment, internships, apprenticeships, paid work experiences, etc.; Case management and employment services planning, including Social Security work incentives, and the Social Security Administration's Ticket-to-Work program; knowledge of labor market trends, occupational requirements, and other labor market information that provides information about employers, business practices, and employer personnel needs; the use of labor market information to support building and maintaining relationships with employers and to inform delivery of job development and job placement activities that respond to today's labor market; understanding the effective utilization of rehabilitation technology and job accommodations; skills to address cultural diversity among consumers, particularly affecting workplace settings, including racial and ethnic diversity and generational differences; and understanding confidentiality and ethical standards and practices; Pre-Employment Transition Services, Deafness, Supported Employment, Post-Secondary Education Training opportunities, etc.

The YesLMS training platform is also used to provide training in the following areas: Ethics, Assessment, Job Development and Employment Acquisition, Communication, History of Vocational Rehabilitation, WIOA Vision, VR Funding, VR Processes, Organizational Skills, Empathy, Values and Motivation, Privacy Rules, VR and HIPAA, VR Counseling and Guidance, and Assistive Technology. A curriculum has been developed for these staff members that is applicable to each position. This training is coordinated by designated staff.

In addition to core curriculum training that provides on-going staff development, VR Program Specialist provide training meetings throughout the year to help ensure that counselors with specialized caseloads receive the training and guidance they need to provide services in the



specialty area of the caseload. This training is generally provided on a quarterly basis. VR Program Specialist also helps and participates in District Training Meetings to assist the District Manager and Deputy District provide training and support to staff.

### **New Counselor Training**

New VR and VRB Counselors are required to participate in a 10–12-week synchronous virtual training program. These virtual training courses are conducted twice a week for 2-3 hours a day. Trainees are given assignments/activities to complete between training days. The training is competency-based and includes instruction in vocational counseling and guidance, facilitating informed choice, and in IPE development. It also includes lessons in understanding disability and its vocational implications. VR and VRB will pursue opportunities to record training material so that staff can review and re-listen to information presented. In addition, if subjects are recorded, listening to the subject content can continue in the absence of a trainer.

### **Automated Accessible Case Environment (AACE) Training**

The Aware Case Management System, AACE, is utilized by VR and VRB staff as a Case Management System and as a data collection tool for case management, internal and Federal reporting. Training for specialized AACE functions, features, and Federal requirements.

Newly hired VR and VRB counselors, counselor assistants and evaluators are provided with a comprehensive hands-on introduction to the functionality of the AACE, provide staff with effective caseload management skills, and equip staff with the knowledge of the VR process workflow. Follow-up AACE training is also provided when the need has been identified.

### **2024 New Counselor Mentorship Process**

The Counselor Mentorship process will coordinate senior counselors with newly hired counselors to assist them to effectively transition into the role as Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors (VRC) with the goal of becoming a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC). The mentor will help equip the counselor with the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to provide the highest quality of services to the individuals they serve. In addition, this mentorship program can boost workplace satisfaction, foster professional development, and career advancement.

The foundation of Counselor Mentorship will be based on the six principles codes of ethical behavior for Rehabilitation Counselors: autonomy, beneficence, fidelity, justice, nonmaleficence and veracity.

The Counselor Mentorship Process is a one-year process and will begin one month after the counselor begins working as a VR Counselor. The Counselor Mentorship process will include the duties and responsibilities for the Counselor Mentorship Coordinator, Mentor and Mentee. The VR Program Coordinator that coordinates the VR internship program will coordinate the mentorship process. The VR Program Coordinator will be responsible for pairing the Mentor and Mentee and tracking the progress of the Mentee and Mentor. The Mentor will schedule regular meetings with the Mentee to offer guidance, advice, and support towards the Mentee's professional growth. The Mentee will be responsible for meeting with the Mentor as scheduled to discuss any issues, concerns, or questions they may encounter throughout the one-year process of their career development as a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor.

Both the VR Program Coordinator and Counselor Mentor will assess the mentee's progress and provide feedback to the District Manager through monthly updates, participate in meetings (virtually or in-person) to discuss and evaluate the Mentorship process progress and make

adjustments if needed to potential problem areas with the process, track the Mentee's skills progression up to one year of employment and determine their next career development plan for career advancement. For example, seek master's degree in Rehabilitation Counseling or prepare for CRC examination to earn credentials as a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor.

Upon completion of the Counselor Mentorship process, documentation of participation and completion of the Mentorship process will be maintained by VR Program Coordinator and Office of Human Development.

### **Additional Training Based on Need**

MDRS, VR and VRB offer individual training allocations for staff members. This allocation can be used for job related professional development activities such as attending conferences, purchasing books, CDs, DVDs or other materials, taking online short courses or any other approved professional development activity. Supervisory approval is required for these professional development activities to ensure that employees participate in activities consistent with their individual needs and job responsibilities and requirements. Our HRD provides consultation and technical assistance to VR employees as needed. Training sessions are held at the district level and in formal statewide training as needed.

In order to address the increasing percentage of retirement eligible employees and the need for knowledgeable managers and supervisors, the MDRS Executive Team established a formal leadership development program. This program, known as Leadership, Education, and Development for Rehabilitation Services (LEADRS), addresses the future loss of institutional memory and the transfer of accumulated wisdom through its development of employee management skills and technical competencies. LEADRS' mission is, *"To educate, develop, and empower current and future leaders of MDRS to sustain and enhance the Department's holistic approach in meeting the needs of Mississippians with disabilities"*.

MDRS also promotes capacity building and leadership development through supervisory staff's participation in a Basic Supervisory Course and the Certified Public Manager Program available through the Mississippi State Personnel Board, and In-service Supervisor Training available through MDRS. In addition, staff members have participated in Leadership Program at the National Rehabilitation Leadership Institute at San Diego State University. The staff development plan is based upon the assessed needs of the staff.

The Performance Development System (PDS) was developed by the Mississippi State Personnel Board and is applicable to all state service employees to evaluate employee performance.

Also incorporated into the employee evaluation process is the employee's Individual Development Plan (IDP), which serves as an employee training needs assessment. IDPs are developed by the employee and evaluated by the supervisor to assure that the employee receives work-related training and training in other areas that the employee and supervisor agree will benefit the employee's performance.

The system of employee performance evaluation does not impede the accomplishment of specific mandates contained in Title I of the Rehabilitation Act. The system facilitates accomplishment by means of including in performance standards the responsibilities of MDRS and its employees under the Rehabilitation Act.

Information from case reviews conducted by the MDRS Program Evaluation Unit is analyzed to evaluate the knowledge and skill of employees as they relate to the policy of serving individuals with the most severe disabilities. Results of such evaluations are included in the development of

objectives for the annual VR training plan. Information from annual client surveys is also used in determining training objectives and is incorporated into the VR training plan.

**ii. Procedures for the acquisition and dissemination of significant knowledge from research and other sources to VR agency professionals and paraprofessionals and for providing training regarding the amendments to the Rehabilitation Act made by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.**

MDRS continues to identify current information from research, rehabilitation trends and professional resources. This information is provided to agency staff through a variety of methods, including training at the state, regional, and district levels. Training has been focused on Autism, Pre-Employment Transition Services, Person-Centered Planning, Customized Employment and Mental Health First Aid. Training information and resources are posted and available to staff on MDRS Connect, VR and VRB Folder, which is the agencies' intranet.

Information regarding current trends, disabilities, and tools to use to assist the counselors and staff in performing their duties and providing quality services to individuals with disabilities is disseminated via Connect, VR and VRB Folder.

VR program staff are required to provide staff with and post current information regarding their program areas for staff usage.

**3. DESCRIPTION OF VR AGENCY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF PERSONNEL STANDARDS CONSISTENT WITH SECTION 101(A)(7)(B) TO ENSURE THAT VR AGENCY PROFESSIONAL AND PARAPROFESSIONAL PERSONNEL ARE ADEQUATELY TRAINED AND PREPARED, INCLUDING—**

**A. STANDARDS THAT ARE CONSISTENT WITH ANY NATIONAL OR STATE-APPROVED OR -RECOGNIZED CERTIFICATION, LICENSING, REGISTRATION, OR OTHER COMPARABLE REQUIREMENTS THAT APPLY TO THE PROFESSION OR DISCIPLINE IN WHICH SUCH PERSONNEL ARE PROVIDING VR SERVICES; AND**

**B. THE ESTABLISHMENT AND MAINTENANCE OF EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS, IN ACCORDANCE WITH SECTION 101(A)(7)(B)(II) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT, TO ENSURE THAT THE PERSONNEL HAVE A 21ST CENTURY UNDERSTANDING OF THE EVOLVING LABOR FORCE AND THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES.**

**A. Standards that are consistent with any national or State-approved or -recognized certification, licensing, registration, or other comparable requirements that apply to the profession or discipline in which such personnel are providing VR services; and**

**VR and VRB Counselors and other professional staff are hired through the Mississippi State Personnel Board. Qualifications for counselors are based on both educational preparation and professional work experience. There is not a state approved or recognized certification, licensure, or registration of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors in the state of Mississippi. VR, VRB in conjunction with the State Rehabilitation Council establish the Certified Rehabilitation Counselor (CRC) educational eligibility requirement as its highest standard. Efforts are made to recruit those who meet the CRC educational eligibility status.**

**VR and VRB Counselor Qualifications**

A master's degree or doctoral degree from an accredited university in rehabilitation counseling or a degree closely related field such law, social work, psychology, disability studies, business

administration, human resources, special education, management, public administration, or another field that reasonably provides competence in the employment sector with evidence of completion of a graduate level coursework in counseling theory/techniques or experience in providing counseling and guidance to individuals with disabilities and a 21st century understanding of the evolving labor market.

**When OHRD is unsuccessful in finding enough applicants who meet the highest standards, VR and VRB will accept and consider qualified those who meet the minimum initial standard of having:**

**A bachelor's degree from an accredited university in rehabilitation counseling or a closely related field such as law, social work, psychology, disability studies, business administration, human resources, special education, management, public administration or another field and one (1) year of experience in providing counseling and guidance to individuals who are injured or disabled with an understanding of the needs of individuals with disabilities and a 21st century understanding of the evolving labor market.**

### **VR and VRB Counselor Assistant Qualifications**

A high school diploma or GED and at least one(1) year of experience directly related to the duties and responsibilities in an organization whose mission includes the provision of services to persons who are injured or disabled so that an understanding and sensitivity toward people with disabilities has been obtained; or completed degree(s) from an accredited institution that are above the minimum education requirement may be substituted for experience on a year for year basis; customer service skills sufficient to perform initial interviews, assist with forms, and to develop positive relationships with the individuals receiving services and providers; data entry and keyboarding skills sufficient to create documents and complete data entry; and English sufficient to interview clients, communicate effectively with providers; and to draft correspondences or complete forms; assist in planning, coordinating and preparing daily activities and counseling efforts of the counselor; Create, issue and pay authorizations for purchase under the direction of the Counselor utilizing correct coding and ensuring fees are paid and processed in a timely manner.

OVRB current service delivery also includes 17 master level counselors that focus on transition and adults to assist with facilitating clients through the vocational process. VRB has four (4) Orientation and Mobility Specialists throughout the state that work with VRB clients. Three (3) are currently ACVREP certified, and one is receiving training in Orientation and Mobility. All VRB Counselors are eligible to take the CRC exam and retain their CRC.

OVR currently has 38 VR staff with certification as a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor. VR Managers represent the largest group of VR staff who hold a CRC certification.

Educational Assistance - MDRS, within the limits of available funds, is authorized, pursuant to Section 37-101-293 of the Mississippi Code of 1972 Annotated, to grant educational assistance to its employees. Educational assistance may consist of any combination of paid educational leave (full-time or part-time) at a maximum salary to be established by the Mississippi State Personnel Board and/or reimbursement for tuition, books, and related fees for undergraduate or graduate level courses. The purpose of the educational assistance program is to encourage employees to develop job-related skills and to develop employees for higher level professional and management positions. Priorities for awarding educational assistance will be based on the established need within MDRS for staff with the educational credentials being sought and the availability of individuals with those credentials in the relevant applicant pool.

A systematic program of skills-based training provides all programmatic and support personnel with the abilities and tools necessary to deliver quality services. Training activities range from providing staff with information about correct and/or better methods of carrying out assigned jobs to providing staff with new and challenging ideas pertinent to the programs in MDRS.

**B. The establishment and maintenance of education and experience requirements, in accordance with section 101(a)(7)(B)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act, to ensure that the personnel have a 21st century understanding of the evolving labor force and the needs of individuals with disabilities.**

OVR and OVRB performance development is an on-going, day-to-day process of communication and feedback between the supervisor and employee. Job duties and associated competencies and behavioral anchors are provided during the annual Planning Phase. The supervisor shall provide information to the employee on his/her progress throughout the performance development period (Review and Feedback Phase). The employee is assigned a formal PDS Rating at the end of the appraisal period.

Ensuring that personnel have a 21st-century understanding of the evolving labor force and the needs of individuals with disabilities means that personnel have specialized training and experience that enables them to work effectively with individuals with disabilities to assist them to achieve Competitive Integrated Employment and with employers who hire such individuals. Relevant personnel skills include, but are not limited to:

- Understanding the functional limitations of various disabilities and the vocational implications of functional limitations on employment, especially with regard to individuals whose disabilities may require specialized services or groups of individuals with disabilities who comprise an increasing proportion of the State VR caseloads, such as individuals with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress syndrome, mental illnesses, autism, blindness or deaf blindness.
- Vocational assessment tools and strategies and the interpretation of vocational assessment results, including, when appropriate, situational and work-based assessments and analysis of transferable work skills.
- Counseling and guidance skills, including individual and group counseling and career guidance.
- Effective use of practices leading to Competitive Integrated Employment, such as supported employment, customized employment, internships, apprenticeships, paid work experiences, etc.
- Case management and employment services planning, including familiarity and use of the broad range of disability, employment, and social services programs in the state and local area, such as independent living programs, Social Security work incentives, and the Social Security Administration's Ticket-to-Work program.
- Caseload management, including familiarity with effective caseload management practices and the use of any available automated or information technology resources.
- In-depth knowledge of labor market trends, occupational requirements, and other labor market information that provides information about employers, business practices, and employer personnel needs, such as data provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Department of Labor's O\*NET occupational system.

- The use of labor market information for vocational rehabilitation counseling, vocational planning, and the provision of information to consumers for the purposes of making informed choices, business engagement and business relationships, and job development and job placement.
- The use of labor market information to support building and maintaining relationships with employers and to inform delivery of job development and job placement activities that respond to today's labor market.
- Understanding the effective utilization of rehabilitation technology and job accommodations.
- Training in understanding the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act and other employment discrimination and employment-related laws.
- Advocacy skills to modify attitudinal and environmental barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities, including those with the most significant disabilities.
- Skills to address cultural diversity among consumers, particularly affecting workplace settings, including racial and ethnic diversity and generational differences; and
- Understanding confidentiality and ethical standards and practices, especially related to new challenges in use of social media, new partnerships, and data sharing.

#### 4. METHOD(S) THE VR AGENCY USES TO ENSURE THAT PERSONNEL ARE ABLE TO COMMUNICATE IN APPROPRIATE MODES OF COMMUNICATION WITH OR IN THE NATIVE LANGUAGE OF APPLICANTS OR ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE LIMITED ENGLISH SPEAKING ABILITY.

VR and VRB staff work with Mississippi's diverse populations. One way VR and VRB does this is to actively recruit and support employees who have diverse backgrounds. When a counselor is unable to communicate directly with a customer in his/her preferred language, VR has qualified interpreters or program staff to assist in identifying a translator in the individual's preferred language.

Due to the increasing Hispanic population, qualified interpreters are contracted on an as needed basis for individuals who are Spanish speakers. VR also seeks to hire qualified rehabilitation counselors who are Spanish and English speakers.

VR has established fees for foreign language interpreters which may be authorized and paid by counselors when the need for their services occurs to provide rehabilitation services to non-English speaking individuals. A contract is maintained with a Spanish Translator that translates forms, documents, brochures and any written documents into Spanish.

American Sign Language interpretation needs, for those who are Deaf or Deaf-Blind, are met using a combination of employee positions and arrangements with qualified local interpreter service providers. MDRS employs eight qualified sign language interpreters for the ten districts that comprise the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation. The Office on Deaf and Hard of Hearing also employs one qualified sign language interpreter who is available to provide interpreter services. The Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing assist individuals in the state obtain interpreter services when needed.

VR has assisted listening devices in most offices for employees to communicate with individuals who are hard of hearing or late deafened and do not know sign language. VRB provides

materials in braille or large print as needed. VR arranges for Foreign Language Translators when needed.

VRB Counselors participate in specialized in-service quarterly training and in-service training provided through the MDRS Assistive Technology Division which includes training on communication skills for individuals who are Blind or Deaf-Blind. Materials are available in braille and other accessible formats, as requested by consumers.

VR requires that all VR Counselors for the Deaf achieve and maintain basic proficiency in American Sign Language. Specialized training in deafness-related areas is provided for new counselors in the Deaf Program as well as quarterly training for all VR Counselors for the Deaf and Sign Language Interpreters.

5. AS APPROPRIATE, DESCRIBE THE PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES TO COORDINATE THE DESIGNATED STATE UNIT'S COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM OF PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT WITH PERSONNEL DEVELOPMENT UNDER THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT.

Mississippi VR and VRB programs have an established partnership with the Mississippi Department of Education/Office of Special Education including an executed Interagency Agreement (IA).

VR and VRB have operationalized the Pre-Employment and Transition Services Program and have continued to work on improving the quality of those services. To support this, counselors are assigned to 153 local education agencies throughout the state. Additional staff will be needed to help coordinate, plan and provide services to students with disabilities, coordinate and plan with local education agencies, and to work with district staff.

## **J. COORDINATION WITH EDUCATION OFFICIALS**

In accordance with the requirements in Section 101(a)(11)(D) of the Rehabilitation Act—

1. DESCRIBE PLANS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES FOR COORDINATION BETWEEN THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY AND EDUCATION OFFICIALS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PUBLIC EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, THAT ARE DESIGNED TO FACILITATE THE TRANSITION OF THE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FROM THE RECEIPT OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN SCHOOL TO THE RECEIPT OF VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES, INCLUDING PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind, Mississippi Department of Education and Local Schools have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) designed to achieve better coordination between the school staff VR and VRB staff.

Mississippi currently has 153 local school districts. Each local school has a VR Counselor and VRB Counselor assigned to the school who are responsible for developing cooperative working relationships with the local education agency staff in the districts, and other agencies working with youth. VR Program Coordinators also assist with developing and maintaining cooperative agreements and relationships with the Mississippi Department of Education and the local education agencies.

VR has designated VR Program staff that include a Statewide Coordinator for Transition Services, Statewide Coordinator for Post Secondary Education and Transition, Program Specialist for Autism Services and Program Specialist for Supported Employment that all work together to coordinate and monitor Transition Services, including Pre-Employment Transition Services. Because of the continued growth of Transition Services and Post Secondary Education and Training, we currently have a need to add more staff to coordinate and monitor transition services, including Pre-Employment Transition Services.

2. DESCRIBE THE CURRENT STATUS AND SCOPE OF THE FORMAL INTERAGENCY AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE VR AGENCY AND THE STATE EDUCATIONAL AGENCY. CONSISTENT WITH THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE FORMAL INTERAGENCY AGREEMENT PURSUANT TO 34 C.F.R. § 361.22(B), PROVIDE, AT A MINIMUM, THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION ABOUT THE AGREEMENT:

A. CONSULTATION AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE, WHICH MAY BE PROVIDED USING ALTERNATIVE MEANS FOR MEETING PARTICIPATION (SUCH AS VIDEO CONFERENCES AND CONFERENCE CALLS), TO ASSIST EDUCATIONAL AGENCIES IN PLANNING FOR THE TRANSITION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES FROM SCHOOL TO POST-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES, INCLUDING PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES AND OTHER VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES;

B. TRANSITION PLANNING BY PERSONNEL OF THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY AND EDUCATIONAL AGENCY PERSONNEL FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES THAT FACILITATES THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THEIR INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS (IEPS) UNDER SECTION 614(D) OF THE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT;

C. THE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES, INCLUDING FINANCIAL RESPONSIBILITIES, OF EACH AGENCY, INCLUDING PROVISIONS FOR DETERMINING STATE LEAD AGENCIES AND QUALIFIED PERSONNEL RESPONSIBLE FOR TRANSITION SERVICES AND PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES;



D. PROCEDURES FOR OUTREACH TO AND IDENTIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES WHO NEED TRANSITION SERVICES AND PRE-EMPLOYMENT TRANSITION SERVICES. OUTREACH TO THESE STUDENTS SHOULD OCCUR AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE DURING THE TRANSITION PLANNING PROCESS AND MUST INCLUDE, AT A MINIMUM, A DESCRIPTION OF THE PURPOSE OF THE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM, ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS, APPLICATION PROCEDURES, AND SCOPE OF SERVICES THAT MAY BE PROVIDED TO ELIGIBLE INDIVIDUALS;

E. COORDINATION NECESSARY TO SATISFY DOCUMENTATION REQUIREMENTS SET FORTH IN 34 C.F.R. PART 397 REGARDING STUDENTS AND YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES WHO ARE SEEKING SUBMINIMUM WAGE EMPLOYMENT; AND

F. ASSURANCE THAT, IN ACCORDANCE WITH 34 C.F.R. § 397.31, NEITHER THE SEA NOR THE LOCAL EDUCATIONAL AGENCY WILL ENTER INTO A CONTRACT OR OTHER ARRANGEMENT WITH AN ENTITY, AS DEFINED IN 34 C.F.R. § 397.5(D), FOR THE PURPOSE OF OPERATING A PROGRAM UNDER WHICH YOUTH WITH A DISABILITY IS ENGAGED IN WORK COMPENSATED AT A SUBMINIMUM WAGE.

**A. Consultation and technical assistance, which may be provided using alternative means for meeting participation (such as video conferences and conference calls), to assist educational agencies in planning for the transition of students with disabilities from school to post-school activities, including pre-employment transition services and other vocational rehabilitation services;**

VR, VRB and MDE will work together to ensure that consultation and technical assistance, which could include video conference and conference calls, is provided to the local education agency staff in planning for the transition of students with disabilities to post-secondary education/training and employment. This includes implementing a structure for ensuring pre-employment transition services and other VR services are made available statewide for students who need these services.

**B. Transition planning by personnel of the designated State agency and educational agency personnel for students with disabilities that facilitates the development and implementation of their individualized education programs (IEPs) under Section 614(d) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act;**

Transition planning between VR, VRB and MDE ultimately helps with the successful development and implementation of both the IEP and the IPE. VR, VRB and MDE's Office of Special Education staff will provide technical assistance and consultation regarding the five required Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) made available to students with disabilities who need them, between the ages of 14 through 21 statewide:

- Job Exploration counseling to assist students with disabilities in understanding their work-related strengths and interests and career possibilities.
- Work-based learning experiences, which may include in-school or afterschool opportunities, or work experiences outside of the traditional school setting (including internships), that is provided in an integrated environment in the community to the maximum extent possible.
- Counseling on post-secondary education and training opportunities including enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary education programs at institutions of higher education.

- Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living skills; and
- Instruction in self-advocacy (including instruction in person-centered planning), which may include peer mentoring (including) peer mentoring from individuals with disabilities working in competitive integrated employment).

VR and VRB Counselors will work with and coordinate with classroom teachers implementing Pre-ETS services for students who need the services. VR and VRB Counselors will attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings when invited. VR and VRB Counselors will use the IEPs with students to assist in developing the Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

VR, VRB and local school districts will work together and share responsibility for ensuring that schools are aware of and know how to use vocational assessment tools to support students with disabilities to receive current information about their strengths, interests, and preferences in order to make informed choices about competitive integrated employment before leaving secondary education.

**C. The roles and responsibilities, including financial responsibilities, of each agency, including provisions for determining State lead agencies and qualified personnel responsible for transition services and pre-employment transition services;**

VR Transition Counselors and VRB Counselors assist eligible students with disabilities to make informed choices regarding VR services needed to prepare for, secure, retain, advance in or regain competitive integrated employment. VR Services include the provision of pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities who are eligible or students who are potentially eligible for VR services.

VR and VRB Counselor's responsibilities include assessing and determining a student's unique strengths, resources, priorities, concerns, abilities, capabilities, interests, and informed choice that is consistent with the general goal of competitive integrated employment that include their VR service needs, developing and implementing the IPE, and assisting in the achievement of the employment goal for the eligible student.

In addition, a key component of informed choice and IPE development is financial literacy, including information related to the potential effects of employment on Social Security and other benefits that will dispel misinformation or misperceptions about the impact of work on their benefits and help students with disabilities and/or their legal guardians, to make well-informed decisions about the employment tools. Counselors refer students to CWICs, Certified Work Incentive Counselors, to provide benefits planning during the initial phase of the development of the IPE, during the implementation of the IPE as a service, upon employment, and again, when an individual receives a pay increase on the job.

MDE Office of Special Education is responsible for ensuring that local education agencies provide special education and related services as documented in the student's IEP.

VR and VRB set aside 15% of the federal allotment to fund Pre-Employment Transition Services for students with disabilities. VR and VRB is financially responsible for the services VR provide. MDE and the local education agencies are financially responsible for the services they provide under IDEA and state rules and regulations. Nothing in our MOU will be construed to reduce the obligation under IDEA for a local education agency or any other agency to provide or pay for any transition services that are also considered special education or related services and that are necessary for ensuring a free and appropriate public education to a child with disabilities in Mississippi.

VR and VRB administration and MDE Office of Special Education are responsible to ensure that neither the local education agencies, VR or VRB local offices shift the burden for providing a service, for which it otherwise would be responsible to the other entity. Decisions related to which entity will be responsible for providing transition, pre-employment transition services or VR services that can be considered both a special education and a VR service will be made at the state and local level as part of the collaboration between VR, VRB, and local education agency.

Whenever there is an overlap of goals and services, VR and VRB work with the local education agency to arrange a cost-sharing agreement to provide the services the student needs.

The following guidelines are used to reach a final agreement regarding which agency is responsible for providing the service(s):

The purpose of the service:

1. Is it related to the achievement of the education/IEP goal?
2. Is the service related to the achievement of the employment goal/IPE goal?
3. Which agency customarily provides the service?
4. If the service will help achieve the IEP goal and the IPE goal, the local education agency and VR or VRB negotiate how each party will participate in the cost of the service. (IDEA Part B or VR/VRB)

**D. Procedures for outreach to and identification of students with disabilities who need transition services and pre-employment transition services. Outreach to these students should occur as early as possible during the transition planning process and must include, at a minimum, a description of the purpose of the vocational rehabilitation program, eligibility requirements, application procedures, and scope of services that may be provided to eligible individuals;**

### **Outreach Meetings**

The counselor assigned to the local education agency and/or VR/VRB Outreach staff establish linkages and provide outreach within each school with the Special Education Director, Transition Coordinator, Principal, 504 Coordinator, Career and Technical Education Coordinator, Guidance Counselor, Teacher, School Nurses, school mental health coordinators, school psychologist/psychometrist, alternative education teachers, school health personnel, and other school-based staff determined appropriate.

When conducting general outreach activities throughout the year, an Introduction to VR services will be provided, discussion regarding the application process, explanation of the referral form and process for potentially eligible students and eligible students interested and in need of services, discussion regarding the eligibility requirements for VR, description of the scope of VR services, including Pre-Employment Transition Services, information regarding specialized caseloads (ex. Vision, hearing) and distribution of brochures, business cards and informational material.

VR, VRB and LEA will work together to ensure outreach is received by students receiving special education services under IDEA, students receiving accommodations under Section 504, students receiving school psychological/mental health services, occupational therapy, speech therapy, nursing and other students who have disabilities as defined in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, but who do not receive IDEA services or have a 504 plan.

Following the outreach meetings, VR/VRB and LEA staff will identify students with disabilities who are in need of Pre-ETS and/or the full scope of VR services and begin arranging to obtain the necessary referral information, project the timelines for processing applications, connecting students to specialized caseload, when appropriate, begin the provision of VR Services, provide specific information regarding VR services such as updates on Pre-ETS, summer programs, Pre-ETS Grow, explaining measurable skills gain, why we track it, and why we need documentation for each student participating in VR services and planning activities during the upcoming school year for students and confirming the availability of meeting space in the schools.

To provide information to students and their families/legal guardians about pre-employment transition services and/or VR services, MDE will allow VR and VRB access their digital platform MajorClarity which includes a student directory and contact information. Having access to this platform will enable VR and VRB to obtain school information and records, if available, that are needed and/or beneficial for eligibility and the provision of transition services, including pre-employment transition services.

### **School Survey**

A school survey will be utilized to survey school staff at least once per year to help determine the number of students that need VR services. The school survey is generally sent to the school staff that the Program Coordinators have identified as the point of contact to obtain this information. The information from the survey has proven to be valuable information that provides insight into the relationship that the school has with VR and VRB, the number the school is identifying as students with a disability, and a cross reference of data that is received from MDE.

### **VR and VRB Pre-ETS Handouts and Flyers**

Basic Pre-ETS Handouts and Flyers will be made available to local education agencies. These handouts will be utilized so that any student is able to self-identify as having a disability that may qualify them for eligibility for VR. They will be able to contact VR Transition staff on their own or take the information to designated staff at the school. These handouts and flyers are a tool to help ensure that VR and VRB are reaching out to schools and making Pre-ETS services, as well as VR services available to students in need of such services.

### **E. Coordination necessary to satisfy documentation requirements set forth in 34 C.F.R. part 397 regarding students and youth with disabilities who are seeking subminimum wage employment; and**

VR, VRB and the local education agency are responsible for the coordination necessary to satisfy documentation requirements set forth in WIOA and 34 CFR 397.10 (b)(i) and (ii) about students and youth with disabilities who are seeking subminimum wage employment.

VR, VRB and LEA's will work together to ensure that outreach and students with disabilities who are seeking subminimum wage employment will receive Pre-ETS Career Counseling Information and Referral Services (CCIR) related to competitive integrated employment, including Supported employment.

VR and VRB will ensure that students seeking subminimum wage can apply for services and be determined eligible or ineligible for VR services, and if determined eligible will develop an IPE and receive Pre-employment transition services.

VR and VRB will provide the local education agency with the required documentation specified in WIOA for all students who are seeking subminimum wage employment. If the student and

his/her legal guardian refuse pre-ETS CCIR, the student will receive documentation stating their refusal of services.

**F. Assurance that, in accordance with 34 C.F.R. § 397.31, neither the SEA nor the local educational agency will enter into a contract or other arrangement with an entity, as defined in 34 C.F.R. § 397.5(d), for the purpose of operating a program under which youth with a disability is engaged in work compensated at a subminimum wage.**

VR and VRB in accordance with 34 CFR 397.31, will assist the local education agency in identifying programs that pay subminimum wage to help the local education agency avoid contracting with an entity, as defined in WIOA 34 CFR 397.5 (d) for the purpose of operating a program under which a student with a disability is engaged in work that is compensated at subminimum wage.

A Memorandum of Agreement for Transition Planning for Secondary Students with Disabilities is made and entered into by and between the Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, hereafter referred to as 'MDRS', for and on behalf of its Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind, hereafter referred to as 'VR/VRB', and the Mississippi Department of Education, for and on behalf of its Office of Special Education, hereafter referred to as 'MDE OSE'.

A Memorandum of Understanding for Transition Planning for Secondary Students with Disabilities is made and entered into by and between the Offices of Vocational Rehabilitation and Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind with local education agencies. Mississippi has 153 local education agencies. There are currently 140 signed Memorandum of Understanding.

The scope of services between VR and VRB and the local education agency are intended to serve as a mechanism for VR and VRB and the local school districts to specify the plans, policies, and procedures for coordinating services to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities, including:

- Responsibilities of VR and VRB
- Responsibilities of Local Education Agency
- Referral Process
- Coordination necessary and documentation requirements set forth in section 511 of the Rehabilitation Act, as added by WIOA, about students with disabilities who are seeking subminimum wage employment.
- Consultation and technical assistance in the planning for the transition of students with disabilities.
- Transition planning by VR/VRB and educational personnel that facilitates the development and implementation of a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) and IPE.
- Roles and responsibilities, including financial and programmatic responsibilities of each agency.
- Procedures for outreach to and identification of students with disabilities.
- Assessment of students' potential need for transition services and Pre-Employment Transition Services.

- Coordination necessary and documentation requirements set forth in section 511 of the Rehabilitation Act, as added by WIOA, with regard to students with disabilities who are seeking subminimum wage employment.
- Assurance that the MDE OSE will not enter an arrangement with an entity holding a special wage certificate under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act for the purpose of operating a program under which a youth with a disability is engaged in work at a subminimum wage; and
- Additional considerations include grievance procedure to resolve disputes between VR/VRB and the MDE OSE, as appropriate, as well as procedures to resolve disputes between an individual with a disability and the entities specified above, and information about the Client Assistance Program.

The Cooperative Agreement between the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation/Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for Blind and the Mississippi School for the Deaf and Mississippi School for the Blind was implemented to ensure that students who are Blind and Deaf receive effective seamless services as they make the transition from high school to post-high school education and/or training. This agreement includes Pre-ETS and other VR services. This agreement follows the same guidelines for all cooperative agreements with the Mississippi Department of Education and the local education agency in terms coordination, consultation, and technical assistance.

## **K. COORDINATION WITH EMPLOYERS**

In accordance with the requirements in Section 101(a)(11)(E) of the Rehabilitation Act, describe how the VR agency will work with employers to identify competitive integrated employment and career exploration opportunities in order to facilitate the provision of VR services; and transition services for youth and students with disabilities, including pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities.

WIOA specifically directs the VR program to work with employers to identify Competitive Integrated Employment opportunities and career exploration opportunities to facilitate the provision of VR services, and transition services for youth with disabilities such as Pre-Employment Transition Services. MDRS will handle this coordination with employers through its Office of Business Development.

The Office of Business Development (OBD) is comprised of 27 individuals spread across 82 Mississippi counties. There are eleven (11) Business Development Representatives (BDRs) located in and across a ten-district area. The BDRs are located in (Olive Branch, Tupelo, Greenwood, Starkville, Jackson, Pearl, Meridian, McComb, Hattiesburg, Gulfport). Eleven BDRs, ten Career Counselors (currently referred to as Job Search Coordinators), and three Special Project Coordinators are supported by three managers, (two regional managers and one director), one office assistant, and one contract employee. Presence in the community provides the BDRs with learning the communities' workforce needs, meeting employers located in their districts, learning employers' human capital needs, and helping the VR arm of MDRS connect the needs of the businesses with the clients being served. This team trains, supports, and provides direction to the eleven (11) BDRs and is responsible for assistance in the creation of large-scale programs with employers who want to hire on a mass scale.

In 2020, MDRS job fair efforts were hindered and cancelled due to COVID-19. In the fiscal year 2021, the goal was to implement three job fairs independent from the Governor's Job Fair Network. The first independent job fair was held in October 2021 in Oxford, Mississippi. It was held in conjunction with the University of Mississippi and was targeted towards college students with disabilities. Twenty-eight businesses attended the job fair. Students' attendance was less than expected; however, feedback from business partners was positive. The most common feedback was that the students were job seeking and qualified for the positions that were being offered. In PY 2022, a total of four Job Fairs were held in Southaven, Jackson, University of Southern Mississippi located in Hattiesburg and The University of Mississippi located in Oxford, Mississippi. In PY 2023, a total of four Job Fairs were held in Southaven, Jackson, Hattiesburg, and Meridian.

OBD will continue to target college age individuals with disabilities exiting post-secondary and seeking employment. Plans are to geographically target the central and southern parts of the state, potentially with the University of Southern Mississippi and Jackson State University. During the 2024-27 plan years, OBD's objective is to continue current events in addition to ten (10) job fairs per year (one in each MDRS district); 20-40 Job Extravaganza events annually for the duration of the contract (5 years); hiring initiative growth through targeted relationships with employers; and market growth through expanded effort in community outreach and education.

### **Sales-Minded / Business First Approach**

The OBD representatives' goal is to provide multiple services and an on-going rapport with business relationships. This mindset is directly correlated with the sales approach that the

office bases its strategy upon. The OBD units' goal is to understand the workforce area in which each representative is located, understand the employers within these areas, recognize the employers' needs, and how to utilize the resources of VR and MDRS (AbilityWorks, Training, etc.) to meet the employers' needs.

OBD uses a face-first approach to delivering the product. The goal is to keep the OBD representatives in the community interacting with businesses as much as possible, to be in-person with the businesses, building relationships, taking facility tours, have meetings about how a business operates, etc.. The purpose of this is to put a face to MDRS. This means a lot to businesses in Mississippi who come from a relational culture. Ultimately, by building this relationship and understanding the business, OBD can specifically pinpoint the needs of the business. Once the business needs are understood, the next step is to utilize the trainings the OBD program provides, the services offered, and the individuals OBD represents to meet the needs of that business.

### **Services to Business**

OBD's goal is to provide a package of services that meets a business' needs for education, support, and human capital. These needs are met through a bundle of services that BDRs are trained to provide. The OBD unit is equipped to provide training such as Disability Awareness, Customer Service, Assistive Technology, ABLE Act, etc.. The goal of the business training is to educate the business about the disability community and to establish a level of comfort about working with the disability community that may not have existed beforehand.

Placement has been prioritized for a long period of time. The OBD representatives carry a caseload of 'job ready' clients who are willing and ready to return to work. When approaching businesses, the first step for the BDR is exploration and fact-finding. The goal is to understand the business model and to understand the businesses' human capital needs. Once the representative has grasped those topics, then the BDR moves to try meeting those business needs with the job-ready client served through VR. The BDR's primary function is relationship building, understanding the client's needs, finding opportunities, and connecting the clients to those opportunities. The BDR's performance is graded on the ability to connect the clients to employment, internships, community-based opportunities, and other services the OBD provides.

Lastly, OBD has entered into relationships with businesses who want to hire individuals with disabilities on a mass scale. These companies understand the value of diversity and the value the clients bring to the workforce and incorporate this value within the business corporate model. OBD staff meets with businesses and determines how this corporate model can be best achieved. The assessment usually determines how many individuals the business is seeking, the specific jobs and areas in which the businesses need individuals to work, training existing staff to prepare for individuals with disabilities to work there, and developing training to prepare the individuals for success when entering the workplace.

In 2018, 10,346 individual contacts to businesses in the state of Mississippi were made by the Office of Business Development (OBD) staff. In 2019, 11,245 individual contacts were made to businesses in the state of Mississippi. In 2020, 6,276 individual contacts were made to businesses in the state of Mississippi, in which COVID-19 had an impact on the number of businesses contacted during 2020. In 2021, 9,857 individual contacts to businesses in the state of Mississippi were made in 2021. In PY 2022, 9,861 individual contacts to businesses in the state of Mississippi were made by the OBD staff. In PY 2023, 13,106 individual contacts to businesses were made by the Office of Business Development staff.



## L. INTERAGENCY COOPERATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES

In accordance with the requirements in Section 101(a)(11)(C) and (K), describe interagency cooperation with and utilization of the services and facilities of agencies and programs that are not carrying out activities through the statewide workforce development system to develop opportunities for community-based employment in integrated settings, to the greatest extent practicable for the following:

1. STATE PROGRAMS (DESIGNATE LEAD AGENCY(IES) AND IMPLEMENTING ENTITY(IES))  
CARRIED OUT UNDER SECTION 4 OF THE ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY ACT OF 1998;

- **Mississippi's Project START (Success through Assistive Rehabilitative Technology)**, is the state program carried out under Section 4 of the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, for education awareness and access to Assistive Technology. Vocational Rehabilitation refers clients to the Start program for bringing awareness of and access to AT through device loan, demonstration, training on AT, and the Re-Use Program.
- **The Assistive Technology Program**, administered by MDRS, assures the adequate and appropriate utilization of rehabilitation engineering assistance is provided to individuals with disabilities. VR and VRB make referrals to this program. The rehabilitation engineering assistance includes a range of services to assist individuals with physical and/or cognitive disabilities that can be addressed through modification, alteration or renovation via development or use of technological devices, or by way of other technology-related assistance. To provide timely and quality rehabilitation engineering services, MDRS has Assistive Technology Specialists located throughout the state in MDRS offices.
- **TK Martin Center for Technology and Disability** to provide for evaluations pertaining to assistive technology, primarily related to seating, positioning and mobility; adaptive driving, including bioptic driving; vehicle modifications; and augmentative and alternative communication.
- **TK Martin Center for Technology and Disability** provides a range of behavioral support services, including social skill building and challenging behavior reduction to support individuals toward their goal of gaining competitive integrated employment. Psychological and behavioral assessment services are also provided.

2. PROGRAMS CARRIED OUT BY THE UNDER SECRETARY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE;

VR and VRB have developed a relationship with the local office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to gather information, build relationships, and develop cooperative efforts to provide services to Mississippians with a disability.

Although no written cooperative agreements have been developed, VR will continue to foster a relationship with the Mississippi Chapter of the USDA and initiate steps to invite a USDA representative to present to VR Counselors at their District meetings.

3. NON-EDUCATIONAL AGENCIES SERVING OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH;

- **Department of Mental Health - Bureau of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities** MOU is developed to continue enhancing, explained and developing methods to support eligible persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities who express a desire for competitive integrated employment; establish a state-level

work group to address system, policy and funding issues that impeded the continuous provision of employment services by VR/VRB and DMH; engage VR/VRB staff and DMH providers and stakeholders at the local level in collaboration and cooperation in the accomplishment of the vision and desired outcomes; identify and disseminate best practices including training and functioning strategies; and, provide individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities with quality employment services that lead to competitive integrated employment in a non-duplicated and seamless manner.

- **Department of Human Services (DHS)-Division of Family and Children Services** MOU developed to assess foster care participants who are diagnosed as having a physical and/or mental disability and assist in the provision of VR Services, including Pre-Employment Transition Services to assist these individuals in reaching competitive integrated employment outcomes.
- **Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians** developed to collaborate and receive interagency referrals for vocational rehabilitation services, including transition planning to Choctaw Indians.
- **Department of Human Services – Division of Field Operations** MOU developed to assist in providing VR services to TANF recipients who are diagnosed with physical and/or mental disabilities reach competitive integrated employment outcomes.
- **Autism and Developmental Disabilities Clinic (ADDC)** – provides a range of behavioral support services, including social skills building and challenging behavior reduction to support individuals toward their goal of gaining competitive integrated employment.
- **Department of Transportation** to coordinate transportation and related program resources and services at the state level wherever possible and promote maximum feasible coordination at the local level.
- **Department of Mental Health (Substance Abuse Programs)** 13 contracts with Residential Treatment Facilities and Individual Outpatient Program.

#### 4. STATE USE CONTRACTING PROGRAMS;

Mississippi has no state use contracting programs.

#### 5. STATE AGENCY RESPONSIBLE FOR ADMINISTERING THE STATE MEDICAID PLAN UNDER TITLE XIX OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY ACT (42 U.S.C. 1396 ET SEQ.);

**Division of Medicaid** MOU provides seamless, non-duplicated services to individuals who are eligible for both Medicaid and VR services and for maximum utilization of resources between the two agencies that serve out of school youth.

#### 6. STATE AGENCY RESPONSIBLE FOR PROVIDING SERVICES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES;

**Department of Mental Health – Bureau of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities -** MOU is developed to continue enhancing, explained and developing methods to support eligible persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities who express a desire for competitive integrated employment; establish a state-level work group to address system, policy and funding issues that impeded the continuous provision of employment services by VR/VRB and DMH; engage VR/VRB staff and DMH providers and stakeholders at the local level in collaboration and cooperation in the accomplishment of the vision and desired outcomes;

identify and disseminate best practices including training and functioning strategies; and, provide individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities with quality employment services that lead to competitive integrated employment in a non-duplicated and seamless manner.

#### 7. STATE AGENCY RESPONSIBLE FOR PROVIDING MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES; AND

Thirteen (13) Memorandum of Understanding with the thirteen (13) Community Mental Health Centers: **Region One, Communicare, Timber Hills, Life Help, LifeCore, Community Counseling, Hinds Behavioral Health Resources, Region 8, Weems, Pine Belt Mental Health, Warren-Yazoo Behavioral Health, Singing River and Southwest Mississippi**. This MOU is purpose of this program is to enhance employment opportunities for individuals with severe and persistent mental illness or persons in recovery. This program will result in increased integrated employment opportunities for these individuals.

**Department of Mental Health, Bureau of Mental Health** An MOU has been implemented to provide a statewide provision of services for individuals with severe mental illness. Beginning in 2018 to present, a formalized agreement between OVR and OVRB MOU is developed to serve individuals with severe mental illness, including out of school youth. The purpose of this MOU is to enhance the service delivery and employment opportunities for individuals with severe and persistent mental illness or persons in recovery. Twenty (25) Memorandum of Understanding with Mental Health Residential Facilities and IOP Programs.

**Warren-Yazoo Mental Health Service Program of Assertive Community Treatment (PACT)** developed to facilitate the most effective and efficient process to assist PACT recipients gain access to vocational rehabilitation services.

Twenty (25) Memorandum of Understanding with Mental Health Residential Facilities and IOP Programs.

#### 8. OTHER FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL AGENCIES AND PROGRAMS OUTSIDE THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM.

**US Department of Veterans Affairs** - to improve work opportunities for veterans with disabilities and coordinate a referral and service delivery process.

A Memoranda of Understanding clarifies and drives the WIOA required partnership between OVR/OVRB and Mississippi's One-Stop system and each of the four local workforce development areas. Moving forward, MDRS' OVR/OVRB activities include a common intake process and coordinating data sharing between agencies. Data was not available on the implementation or progress on these activities. Additional exploration may be needed to provide further clarification on activities and opportunities for improvement.

#### 9. OTHER PRIVATE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS.

**The VR program staff provides VR services directly, the VR program also partners with other nonprofit organizations and business and communities throughout the state to provide employment services, provides self-advocacy training as part of Pre-Employment Transition Services for post-secondary students with disabilities and to assist with the transition of these students into post-secondary education in order to achieve degrees in higher education that allow for successful careers in addition to adults.**

## ASSURANCES

The designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate and identified in the State certifications included with this VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, through signature of the authorized individual, assures the Commissioner, that it will comply with all of the requirements of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement, as set forth in sections 101(a) and 606 of the Rehabilitation Act. The individual authorized to submit the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement makes the following assurances:

**The VR agency must select the “Edit” button to review and agree to the VR State plan Assurances.**

The State Plan must include
1. Public Comment on Policies and Procedures: The designated State agency assures it will comply with all statutory and regulatory requirements for public participation in the VR Services Portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, as required by section 101(a)(16)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act.
2. Submission of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and Its Supplement: The designated State unit assures it will comply with all requirements pertaining to the submission and revisions of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan and its supplement for the State Supported Employment Services program, as required by sections 101(a)(1), (22), (23), and 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act; section 102 of WIOA in the case of the submission of a Unified State plan; section 103 of WIOA in the case of a submission of a Combined State Plan; 34 CFR 76.140.
3. Administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan: The designated State agency or designated State unit, as appropriate, assures it will comply with the requirements related to:
3.a. the establishment of the designated State agency and designated State unit, as required by section 101(a)(2) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.b. either a State independent commission or State Rehabilitation Council, as required by section 101(a)(21) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.c. consultations regarding the administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, in accordance with section 101(a)(16)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.d. the financial participation by the State, or if the State so elects, by the State and local agencies, to provide the amount of the non-Federal share of the cost of carrying out the VR program in accordance with section 101(a)(3).
3.e. as applicable, the local administration of the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, in accordance with section 101(a)(2)(A) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.f. as applicable, the shared funding and administration of joint programs, in accordance with section 101(a)(2)(A)(ii) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.g. statewideness and waivers of statewideness requirements, as set forth in section 101(a)(4) of the Rehabilitation Act.

The State Plan must include
3.h. the requirements for cooperation, collaboration, and coordination, as required by sections 101(a)(11) and (24)(B); and 606(b) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.i. all required methods of administration, as required by section 101(a)(6) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.j. the requirements for the comprehensive system of personnel development, as set forth in section 101(a)(7) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.k. the compilation and submission to the Commissioner of statewide assessments, estimates, State goals and priorities, strategies, and progress reports, as appropriate, and as required by sections 101(a)(15), 105(c)(2), and 606(b)(8) of the Rehabilitation Act.
3.l. the reservation and use of a portion of the funds allotted to the State under section 110 of the Rehabilitation Act for the development and implementation of innovative approaches to expand and improve the provision of VR services to individuals with disabilities, particularly individuals with the most significant disabilities as set forth in section 101(a)(18)(A).
3.m. the submission of reports as required by section 101(a)(10) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4. Administration of the Provision of VR Services: The designated State agency, or designated State unit, as appropriate, assures that it will:
4.a. comply with all requirements regarding information and referral services in accordance with sections 101(a)(5)(E) and (20) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4.b. impose no duration of residence requirement as part of determining an individual's eligibility for VR services or that excludes from services under the plan any individual who is present in the State in accordance with section 101(a)(12) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4.c. provide the full range of services listed in section 103(a) of the Rehabilitation Act as appropriate, to all eligible individuals with disabilities in the State who apply for services or, if implementing an order of selection, in accordance with criteria established by the State for the order of selection as set out in section 101(a)(5) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4.d. determine whether comparable services and benefits are available to the individual in accordance with section 101(a)(8) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4.e. comply with the requirements for the development of an individualized plan for employment in accordance with section 102(b) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4.f. Comply with requirements regarding the provisions of informed choice for all applicants and eligible individuals in accordance with section 102(d) of the Rehabilitation Act
4.g. provide vocational rehabilitation services to American Indians who are individuals with disabilities residing in the State, in accordance with section 101(a)(13) of the Rehabilitation Act.
4.h. comply with the requirements for the conduct of semiannual or annual reviews, as appropriate, for individuals employed either in an extended employment setting in a community rehabilitation program or any other employment under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, as required by sections 101(a)(14) and 511 of the Rehabilitation Act.

The State Plan must include
4.i. meet the requirements in sections 101(a)(17) and 103(b)(2) of the Rehabilitation Act if the State elects to construct, under special circumstances, facilities for community rehabilitation programs.
4.j. With respect to students with disabilities, the State,
4.j.i. has developed and will implement,
4.j.i.A. strategies to address the needs identified in the assessments; and
4.j.i.B. strategies to achieve the goals and priorities identified by the State, to improve and expand vocational rehabilitation services for students with disabilities on a statewide basis; and
4.j.ii. has developed and will implement strategies to provide pre-employment transition services (sections 101(a)(15), 101(a)(25) and 113).
4.j.iii. shall reserve not less than 15 percent of the allocated funds for the provision of pre-employment transition services; such funds shall not be used to pay for the administrative costs of providing pre-employment transition services.
5. Program Administration for the Supported Employment Title VI Supplement to the State plan:
5.a. The designated State unit assures that it will include in the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan all information required by section 606 of the Rehabilitation Act.
5.b. The designated State agency assures that it will submit reports in such form and in accordance with such procedures as the Commissioner may require and collects the information required by section 101(a)(10) of the Rehabilitation Act separately for individuals receiving supported employment services under title I and individuals receiving supported employment services under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act.
6. Financial Administration of the Supported Employment Program (Title VI):
6.a. The designated State agency assures that it will expend no more than 2.5 percent of the State's allotment under title VI for administrative costs of carrying out this program; and, the designated State agency or agencies will provide, directly or indirectly through public or private entities, non-Federal contributions in an amount that is not less than 10 percent of the costs of carrying out supported employment services provided to youth with the most significant disabilities with the funds reserved for such purpose under section 603(d) of the Rehabilitation Act, in accordance with section 606(b)(7)(H) and (I) of the Rehabilitation Act.
6.b. The designated State agency assures that it will use funds made available under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act only to provide supported employment services to individuals with the most significant disabilities, including extended services to youth with the most significant disabilities, who are eligible to receive such services; and, that such funds are used only to supplement and not supplant the funds provided under Title I of the Rehabilitation Act, when providing supported employment services specified in the individualized plan for employment, in accordance with section 606(b)(7)(A) and (D), of the Rehabilitation Act.

The State Plan must include
7. Provision of Supported Employment Services:
7.a. The designated State agency assures that it will provide supported employment services as defined in section 7(39) of the Rehabilitation Act.
7.b. The designated State agency assures that the comprehensive assessment of individuals with significant disabilities conducted under section 102(b)(1) of the Rehabilitation Act and funded under title I of the Rehabilitation Act includes consideration of supported employment as an appropriate employment outcome, in accordance with the requirements of section 606(b)(7)(B) of the Rehabilitation Act an individualized plan for employment that meets the requirements of section 102(b) of the Rehabilitation Act, which is developed and updated with title I funds, in accordance with sections 102(b)(3)(F) and 606(b)(7)(C) and (E) of the Rehabilitation Act.

**Do you attest that these assurances will be met?**

**Yes**

## VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION (COMBINED OR GENERAL) CERTIFICATIONS

States must provide written and signed certifications that:

1. THE (ENTER THE NAME OF DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY OR DESIGNATED STATE UNIT, AS APPROPRIATE,) IS AUTHORIZED TO SUBMIT THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN UNDER TITLE I OF THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973 (REHABILITATION ACT), AS AMENDED BY TITLE IV OF WIOA[1], AND ITS STATE PLAN SUPPLEMENT UNDER TITLE VI OF THE REHABILITATION ACT;

[1] Public Law 113-128.

ENTER THE NAME OF DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY OR DESIGNATED STATE UNIT, AS APPROPRIATE

Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS)

2. IN THE EVENT THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY IS NOT PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH VOCATIONAL AND OTHER REHABILITATION OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES, THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY MUST INCLUDE A DESIGNATED STATE UNIT FOR THE VR PROGRAM (SECTION 101(A)(2)(B)(II) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT). AS A CONDITION FOR THE RECEIPT OF FEDERAL FUNDS UNDER TITLE I OF THE REHABILITATION ACT FOR THE PROVISION OF VR SERVICES, THE (DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY OR THE DESIGNATED STATE UNIT WHEN THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY HAS A DESIGNATED STATE UNIT)[2] AGREES TO OPERATE AND IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE STATE VR SERVICES PROGRAM IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN[3], THE REHABILITATION ACT, 34 CFR 361.13(B) AND (C), AND ALL APPLICABLE REGULATIONS[4], POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES ESTABLISHED BY THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION. FUNDS MADE AVAILABLE TO STATES UNDER SECTION 111(A) OF THE REHABILITATION ACT ARE USED SOLELY FOR THE PROVISION OF VR SERVICES AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN;

[2] All references in this plan to "designated State agency" or to "the State agency" relate to the agency identified in this paragraph.

[3] No funds under title I of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 101(a) of the Rehabilitation Act.

[4] Applicable regulations, in part, include the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR parts 76, 77, 79, 81, and 82; 2 CFR part 200 as adopted by 2 CFR part 3474; and the State VR Services program regulations at 34 C.F.R. part 361.

ENTER THE NAME OF DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY

Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

3. AS A CONDITION FOR THE RECEIPT OF FEDERAL FUNDS UNDER TITLE VI OF THE REHABILITATION ACT FOR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES, THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY, OR THE DESIGNATED STATE UNIT WHEN THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY HAS A DESIGNATED STATE UNIT, AGREES TO OPERATE AND IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE STATE SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES PROGRAM IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SUPPLEMENT TO THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN[5], THE REHABILITATION ACT, AND ALL APPLICABLE



REGULATIONS[6], POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES ESTABLISHED BY THE SECRETARY OF EDUCATION. FUNDS MADE AVAILABLE UNDER TITLE VI ARE USED SOLELY FOR THE PROVISION OF SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES AND THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE SUPPLEMENT TO THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN;

[5] No funds under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved supported employment supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act.

[6] Applicable regulations, in part, include the citations in footnote 4, as well as Supported Employment program regulations at 34 C.F.R. part 363.

4. THE DESIGNATED STATE UNIT OR, IF NOT APPLICABLE, THE DESIGNATED STATE AGENCY HAS THE AUTHORITY UNDER STATE LAW TO PERFORM THE FUNCTIONS OF THE STATE REGARDING THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN AND ITS SUPPLEMENT AND IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE VR PROGRAM IN ACCORDANCE WITH 34 CFR 361.13(B) AND (C);

5. THE STATE LEGALLY MAY CARRY OUT EACH PROVISION OF THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN AND ITS SUPPLEMENT.

6. ALL PROVISIONS OF THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN AND ITS SUPPLEMENT ARE CONSISTENT WITH STATE LAW.

7. THE (ENTER THE NAME OF AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE BELOW) HAS THE AUTHORITY UNDER STATE LAW TO RECEIVE, HOLD, AND DISBURSE FEDERAL FUNDS MADE AVAILABLE UNDER THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN AND ITS SUPPLEMENT;

ENTER THE NAME OF AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE BELOW

Billy Taylor

8. THE (ENTER THE TITLE OF AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE BELOW) HAS THE AUTHORITY TO SUBMIT THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN AND THE SUPPLEMENT FOR SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT SERVICES;

ENTER THE TITLE OF AUTHORIZED REPRESENTATIVE BELOW

Executive Director

9. THE AGENCY THAT SUBMITS THE VR SERVICES PORTION OF THE UNIFIED OR COMBINED STATE PLAN AND ITS SUPPLEMENT HAS ADOPTED OR OTHERWISE FORMALLY APPROVED THE PLAN AND ITS SUPPLEMENT.

#### FOOTNOTES

[1] Public Law 113-128.

[2] All references in this plan to "designated State agency" or to "the State agency" relate to the agency identified in this paragraph.

[3] No funds under title I of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 101(a) of the Rehabilitation Act.

[4] Applicable regulations, in part, include the Education Department General Administrative Regulations (EDGAR) in 34 CFR parts 76, 77, 79, 81, and 82; 2 CFR part 200 as adopted by 2 CFR part 3474; and the State VR Services program regulations at 34 C.F.R. part 361.

[5] No funds under title VI of the Rehabilitation Act may be awarded without an approved supported employment supplement to the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan in accordance with section 606(a) of the Rehabilitation Act.

[6] Applicable regulations, in part, include the citations in footnote 4, as well as Supported Employment program regulations at 34 C.F.R. part 363.

## CERTIFICATION SIGNATURE

**To review and complete the Certification section of the VR portion of the State plan, please select the “Edit” button.**

Note, please do not edit the table header or formatting. Only edit the table contents.


If you accidentally edit the table headers and structure, open this link to the blank table. You can copy and paste the table into the narrative field, and start over if needed.

### CERTIFICATION SIGNATURE

**To review and complete the Certification section of the VR portion of the State plan, please select the “Edit” button.**

Note, please do not edit the table header or formatting. Only edit the table contents.

If you accidentally edit the table headers and structure, open this link to the blank table. You can copy and paste the table into the narrative field, and start over if needed.

Signatory information	Enter Signatory information in this column
Name of Signatory	[Billy Taylor] 
Title of Signatory	Executive Director
Date Signed	5/30/24 <i>(Scanned original signature)</i>

Signatory information	Enter Signatory information in this column
Name of Signatory	[Billy Taylor]
Title of Signatory	Executive Director
Date Signed	5/30/24 <i>(Note: an original scanned signature is also attached)</i>

## VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

Each State VR program must submit expected levels of performance in its Unified or Combined State Plan and in the two-year modification of that plan. Expected levels of performance for the first two years of a state plan must be submitted in the initial submission of the Unified or Combined State Plan and in the initial submission of the two-year modification of that Plan, for years three and four, as described in 34 CFR § 361.170(a). Expected levels of performance must be stated to the nearest tenth of a percent (XX.X %) or to the nearest whole dollar for median earnings. State VR programs are reminded that the expected levels of performance must be published for public comment prior to plan submission in accordance with state law, regulation, and policy.

After the Unified or Combined State Plan submission, each State VR program must reach agreement with RSA on the negotiated levels of performance for the indicators for each of the first two years of the Unified or Combined State Plan (or for the third and fourth years of the Unified or Combined State Plan during the required two-year modification process) in accordance with WIOA section 116(b)(3)(A)(iv).

RSA will use its statistical adjustment model to derive pre-program year estimated levels of performance for each indicator. Each State VR program and RSA will consider the negotiation factors outlined in WIOA section 116(b)(3)(A)(v) during the negotiation process. Once negotiated levels of performance are agreed upon, each State VR program must incorporate the negotiated levels of performance into the Unified or Combined State Plan and the two-year modification of that plan prior to the plan’s approval (section 116(b)(3)(A)(iv) of WIOA).

### Effectiveness in Serving Employers

In the final rule implementing WIOA, the Departments indicated that they would initially implement this indicator in the form of a pilot to test the feasibility and rigor of three proposed approaches. During Program Year (PY) 2022, the Departments initiated the rulemaking process to establish a standard definition of Effectiveness in Serving Employers. States will continue to report two of three proposed approaches until the Departments issue the final rule and implement the indicator.

<b>Performance Indicators</b>	<b>PY 2024 Expected Level</b>	<b>PY 2024 Negotiated Level</b>	<b>PY 2025 Expected Level</b>	<b>PY 2025 Negotiated Level</b>
<b>Employment (Second Quarter After Exit)</b>	65.0%	63.0%	70.0%	65.0%
<b>Employment (Fourth Quarter After Exit)</b>	63.0%	58.8%	68.0%	60.8%
<b>Median Earnings (Second Quarter After Exit)</b>	7,802	7,230	8,504	7,516
<b>Credential Attainment Rate</b>	45.0%	45.0%	53.0%	47.0%

<b>Performance Indicators</b>	<b>PY 2024 Expected Level</b>	<b>PY 2024 Negotiated Level</b>	<b>PY 2025 Expected Level</b>	<b>PY 2025 Negotiated Level</b>
<b>Measurable Skill Gains</b>	80.0%	78.0%	84.0%	80.0%
<b>Effectiveness in Serving Employers</b>	Not Applicable <sup>1</sup>	Not Applicable <sup>1</sup>	Not Applicable <sup>1</sup>	Not Applicable <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The Departments have not issued the final rule defining Effectiveness in Serving Employers. As a result, states will not submit expected levels of performance for this indicator and the Departments will not establish negotiated levels of performance for PYs 2024 and 2025.

## **GEPA 427 FORM INSTRUCTIONS FOR APPLICATION PACKAGE - VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION**

### **EQUITY FOR STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, AND OTHER PROGRAM BENEFICIARIES**

OMB Control Number 1894-0005 Expiration 02/28/2026

**Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA)** (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.

### **GEPA Section 427 Form Instructions for State Applicants**

#### **State applicants must respond to the following four questions:**

1. Describe how your entity's existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.
2. Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?
3. Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?
4. What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?

- Applicants identify any barriers that may impede equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity, including, but not limited to, barriers based on economic disadvantage, gender, race, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability, age, language, migrant status, rural status, homeless status or housing insecurity, pregnancy, parenting, or caregiving status, and sexual orientation.
- Applicants use the associated text box to respond to each question. However, applicants might have already included some or all this required information in the narrative sections of their applications or their State Plans. In responding to this requirement, for each question, applicants may provide a cross-reference to the section(s) in their State Plans that includes the information responsive to that question on this form or may restate that information on this form.
- Applicants are not required to have mission statements or policies that align with equity to apply.
- Applicants that have already undertaken steps to address barriers must still provide an explanation and/or description of the steps already taken in each text box, as appropriate, to satisfy the GEPA Section 427 requirement.
- Applicants that believe no barriers exist must still provide an explanation and/or description to each question to validate that perception, as appropriate, to satisfy the GEPA Section 427 requirement.

Please refer to GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package

1. DESCRIBE HOW YOUR ENTITY'S EXISTING MISSION, POLICIES, OR COMMITMENTS ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO, AND EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION IN, THE PROPOSED PROJECT OR ACTIVITY.

***Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.***

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

***State applicants must respond to four questions.***

***The first of four questions is:***

*Describe how your entity's existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.*

The Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services (MDRS) - Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation for the Blind (VRB) will fully ensure possible equitable access to, participation in and appropriate vocational rehabilitation services. Activities, programs, and services will be accessible to all VR and VRB staff, and clients allowing them to fully access and participate in the VR/VRB program.

MDRS- VR and VRB does not discriminate on the basis of age, color, religion, marital status, veteran status, socio-economic status, national origin, race, gender or sex, type of disability, duration of residence in Mississippi, rural status, public assistance status, source of referral, particular service needs, anticipated cost of services required, or income level of an applicant or applicant's family in access to or provision of VR services.

MDRS - VR and VRB will provide reasonable and appropriate accommodations to meet the vocational rehabilitation service needs of a diverse group of individuals with disabilities, staff, community partners, and service providers.

2. BASED ON YOUR PROPOSED PROJECT OR ACTIVITY, WHAT BARRIERS MAY IMPEDE EQUITABLE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, OR OTHER BENEFICIARIES?

***Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.***

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

***State applicants must respond to four questions.***

***The second of four questions is:***

*Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?*

Mississippi is a rural state and access to public transportation is not available across our state. Individuals served by VR and VRB are located across a spectrum of urban, rural to very

rural areas. This creates barriers to access VR services, participation in VR services and ultimately the individual's ability to obtain and maintain competitive integrated employment.

Internet and broadband access are also a barrier. There is a significant number of individuals who access VR services that are at or below the poverty level. Often, Counselors must adapt their counseling strategies so that clients and/or their legal guardians with low income will be more engaged in the VR process.

**3. BASED ON THE BARRIERS IDENTIFIED, WHAT STEPS WILL YOU TAKE TO ADDRESS SUCH BARRIERS TO EQUITABLE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN THE PROPOSED PROJECT OR ACTIVITY?**

***Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.***

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

***State applicants must respond to four questions.***

***The third of four questions is:***

*Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?*

VR and VRB will engage with other agencies to help determine alternative strategies in obtaining transportation resources such as Uber, Lyft, etc.

MDRS has upgraded technology resources for VR and VRB Counselors to be able to provide counseling and guidance, as well as coordinate services to individuals that may live in rural communities. Counselors are allowed to work in itinerant offices and locations to assist the client in accessing services. Counselors have also been given the opportunity to work remotely from home, however, the days they work remotely can also be used to access clients in other locations, especially those that have technology difficulties. VR and VRB will continue to work to obtain providers that will be able to deliver services in rural areas of the state.

**4. WHAT IS YOUR TIMELINE, INCLUDING TARGETED MILESTONES, FOR ADDRESSING THESE IDENTIFIED BARRIERS?**

***Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.***

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

***State applicants must respond to four questions.***

***The final of four questions is:***

*What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?*

Steps and actions to address the barriers identified above have been taken even prior to this state plan submission.



- An exchange of information regarding obtaining transportation has been started with the Department of Health. This milestone started in December 2022 and targeted the completion deadline of December 2024 or sooner.
- To assist in providing Pre-Employment Transition Services to students with disabilities, service provision will be coordinated with schools that have to a 9-week period and intercession and will begin in August 2024.
- The intercession is to be utilized by schools for remedial and enrichments services. The school can assist in providing transportation for students who are receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services to begin in August 2024.
- MDRS, VR and VRB will continue to review barriers and targeted milestones and will adjust on a quarterly basis.

## **GEPA 427 FORM INSTRUCTIONS FOR APPLICATION PACKAGE - SUPPORTED EMPLOYMENT**

### **EQUITY FOR STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, AND OTHER PROGRAM BENEFICIARIES**

OMB Control Number 1894-0005 Expiration 02/28/2026

**Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA)** (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.

### **GEPA Section 427 Form Instructions for State Applicants**

#### **State applicants must respond to the following four questions:**

1. Describe how your entity's existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.
2. Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?
3. Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?
4. What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?

- Applicants identify any barriers that may impede equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity, including, but not limited to, barriers based on economic disadvantage, gender, race, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability, age, language, migrant status, rural status, homeless status or housing insecurity, pregnancy, parenting, or caregiving status, and sexual orientation.
- Applicants use the associated text box to respond to each question. However, applicants might have already included some or all this required information in the narrative sections of their applications or their State Plans. In responding to this requirement, for each question, applicants may provide a cross-reference to the section(s) in their State Plans that includes the information responsive to that question on this form or may restate that information on this form.
- Applicants are not required to have mission statements or policies that align with equity to apply.
- Applicants that have already undertaken steps to address barriers must still provide an explanation and/or description of the steps already taken in each text box, as appropriate, to satisfy the GEPA Section 427 requirement.
- Applicants that believe no barriers exist must still provide an explanation and/or description to each question to validate that perception, as appropriate, to satisfy the GEPA Section 427 requirement.

Please refer to GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package

1. DESCRIBE HOW YOUR ENTITY'S EXISTING MISSION, POLICIES, OR COMMITMENTS ENSURE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO, AND EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION IN, THE PROPOSED PROJECT OR ACTIVITY.

**Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.**

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

**State applicants must respond to four questions.**

**The first of four questions is:**

*Describe how your entity's existing mission, policies, or commitments ensure equitable access to, and equitable participation in, the proposed project or activity.*

For individuals determined to need Supported Employment Services, MDRS– VR and VRB does not discriminate on the basis of age, color, religion, marital status, veteran status, socio-economic status, national origin, race, gender or sex, type of disability, duration of residence in Mississippi, rural status, public assistance status, source of referral, particular service needs, anticipated cost of services required, or income level of an applicant or applicant's family in access to or provision of VR services.

2. BASED ON YOUR PROPOSED PROJECT OR ACTIVITY, WHAT BARRIERS MAY IMPEDE EQUITABLE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION OF STUDENTS, EDUCATORS, OR OTHER BENEFICIARIES?

**Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.**

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

**State applicants must respond to four questions.**

**The second of four questions is:**

*Based on your proposed project or activity, what barriers may impede equitable access and participation of students, educators, or other beneficiaries?*

Mississippi is a rural state and access to public transportation is not available across our state. Individuals served by VR and VRB are located across a spectrum of urban, rural to very rural areas. This creates barriers to access VR services, participation in VR services and ultimately the individual's ability to obtain and maintain competitive integrated employment.

In addition, in Mississippi there are not enough trained and reliable job skills trainers and providers of Supported Employment (SE) services. VR and VRB often must rely on in-house staff to facilitate and provide the services. This often causes a delay in service and sometimes the quality of service provided is impacted.

The number of referrals received from cooperative partners and counselors decreased during the COVID 19 pandemic and SE staff providing outreach to agencies in an effort to increase the number of referrals received.

**3. BASED ON THE BARRIERS IDENTIFIED, WHAT STEPS WILL YOU TAKE TO ADDRESS SUCH BARRIERS TO EQUITABLE ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION IN THE PROPOSED PROJECT OR ACTIVITY?**

***Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.***

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

***State applicants must respond to four questions.***

***The third of four questions is:***

*Based on the barriers identified, what steps will you take to address such barriers to equitable access and participation in the proposed project or activity?*

VR and VRB will continuously work to implement new policies and procedures regulated by WIOA.

For transportation resources, VR and VRB will engage with other agencies to help determine alternative strategies in obtaining transportation resources such as Uber, Lyft, etc.

VR Counselors that provide SE services are also being crossed trained to work with adults and students that have been determined to need long term care services such as the IDD Waiver and students that are in special education. The goal here is to identify the need for SE services early and increase the number of individuals receiving SE services.

**4. WHAT IS YOUR TIMELINE, INCLUDING TARGETED MILESTONES, FOR ADDRESSING THESE IDENTIFIED BARRIERS?**

***Section 427 of the General Education Provisions Act (GEPA) (20 U.S.C. 1228a) applies to a State applicant submitting a state plan for a formula grant from the US Department of Education. The State applicant is responsible for completing the GEPA Section 427 form that provides a description of the steps the State proposes to take to ensure all program beneficiaries have equitable access to, and participation in, its Federally funded, State-level project or activity.***

*GEPA 427 - Form Instructions for Application Package*

***State applicants must respond to four questions.***

***The final of four questions is:***

*What is your timeline, including targeted milestones, for addressing these identified barriers?*

**Steps and actions described above have been started prior to this state plan submission. MDRS, VR and VRB will continue to review targeted milestones for addressing these barriers and update them as we move forward and make progress.**

**FACTORS THAT IMPEDED THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE GOALS AND PRIORITIES:**

- High staff turnover experiences over the last few years affected the VR’s ability to provide consistent, high-quality services to consumers as referenced in the CSNA; VR is actively recruiting for these positions; however, due to sporadic work hours it is difficult to recruit based on these requirements. In addition to recruiting issues, VR is looking at different hiring avenues such as social media, LinkedIn, temp agencies, etc. We hope to see a moderate amount of progress by August 2025.
- The effect of the post-pandemic in providing services to schools and businesses has drastically changed our service delivery to students and adults. However, we are slowly returning to normal operations. The enrollment decline in schools, turnover of personnel normally working with VR is no longer employed and losing clients due to moving. We are addressing this currently and looking for a positive school relationship beginning in August 2024. We have already begun a new Outreach Program in August 2024 and have seen growth trend.