

Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC)

Annual Report Fiscal Year 2024-2025

Employment

Independence

WHY FUNDING MATTERS:

Every Mile Begins with Support

The Mission of the Council is to inform and advise the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Legislature and the Governor on the diverse issues affecting employment of people with disabilities.



This report covers the activities of the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 2024, and ending June 30, 2025. Alternate formats and additional copies are available upon request.

Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council Support Project



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Current and past reports are also available on the PaRC website:



<https://parehabilitationcouncil.org>

Pennsylvania State Law requires the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) to publish an annual program report on a different timeline than this product. Therefore, the PaRC reports the most recently available OVR data. For a more detailed OVR report, you may request OVR's Program Report from:



Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
651 Boas Street Room 700, Harrisburg, PA 17121



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Message from Our Outgoing Chair



William Paz De Melo

As I conclude my term as Chair of the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council, I am honored to reflect on a year defined by collaboration, commitment, and a shared passion for expanding opportunities for Pennsylvanians with disabilities. Serving in this role has been one of the greatest privileges of my professional life, and I am deeply grateful for what we have accomplished together.

At the heart of our work is the mission of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). OVR is more than a state agency - it is a foundation of opportunity that empowers individuals with disabilities to pursue meaningful employment, independence, and full participation in their communities. Our partnerships with OVR, service providers, employers, advocates, and individuals with disabilities demonstrate the transformative impact of vocational rehabilitation when guided by collaboration and a shared purpose.

Employment remains one of the strongest pathways to self-sufficiency and community inclusion. When individuals with disabilities are provided equitable access through tools, accommodations, and opportunity, they excel and strengthen our entire workforce. Competitive integrated employment is not merely an aspiration; it is a right and a cornerstone of true equality. This year reaffirmed our commitment to removing barriers, elevating diverse voices, and ensuring that every Pennsylvanian has the opportunity to work and thrive.

We are also mindful of emerging challenges at the federal level. National policy shifts, funding uncertainties, and changing expectations in the VR system are affecting states nationwide. Now more than ever, we must educate policymakers, employers, families, and communities about the value of vocational rehabilitation and the vital contributions individuals with disabilities make across our Commonwealth."

I want to extend my sincere gratitude to those whose guidance and partnership made this work possible. To Ryan Hyde, Executive Director of OVR - thank you for your honesty, leadership, and mentorship. To Chris Harbert – thank you for your administrative support & collaboration. I am also grateful to Secretary Nancy Walker, Governor Josh Shapiro, and the Pennsylvania legislature for their continued support of OVR and the disability community.

Within the Council, I offer heartfelt appreciation to Vice Chair, Michelle Mitchell, for her partnership and support, and to Member-at-Large, Julia Barol, for her valuable insight and advocacy. A deeply personal thank-you goes to Governance Committee Chair and Parliamentarian, Susan Tomasic. Her mentorship has been invaluable.

Finally, I want to thank our PaRC Project Staff - Michelle Gerrick, Chris Todd, and United Cerebral Palsy of Central PA for their personal support to me and their essential support to the PaRC. Their dedication makes our mission possible - we couldn't do this work without them.

As I step down, I do so with gratitude and complete confidence in incoming Chair, Michelle Mitchell and the officers who will lead PaRC forward. I know they will continue to guide this Council with clarity, resilience, and unwavering dedication.

Thank you for your partnership, your passion, and your steadfast commitment to ensuring that every person, regardless of disability, has the opportunity to live, work, and contribute fully.



Message from Our Incoming Chair



Michelle Mitchell

Dear Friends and Partners,

It is a true honor to address you as Chair of the Pennsylvania Rehab Council (PaRC). Our work is driven by the conviction that all individuals with disabilities deserve fair and meaningful careers with full inclusion in the economic and social life of the Commonwealth. Our mission is to transform this vision into a reality for every Pennsylvanian by working collaboratively with the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), our legislators, and most importantly YOU.

Our most critical goal is to champion policies and initiatives that ensure people with disabilities secure meaningful employment. We want to be sure jobs are competitive, offer fair wages, provide benefits, and align with an individual's skill and passion. We recognize that true integration requires removing systemic barriers whether they are attitudinal, informational, or physical. We will focus our efforts on promoting models that lead to career growth and economic independence, moving beyond subminimum wage and segregated settings to fully embrace the promise of inclusive workplaces.

The PaRC's strength lies in the diverse perspectives and deep commitment of its members. We are an organization where every member is valued for their unique talents, energies, and passions. Our Council is composed of individuals with lived experience, advocates, business leaders, and representatives from community agencies. We are dedicated to fostering an internal culture that promotes open dialogue, respect, and collaboration, ensuring that every voice shapes our advocacy and policy recommendations. We look forward to leveraging this collective expertise to empower our committees and deliver impactful results.

The road to complete inclusion requires a unified front, and critically, it requires investment. Sustained, full funding is the catalyst that transforms our planning and passion into real opportunities. Resources enable the expansion of OVR services, the development of new training programs, and the continuous removal of barriers that delay career success. When we invest in rehabilitation and employment services, we are not just supporting individuals; we are investing in a stronger, more vibrant Pennsylvania economy that benefits us all.

We are optimistic about the opportunities ahead and invite all stakeholders (employers, legislators, educators, and community members) to join us in this vital work and support the financial priorities that fuel our shared success. Together, we will make Pennsylvania a national leader in opportunity and independence for all people with disabilities.

Message from Our OVR Executive Director



Ryan Hyde, Ex-Officio Member

This year, the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) continued its important role as both an advocate for vocational rehabilitation (VR) and an oversight partner to the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR). Despite challenges in 2024–2025, PaRC remained engaged through committees, workgroups, and ongoing collaboration with OVR to support service delivery and pursue improvements that benefit Pennsylvanians with disabilities.

The Council advocated at the federal level regarding the impact of flat funding and the removal of the Cost-of-Living Adjustment, contributed to amendments to the Financial Needs Test policy, and provided input on the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment, which will shape goals in the Vocational Rehabilitation State Plan. Throughout the year, PaRC monitored agency performance measures, staffing changes, and cost-containment efforts, while reviewing employment outcomes and strengthening customer satisfaction tools to ensure meaningful feedback.

The Council also focused on student enrollment at the Commonwealth Technical Institute at the Hiram G. Andrews Center, the Blind Enterprise Program, and the Order of Selection waitlist, while promoting the work of Citizen Advisory Committees across the Commonwealth through outreach and public access to information. Additional advocacy efforts included letters on federal funding, a response to the withdrawal of a national proposed rule on subminimum wage employment, and support for accessible public transportation. PaRC continued to engage with legislators, sharing information on policy issues affecting individuals with disabilities, and has embraced new practices, partnerships, and state priorities to remain a steady advocate and oversight partner during a year of fiscal uncertainty.

OVR is grateful for PaRC's leadership and advocacy, championing our mission to assist Pennsylvanians with disabilities to secure and maintain employment and independence. We look forward to our ongoing partnership, as we continue to advance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.



PaRC MEMBERS

Including Category of Representation July 2024 – June 2025



Ryan Hyde, Ex-Officio Member

Executive Director of the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR)

The Rehab Council has an active and reaching role in advocating for persons with disabilities throughout Pennsylvania. The Council's workgroups and committees provide input to the development and provision of vocational rehab services. The collective experience and knowledge on issues that impact persons with disabilities is invaluable to the administration of OVR's programs, and we look forward to continue the partnership as we pursue our mission to support persons with disabilities and competitive integrated employment.



Julia Grant Barol, Member at Large 2024-2025

Category of Representation: Community Rehabilitation Provider

Committees: Chair of Transition & Education, Vice Chair of OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction, Vice Chair of Governance, Executive, CareerLink/WIOA, Legislative/Public Awareness

I joined the PARC as President of PA APSE to share my knowledge and experience to help advance the employment of people with disabilities.



Christie Cyktor

Category of Representation: Current/Former OVR Customer

Committees: Chair of Legislative Committee, Executive, OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction

Serving on the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council, and especially chairing the Legislative Committee, has been a powerful way to bridge my lived experience with systems-level advocacy. It gives me a platform to amplify the voices of people with disabilities, challenge structural barriers, and push for policies that make vocational rehabilitation and competitive integrated employment truly accessible, inclusive, and person driven. It's not just about policy, it's about progress, equity, and ensuring every Pennsylvanian with a disability has the opportunity to thrive.



Sylenthia Dent-Siebenlist

Category of Representation: General Advocacy

Committees: OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction, Transition & Education

Imagine being told as a parent that your son won't live past the age of three because of his rare genetic disorder - that's what the doctors told me. Fast forward, 18 years later my son is currently attending college because of the support and efforts of the OVR programs. I joined the PaRC because it is important to me as an appointed district surrogate parent, disability educator, and most importantly as a mother. Being a part of the continuation of those positive efforts that OVR fosters is truly a gift that keeps giving for not just me but my community around me.

PaRC MEMBERS

Including Category of Representation July 2024 – June 2025



Cindy Duch

Category of Representation: Parent Training and Information Center (PEAL Center)

Committees: OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction, Transition & Education

"I joined the Council as a Director at the PEAL Center, PA's Parent Training and Information Center. We have direct contact with youth and families throughout the state. We help youth and families navigate the school system to create vision and possibilities when transitioning from high school to adulthood. With the help of OVR, students are provided pathways to a richer, independent and community-based life."



Kait Gillis

Category of Representation: State Workforce Development Board

Committees: Action/Social Media, CareerLink/WIOA



Joan Myers Goodman

Category of Representation: Business/Labor/Industry

Committees: Chair of Action/Social Media, Executive, CareerLink/WIOA, Legislative/Public Awareness

"Joining the PaRC seemed like a match for me. I was disabled as a teen, had positive experiences with OVR services, and a long and fulfilling career in human resources. PaRC's mission and focus on employment was consistent with my interests and experience."



Lynn Heitz

Category of Representation: Sensory Disabilities

Committees: Chair of OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction, Vice Chair of Legislative/Public Awareness, Executive, CareerLink/WIOA

"As a person with a disability, I believe strongly in the phrase 'Nothing About Us Without Us.' So many times, decisions are made for people with disabilities without their input. I want to be part of this change!"



PaRC MEMBERS

Including Category of Representation July 2024 – June 2025



Passle Helminski

Category of Representation: Cognitive Disabilities

Committees: CareerLink/WIOA, Governance, Legislative/Public Awareness

"I want to make our mission statement a living, breathing part of everyday life, which is the reason I wanted to become a member of the PaRC."



Mallory Irwin

Category of Representation: Young Adult

Committees: Action/Social Media, Transition & Education

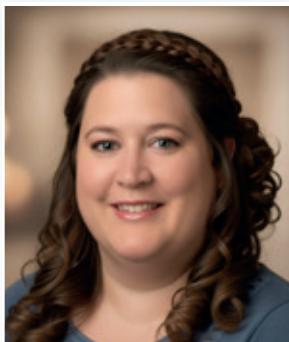


Twana Jones

Category of Representation: Business/Labor/Industry

Committees: Vice Chair of CareerLink/WIOA, OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction

"Rob Wallington knew I would be an excellent candidate to pick up where he left off. I have served for over 25 years doing Union representation and always ensure the Disability Act is being followed without prejudice in reference to work accommodations. The opportunity to assist in a broader aspect is exciting."



Michelle Mitchell, Council Vice Chair 2024-2025

Category of Representation: Rehabilitation Counselor

Committees: Executive, Governance, Legislative/Public Awareness, Transition & Education

"Helping people "Find Their Own Way" has been my lifelong mission. That's why I became a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor – to tear down the walls keeping people from their best lives. My purpose is to open those doors of opportunity for everyone, so they can pursue the training they need to become who they were always meant to be. I am part of PaRC because I am passionately committed to ensuring Pennsylvania holds true to his promise of helping every individual achieve employment."

PaRC MEMBERS

Including Category of Representation July 2024 – June 2025



William Paz De Melo, Council Chair 2024-2025

Category of Representation: Physical Disabilities

Committees: Chair of Executive, Ex-Officio member of all standing committees



Andrew Pennington

Category of Representation: Category of Representation: Client Assistance Program (CAP)

Committees: Chair of CareerLink/WIOA, Vice Chair of Transition & Education, Executive



Kara Donatucci Pham

Category of Representation: Business/Industry/Labor

Committee: CareerLink/WIOA, Transition & Education

"I joined PaRC because I thought my experience in Human Resources and my experience as a parent of a child with an intellectual disability would complement the mission of the organization. My experience in employment and programs of inclusion would lend insight to other organizations like OVR that support inclusion in the workplace."



Julianna Rodrigues

Category of Representation: Community Rehabilitation Provider

Committee: Action/Social Media, Governance, OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction

"I joined the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council because OVR helped me discover my passion for empowering others to achieve independence. Through their support, I found the career I was meant to be in- helping people live fuller, more independent lives. As a person with a disability, I wanted to give back by using both my lived experience and the knowledge I've gained over the years, first as a client and now as a professional in the human services field. Serving on the Council is my way of making sure others have the same opportunities to succeed and thrive."



PaRC MEMBERS

Including Category of Representation July 2024 – June 2025



Susan Tomasic

Category of Representation: Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)

Committee: Chair of Governance, Executive, Action/Social Media, OVR Policy/State Plan/Customer Satisfaction

"I am the Chair of the PA SILC and serve as the SILC representative on the Council."



Robert Wallington

Category of Representation: Business/Industry/Labor

Committee: Action/Social Media, CareerLink/WIOA

"The most important reason I chose to serve on the PaRC is to advocate for marginalized communities and help ensure they have the support and opportunities needed to earn a livable income — creating a positive and lasting impact in their lives."



Council Openings

The Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) is currently accepting applications for membership in the following categories of representation:

- ◆ Business/Industry/Labor
- ◆ Intellectual Disabilities
- ◆ Mental Health
- ◆ Physical Disabilities
- ◆ Sensory Disabilities
- ◆ State Department of Education
- ◆ Young Adult (ages 18-26)

The following categories will become available July 2026. PaRC encourages interested applicants to apply early to ensure a timely transition of membership:

- ◆ Statewide Independent Living Council
- ◆ Sensory Disabilities



Interested in joining the Council? Visit the following link below or QR code.



<https://parehabilitationcouncil.org/get-involved/become-a-member>

Partnership with the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation

The Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), a State Agency under the Department of Labor & Industry, provides vocational rehabilitation services to help individuals with disabilities prepare for, obtain or maintain employment. OVR provides services to eligible individuals with disabilities, both directly and through approved vendors. There are 21 District Offices across Pennsylvania, serving all 67 counties. The Hiram G. Andrews Center in Johnstown offers training and rehabilitation services for individuals from across the state. The **Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS)** offer specialized services for individuals who are blind or have low vision to help increase independence and job readiness.

OVR offers many types of services that can help overcome or lessen a disability and help prepare for a career, including **Diagnostic Services, Vocational Evaluation, Counseling, Training, Restoration Services, Placement Assistance, Assistive Technology, Support Services**.

Funding for the “Transfer to the Vocational Rehabilitation Fund” must be adequate to ensure that OVR has sufficient funds to be able to match all available grant funds from the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA). Having adequate funds to ensure the continued operation of both the Pre-ETS and adult VR program is essential to the financial health of the agency and its ability to provide services across its multiple programs.

PaRC is proud to partner with OVR to promote full inclusion and equal opportunity for Pennsylvanians with disabilities. Together, we work to help individuals gain independence, find competitive jobs, and improve quality of life in their communities.



Road to Success

PaRC Activities FY 24-25

9. Collaborated with OVR & PA State Workforce Development to enhance CareerLink accessibility, Assistive Technology, training, and workforce grants and programs.

10. Established an Ad Hoc Committee to review and clarify the roles of PaRC and OVR State Board, helping to strengthen partnership and coordination efforts.

7. Continued developing strategies to increase Customer Satisfaction Survey response rates and ensure equitable engagement.

8. Advised on transition and education programs for students with disabilities including OVR's Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC), OVR Youth Ambassador Program, Bureau of Special Education (BSE), and Act 26 Reports.

5. Provided feedback on the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) Interim Reports and developed Targeted Goals for the next CSNA cycle starting in January 2026.

6. Provided recommendations on important OVR policy updates such as amendments to the Financial Needs Test (FNT) policy.

3. Partnered with OVR on the 2024–2028 State Plan 2-Year Modification, revising Description (a) and (c) for submission in 2026.

4. Met with Office of Administration (OA) to support the proposed Civil Service Modernization Act and share ways to strengthen the hiring pathways for individuals with disabilities in Pennsylvania.

1. Advised OVR on how to improve programs, services, and operations that impact job outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

2. Approved State Plan amendments that reinstated the Order of Selection (OOS) to help OVR manage federal funding and continue serving customers with the most significant disabilities.

PaRC held four Full Council meetings, two Special meetings, and over fifty committee meetings through its CareerLink, Executive, Governance, Legislative, Policy, Social Media, Transition, and Ad Hoc Committee. These meetings fostered meaningful conversation and collaboration between PaRC, OVR, stakeholders, and the public to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities across Pennsylvania.

Program Year 2023-24 Vocational Rehabilitation Highlights¹



74,269

Individuals engaged with
OVR²



21,157

New applicants



6,002

Individuals placed into
employment⁴



21,861

Students received Pre-
Employment Transition
Services³



76%

Hiram G. Andrews
Center Employment
Rate⁵

Occupations OVR Customers Are Working In



¹Program Year (PY) 2023 began 7/1/2023 and ended 6/30/2024.

²Number of OVR customers who had an open VR case as of June 30, 2024, or had their case closed during the Program Year 2023

³Includes potentially eligible students and students with OVR cases, and both purchased and staff-provided services

⁴Number of unique OVR participants

⁵Seven-year running average of program graduate employment





3,865

Students OVR provided \$32,969,423 to in financial aid for post-secondary training or education

8,230

Individualized Education Plan meetings attended by OVR staff



1,214

Youth who had paid work experiences through OVR's MY Work program at 297 sites across the Commonwealth



Students who Received Pre-Employment Transition Services



2,551

Counseling on Post-
secondary Education



6,178

Instruction in Self-Advocacy

6,394

Job Exploration Counseling



11,041

Workplace Readiness
Training

5,946

Work-Based Learning
Services





\$18.35

Average hourly wage of individuals employed

\$51.29 M

Estimated annual government savings⁶

\$6,341

Average per-person cost of services for an employment placement



8.9

Months projected time to recover investment



3,863

Number of individual Section 511 counseling sessions OVR staff conducted

315

 BEP Businesses BBVS Supported

The Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program (BEP) assists persons who are blind to operate their own food or other service businesses in commercial, industrial, or governmental locations. BEP can also assist interested persons with entrepreneurial business ventures other than food service

⁶Based on estimated income taxes, total average annual SSA reimbursement, and SSA benefits that may decrease or end due to employed individuals achieving SGA levels established by the SSA.



Customers Served in Bureau of Blindness & Visual Services Programs

1,042

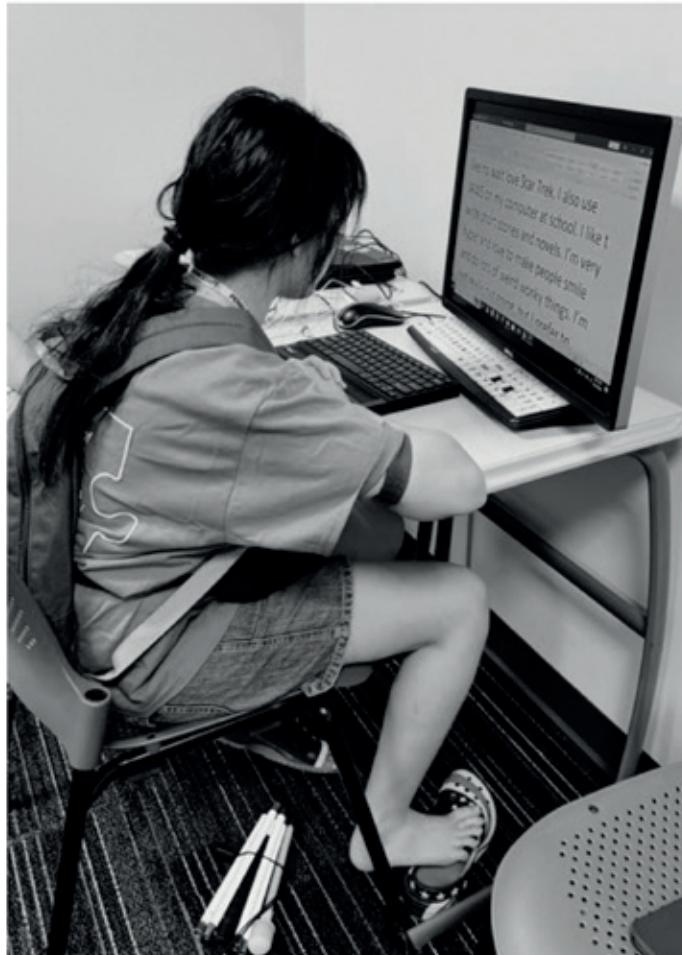
Vocational Rehabilitation

1,572

Independent Living

1,217

Vision Rehabilitation
Therapy



683

Orientation & Mobility

203

Specialized Services Children

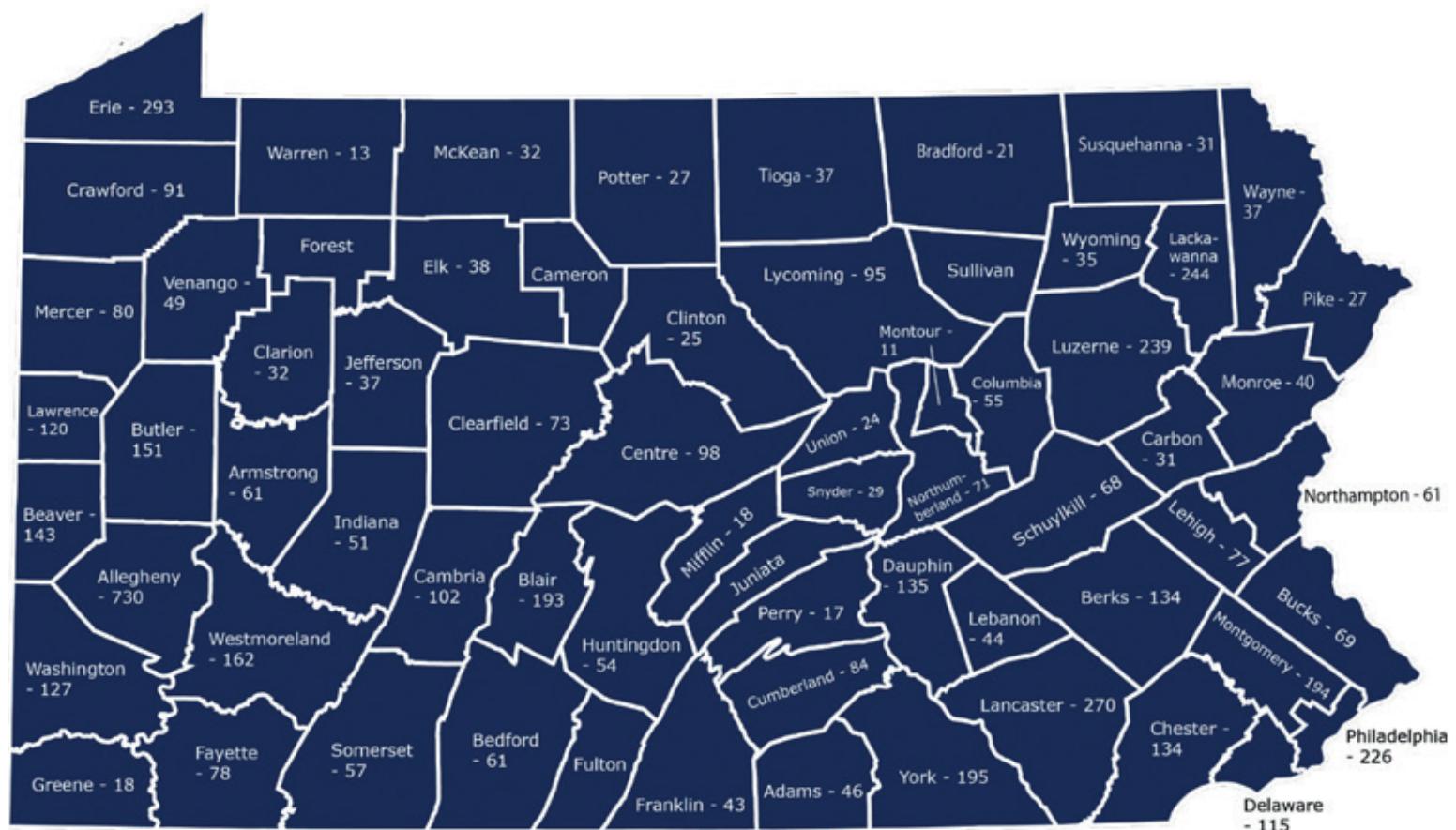
112

Specialized Services: Adult



Where are OVR customers working?⁷

SFY 2023-24 Employment by County



*Numbers were not provided for the counties having less than 10 OVR customers employed to protect customers' privacy.

⁷The 34 CFR 361 regulations implementing the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) require that the employment outcomes satisfy the following criteria under the Vocational Rehabilitation program: (1) competitive earnings, (2) integrated location, and (3) opportunities for advancement

PAVING THE WAY

A Success Story from OVR's 2024 Annual Report

"Never give up and keep working hard." That's the advice Raquwan Bradford would give to other people with disabilities who are seeking employment.



RAQUWAN BRADFORD

Raquwan is no stranger to hard work. He attended Red Lion High School and the Lincoln Intermediate Unit York Tech X Program. After high school, he attended OVR's Commonwealth Technical Institute at the Hiram G. Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC). While there, Raquwan said he was able to explore career options, identify his personal strengths, choose an employment goal, and learn independence.

He graduated from CTI at HGAC with a major in Materials Management and Distribution. Before graduation, he secured his driver's license!

CTI at HGAC Instructor Aimee Barr shared that "everyone involved saw his potential and he continued to work hard and see his efforts pay off. He always reported to class on-time and ready to work and brought his big bright smile. Ray overcame obstacles as all students do during their instruction, but Ray wanted most to be successful for his parents and show them that he could perform the work. I am very proud and wish him all the best!"

Following his training at CTI at HGAC, Raquwan started working at FedEx and has already been employed there for a year. Working at FedEx has offered Raquwan a very competitive hourly wage and an even higher shift differential. He said now he is making his own money, buying things he wants, and enjoying his independence. He also loves meeting new people at FedEx and working as a team.

Raquwan has always valued his experiences as a team member and is very appreciative of the support he received from the Red Lion High School Baseball Team Coach, Kevin Lawrence, and the entire team. He also credits his current success to the teachers at Red Lion High School, most importantly his favorite teacher, Denise Wagner, and Dr. Lorraine Munion from the York Tech X Program. He is very grateful for the support he received from his parents along the way as well.

OVR's York BVRs office started working with Raquwan while he was attending Red Lion High School. He received a variety of services from OVR including pre-employment transition, counseling and guidance, post-secondary training, driving instruction, supported employment, and job placement assistance.

Over the years, Raquwan has been involved in a variety of extracurricular and volunteer activities reflecting his commitment and dedication to achieving his goals, as well as his leadership growth. He has volunteered with the youth baseball league, wrestled in middle school, played intramural basketball, participated in mixed chorus for four years in high school, and served as baseball manager for two years, culminating in making the Red Lion Senior High School team during his final two years. His dedication continued with his role as high school wrestling manager during his senior year.

Raquwan believes that people should always maintain a positive attitude and not put limits on themselves. His new goal is to work for the United States Post Office as a full-time employee someday and buy his own home. With his "no limits" mentality and work ethic, there is no doubt Raquwan will continue to achieve his dreams.



WHY FUNDING MATTERS

A Success Story from OVR's 2024 Annual Report

"It is my safe space. My business, From Scratch, would not have made it without OVR funding." - Jamie

JAMIE PIKULSKY

Sometimes, from adversity, dreams are born!

After her family suffered from acute carbon monoxide poisoning due to a faulty furnace in their 100-year-old home, Jamie was left with a traumatic brain injury and PTSD from witnessing her husband and children slip into unconsciousness while, in critical condition herself, she was unable to help.

Prior to this, Jamie had worked as a Therapeutic Emotional Support Teacher for an Intermediate Unit and sold baked goods on the side with a business partner. After the distress that her family had been through, she had difficulty continuing to work as a teacher due to anxiety and memory lapses.

Her dream was to open an ice cream/sweets store in her hometown that was "a soft, nurturing place for people to congregate while feeling safe, leaving with a smile on their face."

Jamie's business started out with her making homemade ice cream from local farm ingredients at a friend's coffee shop. When her friend told her he was closing the coffee business, Jamie connected with OVR to discuss opening her own ice cream and confection shop called The Corner Creamery in downtown Uniontown, PA.

Jamie worked with Duquesne University to develop a business plan and OVR's Washington Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRS) office and the Washington Small Business Committee for review, revisions, and approval of the plan. In June of 2023, she submitted her final plan and received financial assistance from OVR to purchase many things for her business, including business cards, window decals, refrigerators, freezers, ovens, tables, stools, and other equipment.

In August 2023, The Corner Creamery officially opened first selling ice cream, then expanding to coffee and baked goods. Business is growing! Jamie's shop now hosts community events and baking classes, and her menu has expanded to include additional products like pepperoni rolls and grab and go lunch items. With the addition of more products, Jamie changed the name of the store to From Scratch. It has now become a family business, with her husband running the store's own food truck. From Scratch also outgrew their first location and moved to a larger storefront on Morgantown Street!

Of her business, Jamie shared, "It is my safe space. My business, From Scratch, would not have made it without OVR funding." She shared that working with the Washington BVRS team has given her peace of mind having less to worry about with starting her store.

Be sure to check out From Scratch on Facebook for the latest updates from Jamie and team.

<https://www.facebook.com/people/From-Scratch-Uniontown/100082989859692/>

Governor Shapiro Honors PA OVR



Governor Josh Shapiro has recognized staff from the Department of Labor & Industry's (L&I) Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) and Office of Administration (OA) for their work to transform the OVR/OA Commonwealth Internship Program. The paid internship program gives students with disabilities the opportunity to gain valuable work experience with the Commonwealth while having access to resources to help them reach their career and independence goals.

Under the leadership of L&I Secretary Nancy A. Walker, OVR Executive Director Ryan Hyde, and OA Secretary Neil Weaver, the team has transformed the internship program into more than just a work experience – today, it is a demonstration of the untapped potential of individuals with disabilities to contribute meaningfully to the workforce. The interns are shattering stereotypes and setting new expectations for what an employee with a disability can do, and they're helping make the Commonwealth, as an employer, an even better and more inclusive place to work.

At a ceremony on June 24, Governor Shapiro honored the following OVR and OA team members:

- Dana McKinney, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist Supervisor, L&I
- Janet Wisloski, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist, L&I
- Stephen Coperich, Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist, L&I
- Cassandra Hane, Chief, Work-Based Learning Division, OA

"This internship program provides real choices and opportunities for young people with disabilities thanks to the work of these incredible public servants who are dedicated to empowering every Pennsylvanian with the opportunity, training, and resources they need to play a meaningful role in our workforce," said L&I Secretary Nancy A. Walker. "I'm very proud of this team and applaud them for demonstrating the many ways our Office of Vocational Rehabilitation is making a difference in the lives of Pennsylvanians with disabilities and communities across the Commonwealth."

Cassandra, Dana, Janet, and Stephen have consistently exceeded expectations in connection with this internship program, in part, by proactively identifying gaps in programming and addressing them through innovative solutions, leading initiatives to refine internship processes, and working together to develop comprehensive in-service training programs for OVR staff, intern supervisors, and the interns – equipping them with the tools to succeed and ensuring that any program changes are understood and applied consistently statewide.



Governor Shapiro Honors PA OVR

Continued

"This program is life-changing and keeps getting better, thanks to the work of Dana, Janet, Stephen, and Cassandra," said OVR Executive Director Ryan Hyde. "They've gone above and beyond their regular job duties to ensure these students get the best experience each summer, and the team's work is undoubtedly playing a key role in supporting the Commonwealth's workforce goals and setting this internship program up for long-term success."

For many students, the internship is their first exposure to working in a professional environment. Participating in the OVR/OA internship can be a pivotal experience, allowing students to build career skills, receive career guidance and mentorship, and gain self-confidence. By participating in a program designed to highlight ability rather than disability, interns are empowered to see their lived experience as an asset in the workplace.

"Our workforce is stronger when we make it possible for everyone to participate. Through this partnership with OVR, the Commonwealth is leading by example with inclusive employment programs that promote opportunity and the dignity of work," said Neil Weaver, Secretary of Administration. "People with disabilities have unique perspectives and problem-solving skills that can benefit every employer. Whether the interns choose to work for the Commonwealth or pursue another path after they graduate, we are honored to be part of their journey."

One year ago, Governor Josh Shapiro signed [Executive Order 2024-01](#) to establish the [Hire, Improve, Recruit, Empower \(HIRE\) Committee](#) to expand opportunities for Pennsylvanians seeking careers in public service, continue to build a more competitive workforce, and make state government the best place to work in the Commonwealth. The OVR internship program supports the Governor's workforce development priorities by helping to attract and retain skilled Pennsylvanians to serve in state government.

The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation assists Pennsylvanians with disabilities in obtaining and retaining employment while maintaining their independence through personalized services such as vocational counseling and guidance, goal setting, training, and job placement. OVR also offers a variety of other supports that enable a person with a disability to be successful in the competitive labor market. Since program year 2016, more than 478,500 Pennsylvanians have received services from OVR, including vocational counseling, evaluations, medical diagnostic services, medical restoration services, employment training, placement services, and career support services.

The Governor's Awards for Excellence recognize exemplary job performance or service that reflects initiative, leadership, innovation, and increased efficiency. The L&I and OA team are among 99 employees from nine state agencies honored by Governor Shapiro for accomplishments in 2024.



PaRC Member Story



A VOICE FOR ACCESS: CHRISTIE CYKTOR'S JOURNEY IN ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP

From her earliest years, Christie Cyktor has approached life with determination, creativity, and an unshakable belief that barriers can be transformed into opportunities. Her journey from receiving occupational therapy as a child to becoming a statewide advocate for access and inclusion reflects both her lived experience and her lifelong commitment to empowering others.

I have used a wheelchair for as long as I can remember. I was born with Arthrogryposis Multiplex Congenita, a condition that causes joint contractures and muscle weakness, and my early life was shaped by figuring out how to do everyday things in my own way. Some days that meant finding creative solutions to reach what I needed or navigate spaces that were not designed with me in mind. Other days it meant leaning into humor, patience, and resilience. I did not always see myself reflected in the world around me, but I learned early on that I belong in it.

Growing up, I received occupational therapy both in school and in outpatient settings. My therapists did more than help me build strength or learn new skills. They taught me about possibility. They celebrated progress in small steps and treated creativity as a tool. They helped me understand that independence is not about doing everything alone. It is about being empowered to participate in your own life. Those lessons changed me. They planted the seed for what would eventually become my calling.

I did not always know I wanted to be an occupational therapist, but looking back, the path seems clear. After earning my doctorate from the University of Pittsburgh, I began working with students across Pennsylvania in virtual school settings. I support children and teens with a wide range of disabilities, helping them grow academically, emotionally, and socially in digital classrooms. I love this work because I get to witness growth in real time: a student mastering a new tool, advocating for themselves for the first time, or realizing that disability does not define who they can become. Those moments remind me of the determination I had when I was their age, the desire to live fully even when the world is not built with you in mind.



PaRC Member Story

continued

My journey as a person with a disability has always been personal, but it has also become deeply systemic. Living it every day means understanding both the beauty and the barriers of our systems. That understanding is what led me to become involved with the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council. I wanted to bring my lived experience into spaces where decisions are made, to help ensure that the voices of people with disabilities are heard, valued, and reflected in policy.

As Chair of the Legislative Committee, I have had the privilege of meeting with lawmakers, agencies, and advocates who share the same commitment to equity and access. Each meeting reminds me that change happens when people with disabilities are not only invited to participate, but trusted as leaders and experts in their own lives. I have learned that advocacy is not about confrontation. It is about storytelling and connection. It is about sharing lived experience in a way that opens hearts and creates understanding.

When I think about why funding matters, I think about the people behind the programs. I think about the student who finally gets the assistive technology that allows them to complete their assignments independently. I think about the young adult who receives job coaching and discovers a career path that excites them. I think about the parent who finally sees their child's strengths recognized instead of overlooked. Those are the stories that remind me why this work matters. Funding is not just about programs and numbers. It is about people. It is about the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to live, learn, and work in their community.

There have been challenges along the way. I have had to advocate for access in education, healthcare, and public spaces, and at times, I have had to fight to be seen as capable. But those experiences have strengthened my resolve and deepened my empathy. They have shown me that advocacy is something we live every day, not just something that happens in public hearings or policy meetings.

What keeps me going are the moments that remind me change is real. The student who sends a message to say they spoke up in a meeting for the first time. The policymaker who pauses to listen instead of assuming. The moment when someone says, "I never thought about it that way before." Those moments may not make headlines, but they build a better future piece by piece.

When I look back on my story, it is one of persistence, community, and hope. I have learned that access is about more than physical structures or legal requirements. It is about connection, respect, and the shared belief that everyone deserves to take part in the story of our communities and our future. Working with PaRC has given me a sense of purpose that feels both personal and collective. Together, we are not just identifying barriers. We are building pathways.

At the end of the day, what drives me is simple. I want to leave every space more inclusive than I found it. I want the next generation of young people with disabilities to grow up knowing that their voices matter, their leadership is needed, and their stories are worth telling. That is what this work means to me.



Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) Summary of 2025 – 2026 Federal Position Paper

The Council is mandated by statute with informing and advising the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), the State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Legislature, and the Governor on the diverse issues affecting employment of people with disabilities.

This document summarizes the Council's position on key federal laws and policy issues for more in-depth information you may refer to the [Full PaRC Federal Position Paper](#) on our website or contact us by email or phone via the information listed above.

- **SUPPORT (CURRENT SESSION, 2025-2026):** [H.R.1175](#) *Blind Americans Return to Work Act of 2025*, [H.R.1529](#) and [S.1918](#) *Access Technology Affordability Act of 2025*, [H.R.2506](#) and [S.1211](#) *AID Youth Employment Act*, [H.R.2540](#) and [S.1234](#) *SSI Savings Penalty Elimination Act*, [H.R.2743](#) and [S.1332](#) *Raise the Wage Act of 2025*, [H.R.4771](#) and [S.2438](#) *Transformation to Competitive Integrated Employment Act*
- **SUPPORT (PREVIOUS SESSION, 2023-2024):** [H.R.547](#) and [S.100](#) *Better Care Better Jobs Act*, [H.R.1616](#) and [S.801](#) *CARE for Long COVID Act*, [H.R.2708](#) and [S.1193](#) *Latonya Reeves Freedom Act of 2023*, [H.R.2941](#) and [S.1332](#) *Recognizing the Role of Direct Support Professionals Act*, [H.R.5102](#) and [S.2522](#) *ABLE MATCH (Making Able a Tool to Combat Hardship) Act*, [H.R.6296](#) and [S.3118](#) *HCBS Relief Act of 2023*, [H.R.7208](#) *Dennis John Beningo Traumatic Brain Injury Program Reauthorization Act of 2024*, [S.3076](#) *Disability Employment Incentive Act*
- Keep VR a mandatory program with State funding to match Federal dollars at a 21.3% to 78.7% rate. Full Funding of OVR will allow for the expansion of programs to maximize opportunity to support our businesses and meet workforce needs through the successful employment of people with disabilities.
- Increase funding substantially for providing VR services to veterans with disabilities returning to civilian life as well as continuing to screen injured veterans for traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Require all commercial health insurance providers to cover brain injury rehabilitation.
- Promote career development and job advancement by expanding the definition of post-employment services to include training and other services necessary for career advancement.
- Increase funds for the Older Blind Program of 300% over the next 5 years to better service the growing aging, blind population.



- Adjust CSPD requirements through the State Plan to include bachelor's level option as an entry point while retaining a master's level position, both of which would be considered VRC following designated training period.
- Support changes to the public transportation system that promote and enforce equal access for people with disabilities. PaRC recommends an increase of 10% in public transportation funding and increased accessible public transportation including high speed, inter-city, commuter/regional, and rapid transit rail.
- Support an amendment to the Able Act that would allow all people with significant disabilities (regardless of onset age) to have such accounts.
- Support an increase of 15% in funding for mental health services to continue to support employees impacted by severe isolation during the pandemic so that they may return to work. We encourage Legislators to provide increased awareness of the many benefits of providing remote work opportunities for people with disabilities and educating employers about workplace accessibility.

**Scan to visit the PaRC
Annual Report webpage
containing full State and
Federal Position Papers**





Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) Summary of the 2025–2026 State Position Paper

The Council is mandated by statute with informing and advising the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR), the State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Legislature, and the Governor on the diverse issues affecting employment of people with disabilities.

This document summarizes the Council's position on key state laws and policy issues for more in-depth information you may refer to the [**Full PaRC State Position Paper**](#) on our website or contact us by email or phone via the information listed above.

- **SUPPORT (CURRENT SESSION, 2025-2026):** [HB382](#), [HB444](#), [HB485](#), [HB487](#), [HB951](#), [HB1144](#), [HR10](#), [HR68](#), [SB318](#), [SB534](#), [SB592](#), [SB593](#), [SB617](#)
- **SUPPORT (PREVIOUS SESSION, 2023-2024):** [HB181](#), [HB342](#), [HB348](#), [HB1135](#), [HB1834](#), [HB2419](#), [SB438](#)
- **VR Transfer should be \$50M to ensure PA OVR has adequate funding to manage operations and provide services. Grant funds are matched at 21.3% (state) to 78.7% (federal).**
- **Review an Expedited Hiring System to be a model employer and to comply with the spirit and intent of the PA Employment First Act. Establish, through legislation or regulatory action, an Expedited Hiring System so that people with disabilities in Civil Service, Non-Civil Service, and State Contractor hiring positions have an alternative path to employment similar to Schedule A on the Federal level.**
- **Increase funding 25% for the PA Department of Health & Human Services Head Injuries Program (HIP), to support those with traumatic brain injuries attain and maintain employment.**
- **Increase the state appropriation for the ODHH to \$650,000; authorize ODHH to increase its staff / contracting within the increased budgetary allocation; move ODHH's budget from the Labor and Industry General Government Operations line item to a separate line item within the overall Labor and Industry budget. Codify the ODHH Support Service Provider (SSP) Program into the budget by providing its own line item and continue to fund the SSP Program in the amount of at least \$300,000 annually.**
- **Line item appropriation of \$2.7 million will enable the CILs to maintain all services**
- **Transportation Network Providers and all taxi service providers must be required to provide accessible vehicles on demand to people with disabilities. Education or training on the requirements of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act should also be provided to these entities.**



- *The State must work with Amtrak and the Federal Government to ensure that all train stations are accessible.*
- *The Rural Shared Ride System, Fixed Ride, and Commuter Ride Systems must collaboratively work to maximize transportation resources for individuals with disabilities. The Rural Shared Ride System should enable transportation providers to cross County lines to assist people with disabilities who use these rides to obtain, maintain, and/or regain employment.*
- *Establish a bi-partisan and bi-cameral Disabilities Caucus to review and support legislation.*
- *The PaRC supports the EFOC recommendations made to the Executive Office, Legislature, and individual State agencies included within the most recent EFOC report.*
- *Laws prohibiting any interference with Service Dogs should be re-introduced and enforced. Educate communities about the importance of Service Dogs and the harm interference with Service Dogs poses to people with disabilities.*
- *Support Legislation that would strengthen protections for any fully trained animal that supports an individual with a disability through specific trained tasks related to their needs to access employment and independent living.*

Scan to visit the PaRC
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Federal Position Papers



PaRC Advocacy Efforts | FY 2024–2025

Improving and Expanding Employment Opportunities for Pennsylvanians with Disabilities

Legislative and Policy Advocacy

- Participated in 47 bipartisan meetings with state and federal legislators and their staff, including in-person meetings with all 19 of Pennsylvania's federal legislators in Washington, DC, to educate on OVR services, the impact on federal flat funding, Order of Selection and other job related issues like State Civil Service reform, accessible transportation, and the Direct Care Worker shortage.
- Supported OVR's collaboration with the five largest states to write a joint advocacy letter on the impact of national flat funding and removal of the Cost-of-Living Adjustment (COLA) – adding information specific to Pennsylvania and sending the letter to Congress and PA General Assembly.
- Sent a letter to Congress in response to the withdrawal of a national proposed rule aimed at phasing out subminimum wages for people with disabilities.
- Sent a letter to RSA Commissioner expressing support for the Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities (MAWD) program and concerns about risks to workers who join employer retirement plans.

Stakeholder Engagement and Collaboration

- Engaged statewide partners through Council & stakeholder meetings to share updates, coordinate efforts, and enhance employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.
- Advocated through letters on key issues including the importance of full funding, protections for Service Dogs, and feedback on the PA Department of Education's proposed Part B IDEA Grant Application for FFY 2025.
- Promoted inclusive business partnerships by engaging Small Businesses, Small Diverse Businesses, and Veteran Business Enterprises to provide services and support for PaRC operations.

Outreach and Public Awareness

- Expanded communication and awareness of PaRC and OVR services through updated website and social media posts, new Veterans brochure, bi-monthly newsletters, and the Annual Report.
- Represented the PaRC at events and conferences across the state and nation including the PA Department of Education (PDE), PA Community of Practice Transition Conference & Expo, the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR), the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils (NCSRC), and the Association of People Supporting Employment 1st (APSE).



ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

A Success Story from OVR's 2024 Annual Report

"Find your passion with employment and use that passion." - Barbara

BARBARA RUGH

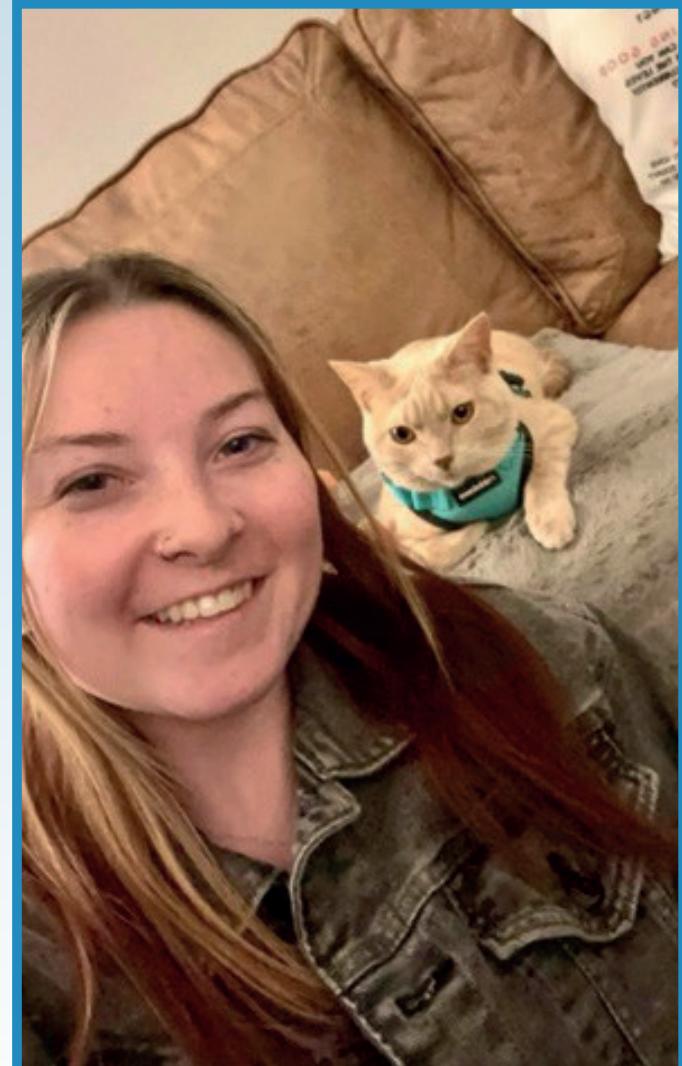
For Barbara, working in her dream job as a mental health therapist is empowering! "It means the world as I have something that I worked hard for and I achieved when people told me that I wouldn't succeed or get a job in the field that I am in due to my disability," she shared.

Barbara, an individual who happens to have a learning disability, started working with OVR's New Castle Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services office when she was a senior in high school. After high school graduation, with OVR's financial assistance, she pursued a bachelor's degree in social work at Slippery Rock University. She then began working as a blended case manager for Family Psychological Associates. After working a year to gain experience, she enrolled in a graduate degree program with Penn West University – Edinboro, receiving tuition assistance from OVR. Upon earning her master's degree in social work, she was promoted to a mental health therapist position at Family Psychological Associates. Barbara enjoys that her job has a "good support system and great coworkers that help me when I need it and answer my questions."

Throughout her college and career journey, Barbara has faced many challenges from her disability. She overcame them by working with OVR's New Castle team; asking for help when needed; utilizing assistive technology and accommodations; and practicing self-care.

When asked what advice she has for other individuals with disabilities Barbara said, "find your passion with employment and use that passion."

What has helped her succeed? "My family, friends, and my past OVR counselors over the years," she shared, "have helped push me to succeed."



PROGRAM-SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES PROGRAM

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 the Workforce Innovation & Opportunities Act (WIOA).

State Rehabilitation Council.

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, (select A or B):

- (A) is an independent State commission.
- (B) has established a State Rehabilitation Council.

In accordance with Assurance 3(b), 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.

Council Representative	Current Term Number/ Vacant	Beginning Date of Term Mo./Yr.
Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC)	2nd Term	07/12/2023
Parent Training & Information Center	1st Term	10/11/2022
Client Assistance Program	2nd Term	07/12/2022
Qualified VR Counselor (Ex-Officio if Employed by the VR Agency)	1st Term	10/11/2022
Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) Service Provider	1st Term	09/21/2021
Business, Industry & Labor	1st Term	4/10/2023
Business, Industry & Labor	2nd Term	07/12/2022
Business, Industry & Labor	1st Term	08/28/2023
Business, Industry & Labor	Vacant	N/A
Disability Advocacy Groups (Physical Disabilities)	2nd Term	07/12/2022
Disability Advocacy Groups (Sensory Disabilities)	1st Term	9/21/2021
Disability Advocacy Groups (Mental Health)	2 nd Term	07/12/21



Council Representative	Current Term Number/Vacant	Beginning Date of Term Mo./Yr.
Disability Advocacy Groups (Sensory Disabilities)	2nd Term	07/12/2021
Disability Advocacy Groups (Intellectual Disabilities)	1st Term	07/21/2022
Current or Former Applicants for, or Recipients of, VR Services	2nd Term	07/12/2023
Section 121 (AIVRS) Project Directors in the State (as applicable)	N/A	N/A
State Educational Agency Responsible for Students with Disabilities Eligible to Receive Services under Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	2nd Term	07/12/2023
State Workforce Development Board (WDB)	Vacant	N/A
VR Agency Director (Ex Officio)	1st Term	N/A

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 PA Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) does not currently have a representative from the State Workforce Development Board (WDB); however, the Executive Director of the WDB is aware of the vacancy and supportive of filling it. He regularly reaches out to WDB members to encourage volunteers, as he is not able to serve due to the nature of his position with the Commonwealth. In the absence of an official member, the WDB Executive Director regularly assigns staff members from workforce-related Commonwealth agencies to attend PaRC committee meetings and share relevant information. OVR, PaRC and the WDB are in regular communication regarding the need to fill this position and will continue to pursue a representative. The PaRC is also actively seeking a fourth representative for Business, Industry & Labor.

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 PaRC used the following sources to develop its recommendations to the PA Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR):

1. PaRC Annual Report (State Fiscal Year [FY] 2021-2022)
2. OVR Customer Satisfaction Surveys
3. Review of items in the 2022 State Plan Attachment (Description A)
4. Comments received at 2022/2023 State Plan Meetings
5. Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) Program Years (PY) 2019-2022 OVR/Institute on Disabilities at Temple University
6. Local Citizen Advisory Committees (CAC) meetings and/or minutes
7. Quarterly reports received from OVR at PaRC Full Council meetings

Provide the VR agency's response to the Council's input and recommendations, including an explanation for the rejection of any input and recommendations.

Commendation: The Council commends OVR for reopening the Order of Selection (OOS) and their work on the Financial Needs Test (FNT) and College Policy, thus providing many more opportunities for people across the Commonwealth to participate in VR and secure Competitive Integrated Employment (CIE).

Recommendations:

1. Empower Individuals paid subminimum wages through 14(c) Waivers to obtain CIE.

Issue: Many individuals who are paid subminimum wages through employers that hold certificates issued under section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act have stated a desire to receive the supports necessary to move into CIE. Potential barriers may include lack of contacts available outside of the workshops for families and individuals, communication between workshops and families, family resistance or decisions being made by families on behalf of individuals, individuals determined in-eligible for services, and a lack of benefits counseling during initial contact with providers.

Recommendations/Measurable goals:

1. Expedite the Integrated Vocational Engagement & Support Team (InVEST) Project to assist individuals with disabilities, families, and community businesses with CIE engagement, supports and services/resource coordination.

OVR Response: Year One is in progress to establish foundation according to the proposal submitted to the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) in preparation for Year Two when the InVEST Project will begin implementation.

2. Upon availability, OVR shares reports and data identifying the main cause of individuals remaining in 14(c) workshops.

OVR Response: Currently, there is no report as to why individuals choose to remain in 14(c) facilities; however, our Section 511 VR Specialists continue to conduct informational presentations to those individuals within the 14(c) facilities and complete applications for those interested in OVR services.

3. It is imperative that people with disabilities are: 1) included in the process of identifying how these barriers are removed, and; 2) provided creative solutions/presentations from people with full professional and lived experiences to ensure better outcomes for participants.

OVR Response: Our Section 511 VR Specialists will continue to provide information on how a person in a 14(c) facility can transition to CIE. They will also provide referrals to District Offices for any person interested in CIE. Through the InVEST Project, OVR is running advisory committees and will use the feedback to implement further strategies to help Customers in 14(c) facilities exit to CIE.

2. Leverage resources, heighten understanding, and provide additional staff trainings in OVR District Offices to better serve Customers with mental health needs

Issue: According to the findings listed in the CSNA, people with mental health needs have been identified as one of the most underserved communities in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PA) because, “many individuals with mental health needs do not recognize themselves as part of the disability community and understand that they can access VR services. This lack of understanding coupled with stigma results in individuals not getting access to necessary accommodations. There is also a lack of training and funding for providers to support individuals with mental health needs.”

Recommendations/Measurable Goals:

1. All OVR District Offices will collaborate with local mental health providers and obtain resources within their region to:
 - a. Provide necessary accommodations for people with mental health needs seeking VR services.



- b. Perform community outreach and inform people with mental health needs about their rights to VR services.
- c. Provide training, information, and resources to OVR counselors, staff, and VR providers to help identify behaviors that may exhibit the need for mental health services.

OVR Response: OVR will continue to provide outreach and onboard new providers to enhance services to those with mental health disorders. OVR will make training available to all staff through in-service trainings and outsource trainings as appropriate and collaborate with the PA Office and Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS).

3. Recovery Efforts from the many impacts of COVID-19

Issue: Since March 2020, when physical distancing protocols began in PA, issues with VR services have been exacerbated on all sides, including those who have experienced the lasting effects from COVID-19 or long-COVID, delayed VR services, disruptions to Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS), and the lack of communication, interaction, and response for those seeking services.

Recommendations/Measurable Goals:

1. Expedite all VR services/cases that have been delayed since March 2020 due to the impacts of COVID-19.

OVR Response: Currently all cases on the waitlist have been served and those who were not able to participate in OVR services during the pandemic for health, personal, or other reasons, will be encouraged to apply. The OVR OOS is open to all three categories based on internal priority selection policies.

2. Provide a timeline for expedited services for those who have experienced delays with Pre-ETS due to the impacts of COVID-19.

OVR Response: Rapid Engagement initiatives have been put into place since October 2022 to expedite the referral, application, and eligibility processes. OVR's referrals and Pre-ETS participation rates continue to increase steadily. OVR will continue to outreach to schools and other stakeholders to generate other referrals.

3. Within 30 days of the adoption of the State Plan, interact personally at least one time with individuals whose cases have been delayed or inactive since March 2020 either by phone, in-person meeting, or virtual meeting.

OVR Response: Through the months of April-June 2023, OVR conducted a Lean 5S Project requiring all staff to reach out to existing customers and ensure they are actively engaged. If they were not actively engaged, staff updated those cases to reflect current goals or closed cases when they were unable to connect with a customer. Customer engagement remains a central piece of OVR's Rapid Engagement strategy and staff will continue to make sure customers are continuously engaged with our system. Staff are also responsible for maintaining continued Rapid Engagement strategies to ensure cases progress timely, and office managers and supervisors have been tasked with developing monitoring and supervisory procedures to ensure compliance with federal service provision timeframes.

4. Strengthen Collaboration between Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services (BVRS) and Bureau of Blindness and Visual Services (BBVS)

Issue: VR services that provide job readiness, training, education, and a pathway to competitive employment are not fully accessible to all customers, particularly BBVS customers.

Recommendations/Measurable goals:

1. OVR will provide a heightened level of cross training and resources between BBVS and BVRS staff to meet the capabilities of all customers.

OVR Response: OVR has initiated mandatory monthly in-service staff trainings which include topics that provide cross training and resources for staff in all Bureaus.

2. OVR will increase BBVS and BVRs staff to focus on providing additional services, programs, and resources for students and customers.

OVR Response: OVR continues to submit employment postings supported by existing complement positions and works with the Governors' Office of Talent Acquisition to assist with talent recruitment.

3. OVR will consult with creditable sources outside the Agency to provide training related to specific disabilities to enhance current training provided by OVR.

OVR Response: OVR has initiated mandatory monthly in-service staff trainings which include topics that provide cross training and resources for staff in all Bureaus. Within these topics, outside presenters are often included to ensure staff are aware of the most current information.

4. OVR will provide Innovation & Expansion grant opportunities to entities interested in providing specific blindness skills training to Pre-ETS and BBVS customers enrolled in VR services.

OVR Response: OVR will explore the need for Innovation & Expansion opportunities and will also continue to do community outreach to encourage additional providers to work with OVR and provide services to customers.

5. Promoting Competitive Integrated Employment Workplace Settings

Issue: Organizations located within PA with the goal to hire a majority of employees with disabilities may be implementing hiring initiatives and policies detrimental to the continued development of competitive, integrated workplace settings, thus negatively impacting existing employment models.

Recommendations/Measurable goals:

1. WIOA defines CIE as work that is performed on a full-time or part-time basis for which an individual is: 1) compensated at or above minimum wage and comparable to the customary rate paid by the employer to employees without disabilities performing similar duties and with similar training and experience; 2) receiving the same level of benefits provided to other employees without disabilities in similar positions; 3) at a location where the employee interacts with other individuals without disabilities; and 4) presented opportunities for advancement similar to other employees without disabilities in similar positions. OVR will provide education and outreach to organizations that it partners with to help ensure PA's workplace settings align with the WIOA definition of CIE.

OVR Response: OVR's policy and review process is aligned with WIOA's definition of CIE and OVR's Business Services & Outreach Division (BSOD) will be providing information and education materials to new employers with whom they engage. When necessary, OVR goes conducts site visits with employers to ensure they are compliant with the CIE policy.

2. OVR will collect and analyze customer data such as wages, location/interaction, natural supports, advancement opportunities, and equal pay and benefits to measure the competitive environments and economic opportunities for people with disabilities.

OVR Response: OVR utilizes RSA's data when analyzing pay and areas of placement. OVR's Business Services staff work to ensure the placement of persons with disabilities meets the above requirements. OVR collects data in accordance with requirements of the RSA-911 file. OVR can use this information to analyze this type of information to ensure OVR customers are obtaining sustainable employment opportunities that provide a living wage and career advancement opportunities.

3. OVR will inform and educate their partner organizations on the importance of, and opportunities for, upward mobility, career advancement, best practices, location with interaction, collaboration within the workplace, natural supports, and equal pay and benefits to ensure the workplace is maintaining CIE.



OVR Response: Provider trainings and other regularly scheduled meetings are held on an ongoing basis. Local District Offices maintain contact with their partner organizations to ensure they are aware of the above measures.

6. Customer Satisfaction Surveys

Issue: The PaRC reviews OVR Customer Satisfaction Surveys monthly to assist with developing the State Plan and evaluate and make recommendations regarding the effectiveness of PA's VR services; however, efforts to rectify concerns regarding low response rates and the lack of accessibility for customers to provide input on their experiences with VR services and programs remain insufficient.

Recommendations/Measurable goals:

1. OVR will increase Customer Satisfaction Survey accessibility and response rates by 10% each year.

OVR Response: OVR will continue to evaluate its Customer Satisfaction process and look for creative ways to increase the response rate.

2. To increase response rates, OVR will consider using Summer Interns to call customers and complete the surveys using the communication method which best meets the needs of the customer.

OVR Response: OVR currently has a devoted staff member who handles the above but will certainly consider additional resources to complete these tasks.

7. Identification of populations served by BVRS and BBVS.

Issue: There is no discrimination between employment outcomes specifically defined for customers of BVRS and BBVS, or separate fiscal reports provided for each Bureau.

Recommendations/Measurable Goals:

1. OVR will provide separate lists of employers for each BVRS and BBVS Bureau.

OVR Response: OVR District Offices work with employers that provide career services for all Pennsylvanians with disabilities. Each placement is unique to the individual's strength and abilities.

2. OVR will provide a fiscal report for each BVRS and BBVS Bureau outlining the expenditures for customers in their respective VR programs.

OVR Response: OVR will provide a fiscal report regarding expenditures of services.

8. Federal flat funding of the national VR program.

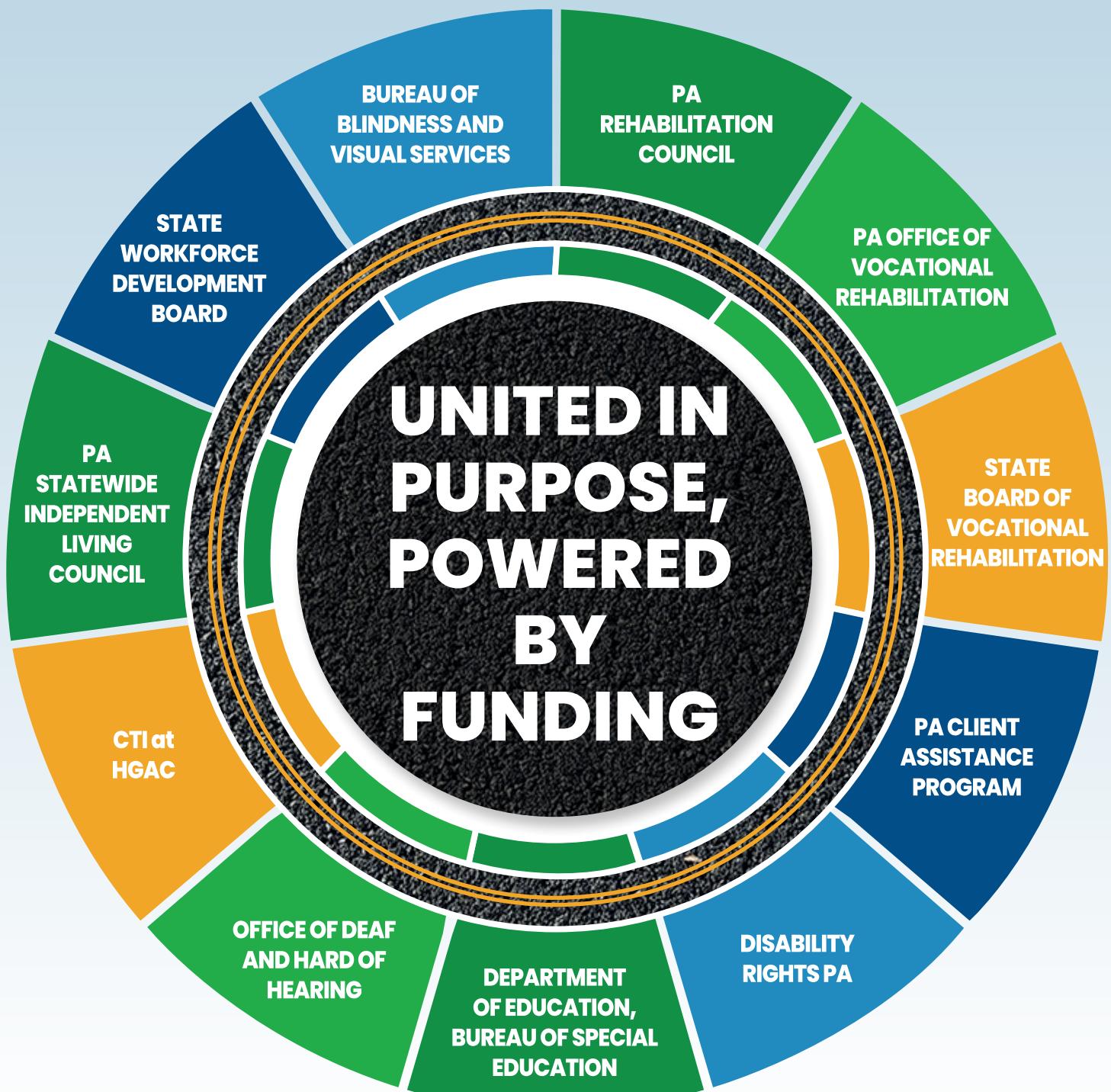
Issue: In May of 2024, OVR was given late notification of federal flat funding of FFY 2024, with FFY 2025 also likely to be flat funded, resulting in a budgetary loss of approximately \$13 million dollars for FFY 2024. Although we previously commended OVR for opening the OOS, the Council does recognize the need to reinstate the OSS based on federal funding issues.

Recommendations/Measurable Goals:

1. OVR will reinstate the Order of Selection (OOS) as per 34 CFR § 361.36 of the Rehabilitation Act, for FFY 2025 to prioritize and ensure existing OVR customers in the Most Significant Disability category will receive services.

OVR Response: OVR accepts this recommendation as the influx of adult and student customers had steadily increased over the past two years and flat funding will create a variety of fiscal and staffing challenges for the agency. We will need time to implement additional cost containment measures and having the OOS available for utilization will help ensure that the agency can continue to serve existing customers as effectively as possible.

PaRC PARTNERSHIPS



Strong partnerships united by a shared purpose – powered by funding to create meaningful impact.

FUELING PROGRESS

A Success Story from OVR's 2024 Annual Report

"Never give up until you have what you are looking for. I am finally employed within an organization where I am valued, appreciated, and have been able to succeed." – Katie DuBrowa

KATHERINE (KATIE) DUBROWA

Katie first worked with OVR's New Castle Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services office for help with post-secondary training/funding and job placement. She returned to OVR for assistance most recently to find a part-time position after struggling with her mental health following the COVID-19 pandemic. Her goal was to use her certification as a peer support specialist to start a new career path.

Through local employer collaborations, Katie's VR Counselor Rebekah (Bekah) Zagorski had a connection with Aurora Services who had shared they had an immediate need for a peer support specialist.

After talking with Aurora and Bekah about what the position would look like and some of her concerns, Katie decided it would be a good fit for her to pursue.

Katie worked with her VR counselor to complete an application, practice Q&As, and complete several mock interviews, then interviewed with Aurora's HR. The rest is history!

She began working for Aurora through an OVR On-the-Job Training (OJT) opportunity, with OVR reimbursing Aurora for Katie's salary for the first 180 days. After the OJT ended, she continued working for Aurora part-time as a peer support specialist and has proven to be a valuable addition to their team. She's even been able to teach groups! Since starting at Aurora, she's received a raise and also increased her hours.

What she loves best about her job is "helping others on their mental health journey. I love witnessing the progress made by my peers." She also shared the difference having a job has made in her life. "Having a job gives me purpose," said Katie. "I have found my purpose in the work that I do every day and the peers that I help."

For Katie, her supervisor and the manager of mental health services at Aurora have helped her succeed and overcome barriers. "When I am unsure of how to proceed with something or someone on my caseload, they both provide me with advice and feedback needed in order to handle a situation independently," Katie said.

Katie recently spoke at a stakeholder meeting about her mental health and recovery, detailing how much OVR and her VR Counselor have helped reach her goals.

As for the future? Katie's wants to someday work full time!



THE ROAD TO OPPORTUNITY

A Success Story from OVR's 2024 Annual Report

His advice for other individuals with disabilities is to “not be discouraged. If it’s a job you want, go for it.”



DAVID ENGELMAN

Since he was 20 years old, David, an individual with a history of depression and substance use disorder, has had multiple incarcerations. At the time of his initial meeting with OVR in April 2022, he was enrolled in the Wyoming/Sullivan CO Drug Treatment Court Program after having just been released from prison. One of the requirements of the program was for David to find employment and, if he was not employed, to volunteer in the community or attend group therapy.

Working with his Wilkes-Barre Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation Services counselor, David obtained employment at Manpower for P&G then Meshoppen Stone as a Diesel Mechanic. He then transferred to H&D Waste as a Diesel Mechanic. One of the requirements for this position was a CDL license. With financial assistance from OVR and working with Trans American Technical Institute, he met this requirement!

Today, David is working at Pensak Transport and making \$30/hour! What David enjoys about his job with Pensak is “the independence and freedom that allows me to travel from state to state while hauling loads.”

He graduated from Wyoming/Sullivan County Drug Treatment Court in April of 2024 and is actively participating in his community, including serving as the Alumni Coordinator for the Wyoming/Sullivan County Treatment Court and participating in the softball league.

David now smiles and laughs often, has a career he is passionate about, and sends OVR referrals. He shared that having a job, for him, means the “foundation of a normal life and stability.”



Commonwealth Technical Institute at Hiram G. Andrews Center (CTI at HGAC)

CULINARY ARTS PROGRAM

Students from CTI at HGAC's AST Culinary Arts program joined First Lady Lori Shapiro at the Governor's Residence and worked side-by-side with Chef Crumlich and his talented culinary team. Throughout the day, students gained hands-on experience and applied industry-standard techniques. This unique opportunity was not only a chance to learn from seasoned professionals but was also a proud moment for CTI at HGAC. After preparing the meal, everyone enjoyed a buffet lunch. Huge thanks to everyone for welcoming our students and providing such an inspiring, memorable experience!





ENGAGE WITH THE PaRC

PaRC NEWSLETTER

Sign up to receive the **PaRC Newsletter** and invite others to join, too! The newsletter broadens the conversation around the diverse issues affecting employment of people with disabilities. To subscribe, send an email to parc@parehabilitationcouncil.org with your contact information or complete the contact form on our website: <https://parehabilitationcouncil.org/contact/>

CONNECT ONLINE

Visit our website <https://parehabilitationcouncil.org/> to explore resources, stay connected, and learn how to get involved. Discover features such as the **Disability Related Resources** page for helpful links to state and national organizations. Check-out the **PaRC News** page to access past newsletters, OVR publications, and success stories and don't miss the **Benefits Corner** to learn about OVR services, including Benefits Counseling, a valuable tool that can help you plan for successful employment. You can also apply for PaRC membership directly through the website.

Follow PaRC on **Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook** to stay up to date on the latest news, find helpful resources, and support employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Whether you want to get involved, stay informed, or make a difference, the **PaRC website and social media pages** are great ways to connect and find support across Pennsylvania.

CELEBRATING OVR EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS

The PaRC proudly shares **OVR Success Stories** that highlight the hard work and achievements of people reaching their employment goals. Whether landing a dream job, earning a promotion, or celebrating another milestone toward meaningful employment, sharing stories is the most powerful way PaRC can show how OVR services make a real difference in people's lives!

If you or someone you know has reached an important employment goal with help from **OVR services** and would like to share a personal story, please contact us at parc@parehabilitationcouncil.org.

SHOW YOUR SUPPORT

PaRC meetings are open to the public. Full Council quarterly meetings are held virtually via Zoom in February and November, while hybrid meetings—offered both in-person and virtual—take place in May and August. Meeting dates and on-site locations for the 2026 calendar year will be posted on the PaRC website: <https://parehabilitationcouncil.org/get-involved/full-council-meetings/>





In compliance with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014, the Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Council (PaRC) respectfully submits its 2024–2025 Annual Report to:

- ◆ Governor Josh Shapiro, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
- ◆ The Citizens of Pennsylvania
- ◆ The Rehabilitation Services Administration
- ◆ The Pennsylvania Legislature
- ◆ The State Board of Vocational Rehabilitation
- ◆ The Pennsylvania Workforce Development Board
- ◆ The Pennsylvania Department of Education

We express our sincere appreciation to everyone who shared their success stories — your accomplishments are truly inspiring!

The PaRC also sincerely thanks Governor Shapiro, PA OVR, its stakeholders, and the citizens of Pennsylvania for working together to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for people with disabilities across the Commonwealth.

Production of the Annual Report is supported by the Pennsylvania Department of Labor & Industry, Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, **Contract #4400027911**.

For additional meeting information, request reasonable accommodations, and submit public comment please contact the PaRC Office using one of the following options:



(888) 250-5175 (Phone)

(717) 737-0158 (TTY)



parc@parehabilitationcouncil.org



The PaRC is a member of the National Coalition of State Rehabilitation Councils, Incorporated (NCSRC).

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