**Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Unified and Combined State Plan Update**

**VI. Program-Specific Requirements for Core State Plan Programs**

**Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired**

**Program Years 2024 and 2025**

a. 1. Input provided by the State Rehabilitation Council, including input and recommendations on the VR services portion of the Unified or Combined State Plan, recommendations from the Council's report, the review and analysis of consumer satisfaction, and other Council reports that may have been developed as part of the Council’s functions;

Report of the Vermont State Rehabilitation Council for the Blind and Visually Impaired -Summary of SRC meetings 2022 and 2023

SRC Involvement in Planning and Evaluating includes Statewide Focus Groups, Performance Data, and Customer Satisfaction Information. The SRC meets in-person every other month and holds executive meetings on the alternate months.

In September 2022, the SRC Executive Committee discussed the agendas for 2023 virtual meetings. The SRC for DBVI will offer recommendations on the WIOA state plan, advise on policy issues, and will be an integral part of planning group for the event Great Expectations and Technology Fair held in April 2023. SRC full council updates will be provided for all members throughout the year. Included in the updates will be OSEP Technology-Based Approaches to Transition Grant, Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development and Pathways to Partnership RSA grant. The entire SRC and DBVI staff meet for an all-day combined meeting each June. In December 2023 the SRC for DBVI submitted specific recommendations for the WIOA state plan.

In September 2022, the SRC Executive Committee recommends regular updates to the SRC related to rural youth apprenticeship development. DBVI RYAD participates in a five-year learning community focused on apprenticeship opportunities for youth. Hosted by UMASS Boston, Institute for Community Inclusion, the partnership includes other states Wyoming, Arkansas, Vermont HireAbility and DBVI, consultation from content experts including partners in Maine BRS. The SRC for DBVI notes there should be more opportunities for credential attainment and apprenticeships for people who are blind or visually impaired. The intent of DBVI to augment consulting in the area of apprenticeship, break down barriers, collectively find companies that could open doors related to apprenticeship for consumers.

The SRC full council discusses three components of apprenticeship: employer, formal training and person who is willing to participate. While formal apprenticeship is lead focus, pre-apprenticeship is also encouraged among national partners. LEAP pre-apprenticeship efforts, particularly Americorps as it includes formal academics and non-profit sectors employment is viewed as a promising model that could be enhanced. DBVI is looking for employers that will hire. Executive council member expresses the concern that people don’t understand that apprenticeship is a guaranteed hit for a job – if it is a true apprenticeship, they’ve got the job.

On February 28, 2023, the DBVI SRC discusses ABLE Library community participation, social isolation, DBVI Policy and Procedures, followed by discussion of LEAP student experiences with Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports.

ABLE Library – Community Participation

SRC and Director of the ABLE library discuss the importance of community participation activities. ABLE library highlights CDC studies on social isolation. Social isolation significantly increases a person’s risk of premature death from all causes. Social isolation was associated with about a 50% increase in the risk of dementia. Personal social relationships are associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease; and a 33 % increased risk of stroke. And not surprisingly, loneliness is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide. ABLE library highlights research from physician Vivek Murthy, US Surgeon’s General who has studied social isolation extensively, characterizes loneliness as an epidemic in the US, and his research to fight against this epidemic that include:

* Murthy research notes three levels of connection to avoid loneliness: the intimate level with a partner or spouse; the relational level that is the circle of friends; and the collective level that is community. Research identifies humans have evolved to be a part of a community; people want to be part of a shared identity.
* ABLE library book clubs, many programs offered by members and partners on the SRC that act to avoid social isolation are important and essential, as important as the vocational opportunities that we develop. They can be the life-line for some folks.

ABLE has received a large and positive response to accessible youth books, audio books and wonder books. The Department of Libraries is looking to budget more large print books for youth and teens; titles will be added. ABLE is working with Perkins to get more books in Braille on BARD. ABLE has a recording studio. The programs at the library grow community participation and promote life-long learning opportunities in literacy, books, reading and sharing stories that facilitate connection.

DBVI General Update and Policy and Procedures

* 704 Report on Independent Living services will be reported to the Administration for Community Living in January 2023.
* Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD) group builds relationships with Virginia State counterparts, Human Resources in State Government and discusses career pathway apprenticeship to state government positions.
* HireAbility is reaching out to employers and business account managers to develop a framework and guidance on how to develop an apprenticeship from the ground up.
* UVM and Developmental Services Supported Employment Specialist offers training to DBVI staff from the Post-secondary Education Consortium.
* Montpelier DBVI counselor in Montpelier identifies increases in referrals.
* SRC members are invited to participate in DBVI policy committee to review Policy and Procedures. SRC Executive member representing Vermont Council or the Blind agrees to participate in this review.

April 2023 – The SRC for DBVI full council were integral partners in planning for the Great Expectations and Technology Fair on April 14, 2023. The Executive Committee encouraged the full council to attend in place of the regular SRC full council meeting.

On June 22, 2023, 23 Full Council and DBVI staff attended and reviewed the following Positive Survey Trends from the Market Decisions survey and areas that need work from DBVI Customer Satisfaction Workgroup. Discussion was followed by professional development workshop on communications & customer service provided by Porter Knight of Productivity Vermont. The communications and customer service presentation was followed by a discussion with LEAP students on subject of connection, contribution and mentoring.

The DBVI Customer Satisfaction Workgroup, shared data from Market Decisions Research:

* Positive survey trends: Survey results are generally consistent with 2017 and prior years, but some areas saw notable improvements:
* 97% of VT DBVI consumers report overall satisfaction; the highest rate on record (up from 92% in 2017).
* 97% felt that staff treated them with dignity and respect (up from a low of 95% in 2017).
* 93% report that services met their expectations (continuing a slight upward trend seen in prior years).
* 96% said that staff were helped to achieve their DBVI goals (up from 94% in 2017).
* 91% felt that the services they received helped them become more independent (up from 88% in 2017).
* Areas to watch: Some survey items saw notable declines In 2021:
* 88% were satisfied with choice of available services (down from 92% in 2017 and 96% in 2015).
* 15% report experiencing a problem with VT DBVI services (up from 11% in 2017 and 8% in 2015).
* 56% of those who experienced a problem report the problem was resolved (down from 59% in 2017 and 82% in 2015).

The survey results do not identify any areas of immediate concern or critical need for improvement. The Customer Satisfaction Workgroup Identified that customer satisfaction may be improved with a better communication and productivity. According to the consumers of VT DBVI, their services meet expectations and are highly satisfactory. The most positive areas of experience, according to consumers, are:

* Likelihood to recommend VT DBVI
* Experience with DBVI Staff and Counselors
* Communications with DBVI Staff
* Experience with Services Provided by DBVI
* Outcomes and Meeting Goals
* Accessibility of the DBVI office

Porter Knight from Productivity Vermont offered professional development on communications & customer service to all SRC full council members and DBVI staff on this date. Summary of workshop: Productive communications is a two-way street that requires thought and skill. Ultimately, communicating well is about relationships as much as information. In this workshop participants will learn how to manage your brain to improve its performance and how to keep track of your own commitments and schedule. From there, you can effectively manage expectations and hone your customer service skills. You’ll leave this lively, interactive program with tools you can put in place immediately to develop stronger human connections and more productive conversations. Key points:

* Improved customer service involves support for connection, to listen to understand consumers. Our brains tend to gallop ahead, and we can’t go wrong by slowing down. Listening to better understand will improve customer service.
* Letting go of attachment can help develop prefrontal cortex.
* Improved cognition, better decision-making can be achieved when the goal is to practice paying attention.
* Meditation equals paying attention.
* List management – get the list out of your head onto a finite space, (e.g. 27 – 33 lines) and move the items onto the calendar.
* Use action verbs, eventually everything on the list is stated as a verb.
* Hold space on the calendar by category.
* Place your genuine intention on the calendar.
* Resist checking email; email is to be done not to be checked so schedule time to sort to “done” and “delete.”
* Fluid movement between tasks recommended when position requires multiple “hats.”
* Porter shares equation: “connection plus contribution minus attachment equals happiness” and ties the presentation to customer service and satisfaction.

Presentation was followed by a discussion with LEAP students on subject of connection, contribution and mentoring.

Action steps. SRC for DBVI full council members recommendations:

* Increase availability of group sessions for DBVI consumers ages 18-55 i.e., job clubs, peer assisted learning, AT groups etc.
* Develop a calendar of events that can be shared with consumers.
* DBVI staff implement identified strategies to augment communication and productivity with consumers.

On August 24, 2023, from 9:00 - 10:00am virtually on Zoom DBVI holds a public hearing is to gather comments on DBVI Policies and Procedures that have been recently updated and reviewed by the SRC.

On October 28, 2023, the SRC reviews the OSEP grant program and Pathways to Partnership RSA new grant initiatives.

* The OSEP grant is a great opportunity to build technology skills of youth who are blind and visually impaired to a high level; technology opens so many doors and options for future.
* DBVI and SRC partners welcome new Project Director, Michelle who started her work on the OSEP grant in the last couple of weeks. Michelle comes to the position with years of working with non-profits.
* First year is a planning year. We will be nailing down what our measures will be and the scope of work for partners.
* LEAP will be incorporating new programming such as AT on demand, checklist and toolkits for Individual Technology Plans for students and enhancing mentoring opportunities.

OSEP Programs Technology-Based Approaches to Transition for Secondary Students with Sensory Disabilities

* Slide One: LEAP CONNECT
* Slide Two: Introducing LEAP Connect, New and Exciting Programming, Assistive Technology Curriculum Enhancements in all programs, AT On Demand in all programs, Mentor Program in all programs, Individualized Technology Plans – ITPs, LEAP Start: 6th-8th Grade College and Career Readiness Training, AT Expert Panel convened bi-annually
* Slide Three: LEAP Connect Outcomes Increase in: Accessibility and participation in pre-vocational and early college experiences in rural and remote areas, Capacity of schools and VR agencies to provide transition services, Collaboration among families, schools, employers, and universities to support successful implementation of transition goals, Inclusion of students in grades 6th – 9th, Acquisition of college and career-related self-determination, social and emotional skills, and assistive technology competencies
* Slide Four:Closing the Loop, Identify Communicate Activate,
* Slide Five: Sustainability Replicability Dissemination

DBVI and SRC discuss Pathways to Partnership updates including the AA-1, project meetings, Statements of Work from each organization, and MOU interagency agreement. The DBVI team has identified December and January as months to complete the Statements of Work (SOW) from each partner.The Pathways to Partnership initiative will have a regular monthly P2P Steering Committee and the larger P2P Leadership Team will meet quarterly. SRC reviews project goals of Vermont’s Pathways to Partnership Initiative that include:

* Establish Partnerships and High Performing Systems of Support. VT P2P will form interagency partnerships across an array of stakeholders to establish a comprehensive set of systems and strategies to achieve postsecondary success for youth with disabilities.
* Center Leadership, Advocacy, and Engagement of People with Disabilities and Their Families. Students will be prepared as self-advocates and serve as primary contributors and decision-makers regarding their transition plans and services.
* Improve Career and Post-secondary Outcomes for Youth with Disabilities. VT-P2P demonstration grant will improve employment, community participation and post-secondary education outcomes for youth with disabilities.

AA-1 – DBVI informs SRC that the AA-1 required approval is currently at the AHS Business Office for review. It will then move to the Governor’s office, and then to the Joint Fiscal committee of the State legislature.

Statements of Work – Most partners (10 out of 13) have begun to detail Statements of Work that will form grant agreements throughout the disability innovation grant. Highlights include meeting with each of the three school pilot sites who have begun to identify key project work in the areas of:

* Students in high school level (and at younger ages) lead transition plans;
* Outreach and communication with youth, families and school to work transition coordinators in each district;
* Innovation in independent living goals, objectives and life skills programs;
* Enhancements of the new DBVI Transition Coordinator positions, high level of professional development and training in supported employment and customized employment;
* Establishing new apprenticeship opportunities;
* Improving transitions to Developmental Services and adult agencies;
* General education and special education coordination (e.g. identifying key access/opportunity points in general regular education and special education etc.); and
* Enhanced relationships with employers and the community.

The pilot sites will be supported with innovations from the Vermont Center for Independent Living, Vermont Family Network, University of Vermont Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, the Green Mountain Self Advocates, ReSource and Griffin-Hammis among all other partners. All will be critical to the grant. We look forward to high level of training in job development, peer to peer connections, supported employment and customized employment that will energize innovation at the local level and impact the experience of young people.

In December 2023, the DBVI SRC discusses full council updates followed by discussion of WIOA state plan goals and strategies, with specific recommendations from the SRC.

Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI):

* VABVI with DBVI participated in White Cane Awareness Day events throughout the state including Burlington, Londonderry, Montpelier, Rutland, Springfield and St. Albans among other locations in October.
* Outreach event for new Americans within Somali community has included VABVI staff, the Lions Club, Jeff Young, UVM Medical Center and ocular pressure testing for glaucoma was provided. 27 people attended, 11 had follow-up visits with their doctor, and one is being treated for glaucoma due to this effort. Four more events are planned for early next year.
* Fully staffed with new UMASS graduate hired to serve Northeast Kingdom.
* Children services update: Early Intensive Residential Life Experience, three-day camp was attended by 13 youth at Rockpoint Center offering youth ages 8-18 the opportunity to meet and mentor with each other.
* VABVI is updating their strategic plan which is done every five years.

ABLE Library Update:

* In response to feedback from ABLE’s latest customer satisfaction survey, the library is increasing the number of newsletters sent out to patrons to 4 times a year. The newsletter is available through email, large print, and audio formats.
* ABLE offers a new program called BARD Basics in January, where patrons will participate in a high-level overview of what BARD is and how to sign up for it.
* ABLE is also offering an assistive technology training for public library staff around the state in January.
* The ABLE book club is going well; the next discussion will be in January, and there is good participation from patrons.
* The National Library Service is testing the feasibility of voice user interface options to listen to NLS materials. Around 400 patrons are currently testing using Amazon’s Alexa product to play back NLS materials.
* NLS continues to test their new digital talking book machines, which will be able to play the existing digital cartridges, as well as connect to WiFi so that patrons can download books directly to the device.
* ABLE added about 100 new Wonderbooks to the Accessible Youth Collection, including SRC member Jerry Doody’s request for Holiday books. The Wonderbooks are picture books and chapter books that have an attached audio player so that readers can listen to the book while following along with the print and pictures.

Client Assistance Program:

* CAP is working with HireAbility and Griffin Hammis to develop self-employment, create and revise policy with RSA.
* HireAbility will offer training on self-employment to all staff and one staff member within each region will be offered more training.
* Guidebook for participants as well as staff is being developed. CAP has advocated for consumers to be included in the development of the guidebook.
* CAP has done outreach to DBVI staff and HireAbility and plans to do outreach for New Americans and to re-establish clinic offerings.

Vermont Council of the Blind:

* VCB offers a range of opportunities for social gatherings to decrease isolation and recently offered a Holiday party in Colchester.
* VCB is working to ensure audiodescription is available at Northern Stage in WRJ and recently traveled to the theater and local restaurants in WRJ.
* Train is another way to travel, and we want to encourage VCB members to think about this as a possible support.
* Wizard of Oz in April at the Flynn will be audio described.

Vermont Center for Independent Living:

* VCIL office in Montpelier is still working through the recovery from the floods, with office space across the street at the Civic Center and remote work.
* Received a grant from ACL in November to provide Covid vaccinations to people who are immunocompromised
* New staff include a pandemic coordinator and a long covid specialist.
* There is a new long term covid support group in Bennington.

DBVI update

* Pathways to Partnership is going through the process with Joint Fiscal, the AA-1 is at AHS and will move to the legislative committee. Staff have been coordinating with partners to work on grant agreements, specifications of work and deliverables.
* OSEP Resource grant is exciting as it impacts the technology available for our BVI students, and in turn may impact career path and technology in the LEAP Program.
* DBVI is recruiting for on VR Counselor position for the Burlington office.

State Plan Goals and Priorities

On December 21, 2023, the full SRC for DBVI reviewed DBVI’s progress towards achieving the goals and priorities for Program Year 2023. The SRC full council recommended new strategies to assist DBVI to reach stated goals. The recommendations are summarized here and detailed to in attachment “o. The methods to be used to expand and improve services to individuals with disabilities” within the WIOA state plan.

In December 2023, the SRC for DBVI recommends the following strategies to maximize DBVI outcomes under the WIOA Common Performance Measures.

* SRC recommends DBVI reach out to VRTAC and other schools for the blind to learn about vocational and other practical assessments i.e., Mississippi TAC, Hadley School for the Blind etc;
* Job Accommodation Network for assistive technology; and
* Griffin-Hammis professional development about customized employment/career assessments.

SRC for DBVI recommends the following additional strategies to coordinate efforts with the Vermont Department of Labor (VDOL) and the Agency of Education (AOE) to ensure that blind and visually impaired individuals have access to employment training and other components of the workforce system (Goals 2 and 4):

* DOL trainings on dual enrollment with DBVI.
* Continue to explore apprenticeships with HireAbility and DOL. Connect with BAMs and explore businesses interested in apprenticeships.

SRC for DBVI recommends that DBVI add the following strategies to expand employer outreach and engagement efforts through Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS) to effectively meet the needs of employers (Goals 1 and 6):

* SRC recommends DBVI reach out to Vermont State Employee Credit Union and share with Nat Piper, short staffed and hired outside company to answer phones. Reach out strategy-Gorilla Marketing

The SRC recommends DBVI add the following strategy to assist DBVI consumers to retain or advance in employment (Goals 1, 2, 3 and 4):

* Reach out to Intellectual Point: IT training and certifications, <https://intellectualpoint.com/>

The SRC recommends DBVI add three strategies to continue to develop and expand services for underserved populations including individuals who require supported employment through partnerships, grant and funding opportunities. Goals 2 and 7.

* Pathways to Partnership Grant, over the next 5 years
* Specialize Support Program through VANCRO.
* ABLE Newsletter to add information

The SRC recommends DBVI add three strategies to continue Improve Outcomes for Students and Youth. Goal 5.

* Add language around the OSEP Grant
* VT Pathways to Partnership Grant
* Explore apprenticeships, RYAD collabortive

The SRC recommends DBVI add the following strategies to continue promote employment by educating employers and providing opportunities for increased exposure to people who are blind or visually impaired. This will address “Societies reaction to blindness.” Goals 1 and 6:

* Card table with Legislatures and partner with VABVI/HireAbility
* Pathways to Partnership grant: Vermont Family Network- development of videos/short clips

On December 21, 2023, the SRC recommends DBVI add the following strategies to assist DBVI to create Consumer Driven Events to assist individuals as they prepare for employment (Goals 1and 2):

* Create a calendar for consumers and DBVI staff that has all of these events in one location. Add it to the P2P Website.
* Create a quarterly work employment group to meet virtually.

On December 21, 2023, DBVI SRC discusses participation in planning Nov 13-15 2024, Vermont annual North East Association of Education and Rehabilitation (NE-AER) conference at the Spruce Peak Lodge in Stowe, VT. AER is a professional membership organization dedicated to the professionals who work with people who are blind/ visually impaired. This three-day conference will have various breakout sessions with teachers and speakers from around the country, but with a main focus of attendees and presenters from the northeast. There will also be a keynote speaker, vendors and an award ceremony banquet dinner. Vermont partners are eager to make the experience as welcoming and accessible as possible. To make this happen committees include:

* The Host Committee: Provides information on local activities, speaker gifts, banquet favors;
* The Registration Committee: creates conference rates with conference committee, print programs, obtain tote bags, staff the registration table;
* The Accessibility Sub-Committee: ensures conference materials are in accessible format, find dog relief area, ensure hotel is accessible, create tactile maps of hotel;
* The Exhibit Sub-Committee: generate a vendor list, set vendor fees, acquire donations, determine layout of exhibit room; and
* The Prize/Raffle Subcommittee: obtains donated gifts, support state basket raffles.
* SRC members are invited to participate in committees. Each committee has one lead committee member who is in charge of managing the committee and outcomes. Each committee already has a lead so you will be joining to support the outcomes throughout the year from now until November.

Action steps, SRC recommendations:

* DBVI workshop on partnerships such as VABVI, vision rehabilitation therapists, and orientation and mobility instructors, assistive technology evaluation
* LEAP student workshop
* Workshop recommended on ABLE library and social isolation
* DBVI SRC recommends SRC members to participate in committees.

Overview of the CSNA Timeline:

* Dec. 2022 (Discussion with the SRC about DBVI Goals).
* February and April 2023 (Continue planning with the SRC).
* June 2023 (Hold a combined meeting with the SRC, DBVI Staff and key Partners to discuss Needs).
* July 2023 Policies and Procedures Public Hearing with SRC
* July 2023 Needs identified within Pathways to Partnership RSA submission
* Conduct Summer Surveys of Teachers of the Visually Impaired and Adult Service Providers.
* Sept. 2023 (Hold a Consumer-Driven Event).
* October 2023 (Hold White Cane Events).
* December 2023 (SRC offers recommendations to DBVI Goals and Strategies).

Goal 1. DBVI will align services to support consumers in achieving the WIOA Common Performance Outcome Measures.

**SRC member recommendations:**

* DBVI will consider the use of zoom to deliver career assessments online, and to offer training opportunities for DBVI clients to access and interact with zoom and other online platforms.
* The focus on how to remove the barriers within the assessment would be priorities.

 Goal 2.  DBVI will increase the percentage of consumers earning more than minimum wage at closure.

* This goal and the indicators related to it are based on the state minimum wage.

**No additional recommendations were made under goal 2.**

Goal 3. DBVI will increase consumer opportunities to participate in post-secondary education and training and gain industry recognized credentials.

**SRC member recommendations:**

* DBVI will look at longitudinal data under this goal as an ongoing strategy. Of those students who start post-secondary education and training, how many finish.
* SRC specifically recommends looking at flexible pathways and dual enrollment opportunities for students.
* Agency of Education agrees that the dual enrollment is a good data point. AOE will put forward a data request – historically a low number of students with disabilities are accessing the dual pathway, and Vermont would like students on IEPs and 504 plans to access dual enrollment to the greatest extent possible.
* Vermont Council of the Blind recommends specific industry recognized credentials may not solely relate to the college degree, citing the importance of IT credentials for employers as one example; this recommendation could be included in the longitudinal data recommendation of this section, above.

Goal 4. In partnership with VDOL and Community Partners, DBVI will create more opportunities for DBVI consumers to participate in training programs.

**SRC member recommendations:**

* DBVI will find and improve access to new apprenticeship opportunities for individuals who are blind and visually impaired, that are not the typical construction, plumbing and heating pathways.
* SRC members discussed history of stipend and minimum wage offering through DVR, DBVI and DOL programs, in collaboration with DOL, Resource and VABIR partnerships.
* Vermont Department of Labor shared history of stipends, Fair Labor Standards Act, and DOL programs that offer minimum wage. DOL has had a history of paying wages, minimum wage for participants.
* DBVI will continue to develop the partnerships with VABIR, Resource, DOL and other entities.

Goal 5. DBVI will continue to implement highly effective Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students statewide.

* DBVI works to achieve outcomes in five core areas under WIOA through Learn, Earn and Prosper, LEAP program. The menu of options available to students through LEAP are available statewide. This year, summer residential option will be available.
* Vermont is fortunate to have structure of DBVI collaboration with VABVI to have 14 teachers for the Visually Impaired in the schools versus other states where each school district hires their own teachers.

**SRC member recommendations:**

* DBVI will continue to coordinate with Vermont Center for Independent Living to provide self-advocacy training and workshops for youth. VCIL has provided weekly workshops over 5 weeks in coordination with DBVI’s LEAP program, last year. DBVI looks forward to continued collaboration in the LEAP program over the next year.
* TVI’s recently participated in Market Decisions research forum. While that data is being compiled, TVI’s specifically want to hear from DBVI staff in the beginning of each school year.
* DBVI will incorporate opportunities for students being taught about their disability (submitted by CAP).
* DBVI will support youth to practice self-advocacy skills and how it impacts the employment environment (submitted by Vermont Family Network).
* SRC discusses importance of helping to incorporate braille study in IEP, DBVI counselor participation in IEP meetings can assist in this effort (VCIL initiates this discussion).
* AOE adds that anything that can help students can be included in the IEP
* VABVI serves 300 students, 20-25 students have braille written within the IEP. It can sometimes be a challenge to get the student a family to agree that Braille instruction is needed.

Goal 6. DBVI will continue to expand efforts to effectively serve employers through Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS).

**No additional recommendations were made under goal 6.**

Goal 7. DBVI will continue to seek opportunities to expand and/or improve services for underserved populations including individuals who need supported employment.

* DBVI coordinates with designated state agency (DSE) for students who meet the criteria of the DSE and has a separate partnership with CCS in Chittenden County.

**No additional recommendations were made under goal 7.**

Goal 8. Consumer satisfaction with DBVI services will be maintained or increase.

* Market Decisions research is being compiled for 2022-2023

**No additional recommendations were made under goal 8.**

a. 3. The designated State unit’s explanations for rejecting any of the Council’s input or recommendations.

DBVI agreed with all SRC recommendations.

g. 1. VR services; and

DBVI collaborates with General Vocational Rehabilitation in efforts to establish relationships with Vermont businesses. This is coordinated approach is desired by the businesses and creates meaningful points of contact. Below is a description of the approach established by General VR and used by DBVI.

DUAL CUSTOMER DESIGN

Vermont’s dual-customer approach considers both individuals with disabilities and the business community as key customers of the Vocational Rehabilitation program.  To that end, Vermont DVR/DBVI has established a cadre of Business Account Managers across the state whose primary responsibilities are to develop and sustain relationships with the businesses in their respective communities. The Business Account Managers also facilitate local Employment Teams made up of the various employment programs serving Vermonters with disabilities. The Employment Teams are designed to improve collaboration between programs and streamline employer outreach in order to maximize resources and increase opportunities for candidates served by the Vocational Rehabilitation program.

In addition to the Business Account Managers, Vermont DVR/DBVI contracts Employment Consultants who provide placement services and assistance to individual candidates, including retention services. These Employment Consultants, in concert with their respective Business Account Managers, are in the community developing contacts and establishing relationships with businesses of all sizes. Due to the rural nature of Vermont, and the fact that trusting relationships are built over time, Vermont has successfully developed ways to track employer engagement.

EMPLOYER DATA

DVR/DBVI tracks employer outreach utilizing Salesforce, a Customer Relations Management (CRM) solution used by many large corporations. All Business Account Managers and Employment Consultants enter information into this system. The information is transparent to everyone and only business information, not client information, is captured. To track employer engagement, the following information is gathered:

**Opportunities:**

Opportunities are defined as any activity, paid or unpaid, offered by a particular business. These activities range from informational interviews and job shadows, to short-term work experiences and paid employment. All opportunities are captured for each business.

**Contacts:**

Contacts are defined as the individuals in a business with whom Employment Consultants and/or Business Account Managers have developed a relationship. In many cases these contacts are Hiring Managers, Owners and Supervisors.

**Activities:**

Each time an Employment Consultant or Business Account Manager interacts with a contact, an activity note is entered into Salesforce. This allows all Employment Team members to see a running history of conversations and activities with that business.

**Caseload Driven Outreach:**

Caseload Driven outreach is defined as labor market outreach directly related to consumers on counselors’ current caseloads. Business Account Managers are tasked with directing two-thirds of their activities to caseload needs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DVR/DBVI CUSTOMERS

In developing relationships over time, we are able to position ourselves as a staffing service with a variety of options for businesses to consider;

* Coordinated business outreach, captured in Salesforce, allows for greater variety in the kinds of businesses we are meeting, and the concurrent variety in opportunities for DVR candidates;
* Gathering information on businesses willing to offer worksite experiences, company tours, and informational interview, will better support career exploration and skill development for both adults and students;
* Our business partners can support Pre-Employment Transition Services activities in schools, including practice interviews, company tours and overviews, as well as identify summer employment opportunities;
* Business partners can support the work of our in-school Transition Counselors, providing information on industry trends, skill requirements and other factors related to particular employment sectors;
* By engaging businesses in working with students, the students will have a better understanding of their local labor market through work experiences, job shadows and paid employment. This in turn should prepare them for transition to either post-secondary education or employment.

g. 2. Transition services, including pre-employment transition services, for students and youth with disabilities.

As noted in the prior section, the Business Account Managers are a major resource to the DBVI Counselors, who work exclusively with students to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services. In particular the Business Account Managers provide:

* Contacts with employers who are willing to provide work-based learning experiences for students;
* Contacts with employers who are willing to participate in informational interviews, company tours, practice interviews and other exploratory activities with students;
* Information on industry trends, skill requirements and other factors related to particular employment sectors;
* Identification of summer or part time competitive employment opportunities for students.

The Business Account Managers also convene local employment teams including the DBVI counselors. The local employment teams coordinate outreach to employers across DVR/DBVI programs. This coordinated approach maximizes the impact of DVR/DBVI employer outreach and reduces duplicate contacts with employers.

i. Comprehensive System of Personnel Development;

i. 1. A. i. The number of personnel who are employed by the State agency in the provision of VR services in relation to the number of individuals served, broken down by personnel category;

The Vermont Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) operates in the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (DAIL) in the Agency of Human Services (AHS). DBVI employs 11 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff positions. DBVI is organized to allow a structure for advancement based on increased professional abilities, knowledge, leadership, improved services, and outcomes and is headed by the Division Director.

In FFY 2022 DBVI served 258 clients and FFY 2023 served 283 clients. DBVI has sufficient staff to meet the vocational rehabilitation needs of clients. DBVI has four regional offices. The Burlington and Montpelier offices each have 1.5 vocational counselors and the Rutland and Springfield offices each have one vocational counselor.

Two Rehabilitation Associates along with the Blind Services Program Coordinator have divided administrative responsibilities to support the vocational rehabilitation and independent living programs in the northern and southern regions of the state. The Blind Services Program Coordinator also provides administrative support to grants, contracts and supported employment.

A Rehabilitation counselor was promoted to DBVI Program Manager in FY2023 to support data management and quality assurance. A second Rehabilitation counselor was promoted to Blind Services Assistant Director in FY2023 to support grant management and personnel. Both positions continue to maintain their Rehabilitation Counselor duties in addition to added responsibilities.

A Rehabilitation Associate was promoted to Blind Services Program Coordinator in FY2023. The position continues to provide administrative support and serve the independent living program in the Springfield regional office.

A LEAP Program Manager position was added in FY2020 to provide increased capacity to serve Pre-ETS students year round and to support DBVI’s Business Enterprise Program.

Technology services are provided by the Blind Services Assistive Technology Coordinator and a contracted professional Rehabilitation Technology expert. The Assistive Technology Coordinator provides AT training services for clients for the entire state. DBVI has two Employment Consultants contracted through VABIR (Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation) serving the Burlington and Montpelier regional offices.

DBVI maintains a high level of performance. The current personnel structure is designed to ensure DBVI clients are well served, including those with significant disabilities, students and adults requesting vocational rehabilitation services. DBVI is proud of its quality customer service and ability to quickly establish eligibility and develop service plans.

i. 1. A. ii. The number of personnel currently needed by the State agency to provide VR services, broken down by personnel category; and

|  **Job Title** | **Total positions** | **Current vacancies** | **Projected vacancies over the next 5 years** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Blind Services Director | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Blind Services Assistant Director | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Blind Services Program Manager | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| LEAP Program Manager | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Blind Services Program Coordinator | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Senior Rehabilitation Counselor | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Rehabilitation Counselor II | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Rehabilitation Counselor I | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Rehabilitation Associate II | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Rehabilitation Associate I | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Adaptive Technology Coordinator | 1 | 0 | 0 |

i. 1. B. i. A list of the institutions of higher education in the State that are preparing VR professionals, by type of program;

Vermont does not have accredited graduate schools offering master’s degrees in Rehabilitation Counseling. To meet the Comprehensive System for Professional Development (CSPD) standards, a rehabilitation counselor needs either a master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling or a master’s degree in a related field plus completion of four CSPD core rehabilitation courses. To help meet the requirement for education, Assumption College, University of Massachusetts, University of Southern Maine, Mississippi State University and Springfield College of Human Services have partnered to provide the required master’s level courses to be CSPD qualified.

 The four core rehabilitation courses required for all counselors include:

* Introduction to Rehabilitation Counseling
* Medical and Psychological Aspects of Disability and Rehabilitation
* Vocational Assessment and Evaluation
* Vocational Counseling and Placement in Rehabilitation

 Additional training and supervision are provided under the guidance of qualified rehabilitation counselors and/or Division Director. Training includes instruction regarding the implications of visual impairment and how to provide expert services for people who are visually impaired and seeking employment and/or vocational training.

 The Vision Specialist Program is a graduate certificate program offered, but not required, to DBVI vocational counselors through Mississippi State University. The program is supported by an RSA long-term training grant and consists of four graduate courses:

* Rehabilitation of Persons who are Visually Impaired
* Sensory Aids/Assistive Technology for Persons Who are Visually Impaired
* Resources for Persons who are Visually Impaired
* Special Project: Practicum

In FFY2022 and 2023 one Rehabilitation Counselor I with a master’s degree completed four of the required core rehabilitation courses at UMASS Boston.

i. 1. B. ii. The number of students enrolled at each of those institutions, broken down by type of program; and

N/A

### i. 1. B. iii. 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.

One Associate Counselor completed an M.S. in Counseling with a concentration in Rehabilitation Counseling through the University of Southern Maine’s (USM) online, distance learning program funded by an RSA long-term training grant to USM in August 2021.

One Rehabilitation Counselor II with a master’s degree completed the Vision Specialist Certificate Program through Mississippi University in October 2021.

One Rehabilitation Counselor with a master’s degree completed the four required core rehabilitation courses in 2022.

### i. 2. Plan for Recruitment, Preparation and Retention of Qualified Personnel

*Describe the development and implementation of a plan to address the current and projected needs for qualified personnel including, the coordination and facilitation of efforts between the designated State unit 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.*

DBVI recruits qualified personnel through The University of Southern Maine, Assumption College, University of Massachusetts, and Springfield College who have received a master’s degree in Rehabilitation Counseling. These graduates meet the highest standard of education for this field. DBVI also recruits qualified personnel in related fields such as Social Work, Special Education, School Guidance and Mental Health Counseling from other New England colleges. These graduates are considered for counseling vacancies if they are willing to complete the four core rehabilitation courses. DBVI recruits professionals with expertise in vocational rehabilitation and knowledge of visual diagnoses and the implications of visual disability.

DBVI advertises openings through the State recruitment system and through local newspapers, college placement services, and on-line job posting platforms. State personnel policies require DBVI to consider qualified applicants on the Reduction in Force list before other applicants. The state of Vermont is an equal opportunity employer and there is an emphasis on recruiting and hiring individuals with disabilities and minority backgrounds to ensure a diverse staff.

Rehabilitation Associates and Associate Counselors are recruited with a strong preference given to those with bachelor’s degrees and a commitment to blind services. Rehabilitation Associates or Associate Counselors with a bachelor’s degree are encouraged to take the required four CSPD master’s level courses and/or pursue master’s degrees in preparation for retention and promotion. DBVI supports staff members who want to obtain advanced degrees or certifications through flexible work schedules and approved time off.

New staff participate in comprehensive orientation and training that covers information appropriate to serving individuals who have vision loss as well as policy and procedure. Training addresses the implications of vision loss and services such as orientation and mobility, vision rehabilitation, and low vision services. In addition, training and consultation occurs with our rehabilitation technology consultant on an ongoing basis.

DBVI ensures a high standard of qualified personnel with training directed toward an expertise for working with people with visual impairment. DBVI supports staff professional development and provides opportunities for job advancement through a career ladder within the division.

DBVI consistently receives high ratings as a great place to work in Vermont, has professional development opportunities, and offers comprehensive benefit plans that help with the recruitment and retention of qualified employees.

### i. 3. 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

DBVI follows the same standard used by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) to be in compliance with Section 101(a)(7) of the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992. This requires State Vocational Rehabilitation agencies to establish qualified personnel standards for rehabilitation personnel. This addresses the qualifications necessary to meet the highest standards which are required in the State of Vermont. DBVI follows standards set forth in the Comprehensive System for Professional Development (CSPD). This prescribes a national standard for vocational rehabilitation counselor qualifications.

 This standard gives the highest priority to counselors with a master’s degree in rehabilitation counseling and have received certification as a rehabilitation counselor (CRC).

The second level of priority is to hire counselors with master’s degrees in counseling or related fields and are required to take the four core rehabilitation courses to comply with the CSPD requirements.

The third level priority is for DBVI to hire counselors with bachelor’s degrees and support their graduate degree training through the RSA training grant.

Though not required by the Division or RSA, counselors are supported to become Certified Rehabilitation Counselors (CRC).

Presently 100% of DBVI Rehabilitation Counselors meet the CSPD standard.

All new employees are required to attend orientation and DBVI service training provided by staff that covers policy and procedures, the vocational rehabilitation process, effective case management, and all other aspects of vocational rehabilitation services. The Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) staff provides training on vision rehabilitation and orientation and mobility. In addition, new staff are scheduled to meet with the rehabilitation technology specialist to learn about adaptive technology and how it can enhance job opportunities for consumers. They also meet with professionals from VABIR (Vermont Association of Business Rehabilitation and Industry) to learn about job development and placement services.

### i. 3. 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.

DBVI ensures that personnel have a 21st century understanding of the evolving labor force and the needs of individuals with visual impairment through partnership with the Department of Labor (DOL). DBVI is part of the unified plan to meet the requirements of the Workforce Innovation Act (WIOA). Cross training with DOL, DVR and the AOE is designed to address the needs of adults and students with vision impairment.

DBVI staff have completed training on Pathways to Promising Careers. DBVI collaborates with the DOL’s Labor Planning and Youth Employment program managers and has access to resources of the DOL’s 12 regional job centers.

Training is arranged annually for staff to learn about the evolving labor market to assist clients with visual disabilities in their career development. DBVI actively partners with DOL to learn about apprenticeship programs and on-the-job training opportunities for clients to enter higher wage occupations.

DBVI works closely with the Vermont Association of Business Industry and Rehabilitation (VABIR) to learn about and connect with local employers and progressive employment opportunities.

Counselors maintain knowledge of local and regional vocational training and post-secondary educational opportunities that provide training for clients in high demand, high wage, and high growth careers.

### i. 4. A. A system of staff development for professionals and paraprofessionals within the designated State unit, 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

Staff development opportunities are provided regularly throughout the year to ensure staff receive appropriate and adequate training in assessment, vocational counseling, job placement and rehabilitation technology in relation to visual impairment. DBVI’s mission is to “support Vermonters who are blind or visually impaired in their efforts to achieve or sustain their economic independence, self-reliance, and social integration to a level consistent with their interests, abilities, and informed choice”.

Training for counselors focuses on the essentials of a comprehensive vocational assessment through webinars and in-person training. Staff are trained in the administration and interpretation of vocational assessments, both traditional and online. DBVI staff are trained in the Virtual Job Shadow, an interactive career exploration and career planning platform. Skillful interviewing also serves as a form of assessment. DBVI staff receive introductory and advanced training in Motivational Interviewing.

Introductory and advanced Motivational Interviewing training is offered to DBVI staff through DVR. Motivational Interviewing is used by many vocational rehabilitation agencies to effectively engage consumers. It is a person-centered approach with a focus on client choice, self-efficacy, and autonomy. Staff also participate in webinars, seminars, and workshops that provide knowledge and skill development in other vocational counseling approaches.

Staff development related to job placement is provided through various modalities. DBVI staff are actively involved with the State of Vermont regional workforce partner coalitions, a collaboration of Agency of Human Services funded employment programs. These coalitions promote cooperative employer relationships and meet regularly to provide information on job placement and vocational training opportunities for consumers. DBVI staff have access to regional DVR/DBVI funded Business Account Managers that provide knowledge of the local labor market and who connect counselors and clients directly to employers for progressive employment opportunities. DBVI maintains relationships with local, regional and national organizations that provide training and employment for the blind and visually impaired (i.e. NSITE, Accessible Web). These organizations provide staff training on an ongoing basis.

DBVI staff receive annual training on current and emerging technologies for the blind and visually impaired through the DBVI Assistive Technology Consultant, VABVI staff, technology providers, and at the annual technology fair.

Annual training is provided by VABVI’s adult services coordinator and instructor at UMASS Boston to learn about vision diagnoses and how they impact individuals, to increase awareness of functional limitations, and to identify accommodations to enhance visual function.

Every year each DBVI employee meets with the division director to discuss their Individual Development Plan (IDP). Meetings focus on how each employee can contribute to DBVI’s mission, goals, and strategies; improve customer satisfaction; and support policies, philosophy, competencies and future vision. In addition, the purpose of the IDP is to ensure that each DBVI employee receives appropriate and adequate training to meet the professional standards and requirements of their position. Discussions with the DBVI director allow employees an opportunity to identify their career ladder. DBVI staff are given opportunities to take on higher level duties and are encouraged and supported to participate in continued education and training. Increased knowledge and responsibilities can lead to salary increases through step grades as determined by the Director and Department of Human Resources.

DBVI continues to expand vocational services for transition aged students and young adults. DBVI partners with the DVR Transition Program Director; VABVI Teachers of the Visually Impaired; DOL Youth Program Manager; and the AOE Program Coordinator to learn about services that support youth vocational development. DBVI staff provide training on adaptive skill instruction, orientation and mobility, vision rehabilitation and low vision services to agency partners. Collaborative initiatives are developed to provide the Pre-ETS core vocational services for students.

DBVI staff help to create and participate in the annual Statewide Interagency Core Team Event. Counselors are active members of regional Core transition teams and attend meetings and events to network with area transition providers and learn about their services. DBVI counselors are active in attending and providing vision rehabilitation information at IEP team meetings for students ages 14-21.

DBVI has greatly enhanced services for transition age consumers through development of the LEAP program. The program involves DBVI (provider of consumers, funding source), Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (infrastructure, staff), Resource (jobs, staff), Linking Learning to Life (follow-up, e-mentoring), VABVI (independent living and O&M trainings, transition staff) and the Gibney Family Foundation (funding). The LEAP summer residential program provides youth with work-based learning opportunities, employment, community service and independent living skill development in an urban setting. The LEAP program also offers in-person and virtual programming throughout the academic year to provide youth with continued vocational and independent living skill development.

The annual Great Expectations, Voices and Choices for the Future event is a collaborative effort by consumers, DBVI, VABVI, and VABIR. The purpose of this event is to increase employment and job seeking skills, promote positive mentoring, provide networking opportunities, develop self-advocacy and self-reliance, and obtain feedback from clients to improve services. Great Expectations is theme based and consumer driven. The 2022 event was “Reconnecting to the World of Work and Each Other”.

DBVI allows for flexible work schedules, provides training assistance, supports state, regional, national, and online learning opportunities for staff to acquire the knowledge necessary to maintain professional standards. DBVI disseminates information on training opportunities, conferences, professional journals, and online resources. DBVI partners with the DVR Staff Development Training Coordinator to ensure inclusion in professional development opportunities offered within the State of Vermont Learning Management System (SOV LINC).

### i. 4. B. Procedures for the acquisition and dissemination of significant knowledge from research and other sources to designated State unit professionals and paraprofessionals.

DBVI staff regularly participate in training and review current research and publications through the National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision (NRTC) through Mississippi State University.

DBVI uses the C3 management model developed by Robin Lawton. This model supports a strong belief and process for a “Customer Centered Culture”. This method helps DBVI to identify the "voice of the customer". DBVI continues to use the process of assessing customer satisfaction and organizational performance with the knowledge obtained through extensive training and consultation from Robin Lawton. DBVI has incorporated this model of management into service delivery and organizational process. C3 training has been provided to the SRC, VABVI and DBVI staff.

The main dimensions of the model: focus on the customer, eliminate ambiguity, include customer priorities. Empower the end user, define success, reduce ambiguity of language. Link customer and operational priorities. Integrate and leverage existing initiatives, focus on improvement. Address outcomes first, processes last, satisfy strategic objectives as well as operations, improve product knowledge. Emphasize sustainability of new practices and challenge traditional assumptions. Using this model DBVI strives to improve customer satisfaction as we decrease ambiguity and improve communication. C3 provides a method to measure successful outcomes based on the "voice of the customer".

In 2023 DBVI conducted town meetings statewide using C3 to allow a process for hearing the voice of the customer. DBVI collected and analyzed information that will be used in the development of DBVI’s strategic planning and service delivery. C3 training and consultation with Robin Lawton have provided staff with the tools and methodology to improve customer satisfaction and provide a higher level of service.

Using strategies from C3, DBVI created “Your Guide to Employment Services”. The guide is given to consumers during the initial interview and contains customer friendly language that explains who we are, our process, includes client success stories and describes the types of services that a person can expect from participating in the employment program. The guide provides information to increase communication and clarity by using common language. DBVI uses input from customers to ensure information is accessible, comprehensive, empowering, understandable and informative. DBVI continues to develop new tools and enhance the “Guide to Employment Services”.

The DBVI team also uses the Franklin Covey management system. “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” has been incorporated into the DBVI team culture to enhance effectiveness, responsibility, personal growth, and vision. The team approach uses a win-win philosophy, which helps to increase understanding and communication.

Using this both “The 7 Habits of Effective People” and the “Customer Centered Culture” management systems have resulted in teams that are effective in analyzing, improving, and providing services for people who are visually impaired.

The DBVI Division Director meets annually with the four regional teams throughout the state and assistive technology teams to discuss and review DBVI’s mission and vision, annual goals, and accomplishments.

**STAFF INDIVIDUAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**:

**Agency and Division committees**: AWARE Help Desk; AWARE Governance Team Committee; Connections Team Committee; DAIL Merit Committee.

**State committees**: State Rehabilitation Council; Governor’s Committee of Employment for People with Disabilities (GCEPD); Youth Advocacy Council Steering Committee; Interagency Core Team planning committee; Vermont Coalition of Disability Rights, Pathways to Partnership Planning Committee (RSA federal grant).

**Collaboratives**: Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development Advisory Council; Institute for Community Inclusion UMASS, Learning Collaborative; Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD) Learning Collaborative; Customer Satisfaction Workgroup; DAIL Core Competency Pilot.

**Trainings:** Vermont Agency of Human Services Leadership Academy; HIPPA; Diversity; Ethics; Records and Information Management; Civility and Unconscious Bias; Preventing and Addressing Sexual Harassment in the Workplace; Suicide and Vision Loss Training; Understanding ADA; AOE, Assistive Technology training; Blindness and Mental Health Webinar; Pre-ETs Blindness Community of Practice webinar; Communication and Productivity Training; Creating Accessible Documents; DocuSign training.

 **Conferences**: NEAER Conference; Statewide Interagency Core Team Supported Employment Summit; National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB); Youth Advocacy Summit; National Symposium on Rehabilitation Counseling; CAP Training: Diverse Teams – Riding the Roller Coaster of Difference; Performance Evaluation Quality Assurance (PEQA) Conference.

### i. 5. Personnel to Address Individual Communication Needs

*Describe how the designated State unit has personnel or obtains the services of other individuals who 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.*

The Division for the Blind operates under the State of Vermont Agency of Human Services. The Agency of Human Services has a Limited English Proficiency (LEP) policy that provides services to individuals who have limited English speaking ability. This policy applies to all Agency Departments, offices, and employees. The LEP policy provides individuals with language assistance as may be needed to ensure meaningful access to our programs. Departments ensure people seeking services understand which services and benefits are available and how they may access them. The LEP policy information provides resources and links dealing with written, face-to-face and over the phone communication with individuals for whom English is not the primary language. DBVI is able to use an agency contract for phone and written translation of almost any language in the world. DBVI also makes use of Vermont Interpreter Referral Service (VIRS), an online resource to obtain interpreters of ASL for those consumers who are deaf or DeafBlind.

### i. 6. Coordination of Personnel Development Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

*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.*

#### Current Narrative:

DBVI works in partnership with the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE), Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), and the Vermont Department of Labor (DOL). The development of the Unified State Plan ensures compliance with the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA). The plan ensures students with disabilities between the ages of 14-21 receive comprehensive and unduplicated services in the five core Pre-Employment Transition services in job exploration, work-based learning experiences, workplace readiness training, instruction in self-advocacy and planning for post-secondary education or training.

DBVI is a partner on the Regional Core Transition teams in the State of Vermont. DBVI counselors work closely with DVR Youth Transition Counselors, Teachers of the Visually Impaired, VABIR Employment Consultants, DOL Youth Employment Specialists, Secondary school guidance counselors and case managers to ensure that students on IEPs are receiving Pre-Employment Transition Services and participating in activities as required in WIOA.

DBVI provides funding for student participation in the LEAP summer and year-round programming. Students who are visually impaired and at risk can work with counselors through Vermont Jobs Program. Students and their families can also receive advocacy and education through the Vermont Family Network and Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL).

**j. 1. A. With the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment services;**

**Summary Outline of CSNA Methods, Results, Gaps, and Implications for State Plan**

The Rehabilitation Act, as amended in 1998, requires each state to conduct a statewide needs assessment every three years. The current triennial needs assessment is statewide and jointly conducted by The Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC). The activities for the comprehensive statewide needs assessment (CSNA) were completed during calendar year 2021, 2022, 2023. The following summary of the CSNA is being used to develop many of our goals and strategies for PY 2024 and PY 2025.

**Introduction**

The goals of this needs assessment are to determine the vocational rehabilitation needs of individuals in Vermont who are blind or visually impaired.

**Methodology**

Information gathering included the use of:

* Existing disability population statistics including the Cornell Study;
* Disability population estimates from available data including the American Foundation for the Blind;
* Population projections and economic forecasts from federal and state data; Department of Labor projections by state;
* Existing DBVI data, studies and experience; 911 data, type of service, cost, whether people currently served by DBVI are representative of the racial and ethnic minority distribution of people with disabilities within the state; data provided by CRPs; and Counselor input;
* State level statistics from other federal programs; WIOA, IEP, 504, Social Security,
* State and local data and reports;
* Stakeholder input: Surveys, focus groups, SRC meetings, interviews, Vermont Employer Awareness Summit, Customer—Centered Culture Focus Groups, and public hearings.
* Meetings and surveys with the statewide network of Teachers of the Visually Impaired.
* Statewide Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Survey conducted by Market Decisions— The current survey began in December 2021 and the final report will be complete at the end of March 2022. The full results and report will be included in the CSNA for CY 2021-2023.
* Review of Journal of Visual Impairment articles by DBVI staff, 2011 to 2023
* Participants included DBVI Staff, State Rehabilitation Council, Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) Staff, and individuals who are blind or visually impaired from around the state. Dissemination plans included group meetings and individual interviews.
* Research and critical needs identified by Pathways to Partnership Grant lead partners including DBVI, the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, University of Vermont, Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, VCIL, Vermont Family Network, HireAbility and Agency of Education, Federal grant awarded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration October 2023.

**Results**

**Current Population Survey**

**Prevalence Rate**(Disability at the Vermont Population Level): In 2020, the percentage of a man and a woman, aged 18-64 who report a disability in Vermont is 13.7 percent.

**Labor Market Activity Rate:**The percentage of a man and a woman, aged 18-64 with a work limitation in Vermont who worked more than 52 hours in the prior calendar year was 53% in 1981 and 24% in 2014. No current data is available.

**Employment Rate:**  In 2021, the percentage of non-institutionalized Vermonters ages 18-64 years with who were employed full-time/full-year in the previous year was 38.1%.

Erickson, W., Lee, C., VonSchrader, S (2021). Disability Statistics from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute (YTI). Cornell University Disability Statistics website: www.disabilitystatistics.org (Links to an external site.)

**2021 Disability Status Report--Vermont**

**Summary of Overall United States and Vermont Data**

**Age--**In 2021, the prevalence of disability in the United States was:

* 13.0 percent for persons of all ages
* 5.8 percent for persons ages 5 to 15
* 7.6 percent for persons ages 16 to 20
* 10.9 percent for persons ages 21 to 64
* 23.9 percent for persons ages 65 to 74
* 46.1 percent for persons ages 75+

**Age--**In 2021, the prevalence of disability in the Vermont was:

* 13.4 percent for persons of all ages
* 4.4 percent for persons ages 5 to 15
* 12.7 percent for persons ages 16 to 20
* 11.0 percent for persons ages 21 to 64
* 19.5 percent for persons ages 65 to 74
* 43.6 percent for persons ages 75+

**Disability Type--**In 2021, the prevalence of the six disability types among persons of all ages in the United States was:

* 2.5% reported a Visual Disability
* 3.6% reported a Hearing Disability
* 6.6% reported an Ambulatory Disability
* 5.4% reported a Cognitive Disability
* 2.4% reported a Self-Care Disability
* 5.7% reported an Independent Living Disability

**Disability Type--**In 2021, the prevalence of the six disability types among persons of all ages in Vermont was:

* 2.1% reported a Visual Disability
* 4.4% reported a Hearing Disability
* 5.8 % reported an Ambulatory Disability
* 5.6% reported a Cognitive Disability
* 2.2% reported a Self-Care Disability
* 5.7% reported an Independent Living Disability

**Gender -**In 2021, 12.6 percent of females of all ages and 14.3 percent of males of all ages in Vermont reported a disability.

**Hispanic/Latino -** In 2021, the prevalence of disability among persons of all ages of Hispanic or Latino origin in the United States was 10% and the prevalence of disability among persons of all ages of Hispanic or Latino origin in Vermont was 4.7 percent.

**Race -**In 2021, in the United States, the prevalence of disability for working-age people (ages 21 to 64) was:

* 11.1 percent among Whites
* 13.8 percent among Black / African Americans
* 5.0 percent Asian
* 10.3 percent among persons of some other race(s)

**Race--**In 2021, in Vermont, the prevalence of disability for working-age people (ages 21 to 64) was:

* 11.0 percent among Whites
* 9.5 percent among Black /African Americans (Note in 2018 5.6 percent among Black / African Americans )
* 3.6 percent Asian (Note in 2018, 0.8 percent Asian)
* 13.9 percent among persons of some other race(s)

**Populations in Households in Vermont**

Vermont’s population of 643,077 people grew 2.8% over a decade from 2010 to 2020. Content provided by the US Census bureau for 2020.

Census Population Demographics for Vermont. https://www.census.gov

* Ages 15 to 19 = 42,255
* Ages 20 to 24 = 45,692
* Ages 25 to 29 = 37,764
* Ages 30 to 34 = 36,441
* Ages 35 to 39 = 36,243
* Ages 40 to 44 = 34,595
* Ages 45 to 49 = 37,960
* Ages 50 to 54 = 42,625
* Ases 55 to 59 = 47,190
* Ages 60 to 64 = 48,408
* Ages 65 to 69 = 41,633
* Ages 70 to 74 = 31,766

**Number of Individuals who are minorities**

* Total population of Vermont =643,077
* White- 584,360
* Two or More Races=17,135
* Hispanic or Latino=9,208
* Asian=10,126
* Black or African=7.964
* American Indian=1,873
* Another Race=2,677
* Two or More Races= 17,135
* Native Hawaiian=98

**Summary of Visual Disability Data in Vermont**

This CSNA references estimates for working age adults by the US Census bureau as well as data from the American Community Survey which provides us with specific data for visual disability.

**Working Age Adults**

Based on 2021 ACS data, DBVI estimates that there are approximately 4,960 Vermonters of working age (18-74) who are blind or severely visually impaired. DBVI estimates a conservative estimate of total numbers due to preliminary MMIS data review. DBVI provides RSA defined services to approximately 5.6% of these individuals annually (283 in SFY23).

**Visual Disability Total= 13,504. This represents** 2.1% of 643,077 Vermont population

**Ages 18-75 = 4,960**- Vermonters of working age who are blind or visually impaired.

American Community Survey 2021.

**Employment Rate**

In 2021, data from the American Community Survey references the following

employment rates of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 18 to 64) with disabilities in Vermont.

* In 2021, the employment rate of working-age people with disabilities in VT was 38.1 percent.
* In 2021, the employment rate of working-age people without disabilities in VT was 79.4 percent.
* The gap between the employment rates of working-age people with and without disabilities was 41.3 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs--**Employment Rate--Visual Disability

* In 2021, the employment rates of working-age Vermonters with a visual disability, ages 21 to 64, was 26.2%.
* In 2021 the employment rate of working-age Vermonters without disabilities, ages 21 to 64 was 60.6%.
* This illustrates a gap between the employment rates of working age Vermonters with and without a visual disability of 34.4 percentage points.
* In 2021 over half or working-age Vermonters with a visual disability, ages 18 – 64  were not employed in Vermont.
* There is also a specific need to connect individuals with multiple disabilities to the Developmental Disability Agencies to determine eligibility while students are still in high school. Vermont rules require that students meet the disability eligibility requirement and have a job before leaving high school to qualify for the waiver. DBVI staff work closely with IEP teams to make sure students with multiple disabilities are assessed for Developments Services eligibility while in high school. DBVI has recently underspent funds for student supported employment because of the efforts to connect high school students directly with the Designated agencies. This is an effective strategy to meet the supported employment needs of eligible students on the DBVI caseload.

**Not Working but Actively Looking for Work**

The percentage of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities in Vermont who are not working but actively looking for work.

* In 2021 in Vermont, the percentage of working-age people with disabilities who were not working but actively looking for work was 8.2 percent.
* In 2021 in Vermont, the percentage of working-age people without disabilities who were not working but actively looking for work was 16.8 percent.
* The difference in the percentage of not working but actively looking for work between working-age people with and without disabilities was 8.6 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs--**Not Working but Actively Looking for Work--Visual Disability

* In 2021, the percentage of working-age Vermonters with a visual disability who were not working but actively looking for work was 1.0 percent.
* The percentage of working-age Vermonters without disabilities who were not working but actively looking for work was 14.8 percent in the same year.
* The difference in the percentage of not working but actively looking for work between working-age Vermonters with a visual disability and without disabilities was 13.8 percentage points.
* **Caution:** Estimate based on small sample size (less than 40 individuals).

**Working Full-Time/Full-Year**

This section presents the percentage of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities working full-time/full-year in Vermont.

* In 2021, the percentage of working-age people with disabilities working full-time/full-year in Vermont was 18.8 percent.
* In 2021, the percentage of working-age people without disabilities working full-time/full-year in Vermont was 60.6 percent.
* The difference in the percentage working full-time/full-year between working-age people with and without disabilities was 41.8 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs: Working Full-Time/Full-Year: -Visual Disability**

* In 2021, the percentage of working-age people with a visual disability working full-time/full-year in Vermont was 26.2 percent, and the percentage working full-time/full-year without disabilities was 60.6%.
* This marks a difference in the percentage working full-time/full-year between working-age Vermonters with a visual disability and without disabilities of 34.4 percentage points.

**Annual Earnings**

The median annual earnings of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities who work full-time/full-year in Vermont.

* In 2021, the median earnings of working-age people with disabilities who worked full-time/full-year in VT was $46,300.
* In 2021, the median earnings of working-age people without disabilities who worked full-time/full-year in VT was $53,600.
* The difference in the median earnings between working-age Vermonters with and without disabilities who worked full-time/full-year was $7,300 annually.

**Gap and Needs--**Annual Earning--Visual Disability

* The difference in the median earnings between working-age people with a visual disability earned $40,500 and people without a disability earned $53,600 showing that people with a visual disability earned $7,100 less annually than people without a disability.

\*Caution: Estimates for visual disability is based on a very small sample size (less than 40 individuals).

**Poverty**

The poverty rates of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities in Vermont.

* In 2021, the poverty rate of working-age people with disabilities in VT was 32.4 percent.
* In 2021, the poverty rate of working-age people without disabilities in VT was 8.4 percent.
* In 2021, the difference in the poverty rate between working-age people with and without disabilities was 24 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs—**Poverty—Visual Disability

* In 2021, the difference in the poverty rate between working-age people with a visual disability (10.6%) and without disabilities (8.4%) was 2.2 percentage points
* In 2021, approximately 1,934 out of 4,960 people with a visual disability who are working age live in poverty in Vermont.
* In 2021, the percentage of non-institutionalized persons ages 21-64 years with visual disability, in the Vermont who were living below the poverty line in 2021 was 39 percent.

**Education Level**

* In 2021, in Vermont, age 21 to 64 years with a visual disability have an educational attainment of less than high school education = 656 (19.2% of 3,365)
* In 2021, in Vermont, age 21 to 64 years with a visual disability with a high school diploma or equivalent = 972 (28.9% of 3,365)
* In 2021 in Vermont age 21 to 64 with a visual disability with some college/associates degree = 892 (26.5% of 3,365)
* College Bachelor Degree or higher = 854 (25.4% of 3,365)

**Gap and Needs—**Education Level--Visual Disability

* The majority of individuals with a visual disability do not get a college degree.

**United States and Vermont Data –**

* Vermont DBVI met with Data Analyst from Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living and reviewed empirical data from researchers Flaxman, A. D. et al. 2021, in JAMA Ophthalmology.
* In the United States, recent empirical data from the Vision and Eye Health Surveillance System from the CDC suggest higher estimates of vision loss and blindness than were previously reported (Flaxman, A. D, et al. 2021).
* In the United States, consensus of definition of blindness and vision loss in youth and adult populations is needed to identify the scope of needs and to promote specific models (Flaxman, A.D, et al. 2021).
* In Vermont, DBVI will continue to work with Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living, Data Analyst to review empirical data and refine MMIS data for youth and older blind populations at the Medicaid claims level among other data sets.

Flaxman, A. D., Wittenborn, J. S., Robalik, T., Gulia, R., Gerzoff, R. B., Lundeen, E., Saaddine, J., & Rein, D. B. (2021).*Prevalence of Visual Acuity Loss or Blindness in the United States: A Bayesian Meta-analysis.* JAMA Opthalmology.

**Vermont MMIS Data –**

In July 2021, DBVI obtained Vermont MMIS Data for Annual Needs Assessment and Reporting.DBVI consultations with Data Analyst, Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living (DAIL).

**Report Description:** This report includes data aggregated from the Vermont Medicaid Management Information System (MMIS) examining Vermont Medicaid claims with the primary diagnosis of one of five vision related disorders as defined by the ICD-10 criteria. Data in this report include claims with beginning dates of service from 07/01/2020 to 06/30/2021.

**Data Analysis Information:** Data were extracted from Gainwell’s Claims Analysis View Universes using the web-based Business Intelligence tool (WebBI) on 11/24/2021 by Leslie C. Johnson. Limiting parameters for all data extracts include:

1. Dates of Service: 07/01/2020 to 06/30/2021
2. Claim Status: 6 (paid claims)
3. Recipient Date of Birth: less than or equal to 07/01/2006
4. Provider Address Type: 04 (physical address)
5. Diagnosis Codes: ICD-10 codes for primary diagnostic categories of Age-Related Macular Degeneration, Glaucoma, Diabetic Retinopathy, Cataract, Amblyopia/Strabismus, Refractive Errors, and Low Vision/Blindness (excluding diagnosis with one “normal vision” eye)
* **Data Analysis Information:** Data were extracted from Gainwell’s Claims Analysis View Universes
* **Data Analysis Method:** Raw data were aggregated using IBM’s SPSS. Resulting analyses on pages 2-5 of the report show the number of total unique people for whom claims were submitted with primary diagnoses in the categories indicated at the state and county-levels. Cell sizes of less than 11 people are denoted as "<11" per CMS federal reporting guidelines.

**Diagnoses Identified as Top Associated with DBVI Programs/Services:**

* **Primary Diagnosis** of Age-Related Macular Degeneration, Glaucoma, Diabetic Retinopathy, Cataract, or Low/Vision Blindness: TotalUnique People=5686
* **Primary Diagnosis** of Refractive Errors: Total Unique People=12254
* **Primary Diagnosis** of Low Vision (both eyes affected): Total Unique People 173

**Customer Satisfaction Data—Key Findings and Discussion**

**Statewide Survey**

Market Decision Research has been working with DBVI for over a decade to conduct its tri-annual customer satisfaction survey. The VT DBVI Consumer Satisfaction Survey is designed to allow consumers the opportunity to provide feedback about the services they are currently receiving or received in the past. The survey instrument for this research was developed jointly between the Vermont Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired and Market Decisions Research. It is based on question topics that Market Decisions Research has used in conducting satisfaction research among Vocational Rehabilitation consumers in six states. It was modified to capture additional details and reflect services as they’re provided under DBVI’s current hybrid remote/in-person service model.

The current survey began in December 2021 and the final report was made available in March 2022. The original plan was to have the survey conducted in CY 2020, however, there were delays due to the timing of Covid-19. Many DBVI consumers were socially isolated during this time period and the decision was made to postpone the survey until 2021.

Positive survey trends:

 Survey results are generally consistent with 2017 and prior years, but some areas saw notable improvements:

* 97% of VT DBVI consumers report overall satisfaction; the highest rate on record (up from 92% in 2017).
* 97% felt that staff treated them with dignity and respect (up from a low of 95% in 2017).
* 93% report that services met their expectations (continuing a slight upward trend seen in prior years).
* 96% said that staff were helped to achieve their DBVI goals (up from 94% in 2017).
* 91% felt that the services they received helped them become more independent (up from 88% in 2017).

 Areas to watch:

 Some survey items saw notable declines in 2021:

* 88% were satisfied with choice of available services (down from 92% in 2017 and 96% in 2015).
* 15% report experiencing a problem with VT DBVI services (up from 11% in 2017 and 8% in 2015).
* 56% of those who experienced a problem report the problem was resolved (down from 59% in 2017 and 82% in 2015).

 The survey results do not identify any areas of immediate concern or critical need for improvement. According to the consumers of VT DBVI, their services meet expectations and are highly satisfactory. The most positive areas of experience, according to consumers, are:

* Likelihood to recommend VT DBVI
* Experience with DBVI Staff and Counselors
* Communications with DBVI Staff
* Experience with Services Provided by DBVI
* Outcomes and Meeting Goals
* Accessibility of the DBVI office

Focus Groups:

 Market Decisions Research worked with VT DBVI in 2021 to conduct a series of focus groups with DBVI staff, teachers of the visually impaired (TVIs), and members from the Vermont Rehabilitation Council. Three focus groups, each lasting approximately two hours, were conducted on December 16, 2021, January 7, 2022, and January 14, 2022. The groups were facilitated using Microsoft Teams. Each group was recorded and transcribed for analysis. These groups were conducted with the goal of exploring in detail barriers to services, communication topics, personal experience with DBVI, and what tools or services are needed in the future for consumers. Key findings include:

* Key Finding 1 – Communication: All groups agree the top qualities of strong client communication are partnership, individualization, consistency, and flexibility. Participants believe counselors and staff are adaptable with each client and the COVID-19 pandemic has created positive opportunities for new types of communication.
* Key Finding 2 – Barriers: The most common barriers to DBVI services are acceptance of disability, lack of public transportation, access to information, knowing where to start, awareness from the public, and stigmas associated with disabilities.
* Key Finding 3 – Tools and Needs: The most pressing needs talked about in the groups were transportation solutions, apprenticeship opportunities, mentoring, and DBVI working within the community.
* Key Finding 4 – Technology: Many agree that since the beginning of COVID-19, there have been new and exciting technology opportunities. Each group discussed the need for more education for clients regarding assistive and mainstream technology.
* Key Finding 5 – Client Motivation: The Council group say even though there are barriers, clients work hard and once they are ready, they work to the fullest capability. DBVI staff and TVI groups believe there are many reasons clients and students are not trying their best, including fear of losing benefits, insecurities in personal capabilities, negative past experiences with former employers, and enablement from family and the education system.

These survey results were presented to the State Rehabilitation Council at the June 2023 SRC Full Council & DBVI Annual Meeting. Following this presentation, Porter Knight from Productivity Vermont conducted a workshop on Communications & Customer Service. The focus was on productive communication as a relational skill, emphasizing the management of brain performance and personal commitments. Participants learned strategies to enhance customer service and build stronger connections. Key takeaways included the importance of letting go of attachment for prefrontal cortex development, the equation for happiness (connection + contribution - attachment), and the benefits of improved cognition through practicing attention, exemplified by meditation. Practical tools for effective list management, such as using action verbs and scheduling tasks on the calendar, were highlighted. Additionally, the workshop advised resisting constant email checking, emphasizing scheduling specific time for sorting and responding. Lastly, fluid task transitions were recommended for roles requiring diverse responsibilities. DBVI Leadership aligned the presentation with the core principles of customer service, emphasizing the importance of fostering meaningful connections and actively listening to better comprehend consumer needs.

**Pre—Employment Transition Skills Planning**

**Includes:**

* Statewide Survey of all Teachers of the Visually Impaired.
* Statewide survey sent to all students.
* Data-Mapping of Child Count data.
* Calculation of current Pre-ETS Expenditures and Forecasting of future needs.

**Statewide Survey of all Teachers of the Visually Impaired in Vermont—Survey Results December 13th 2023.**

What needs do your students have in job exploration counseling?

Most Common Responses:

* Being exposed to a variety of job options
* Self-determination/advocacy skills
* Understanding how assistive technology devices and software applies to jobs
* an understanding of realistic job consequences.
* Job development skills that include resume development, interested inventories, job shadows, interviewing, and job shadows.
* More education around jobs: understanding of responsibilities and skills needed.
* Exploration of customized employment and supported employed options.

Key needs:

* “Transition aged students would benefit from job exploration counseling that profiles jobs and careers which adult DBVI clients have chosen and been successful in. Highlighting the vocational supports and strategies that helped them realize their goals would be a helpful illustration of what is possible when students access resources available to them”

In your experience, what skills do students need to be prepared for work experiences?

Most Common Responses:

* Problem solving skills
* Interpersonal skills
* Assistive technology skills
* Time management
* Organization skills
* Realistic expectations
* Social skills
* Self-advocacy skills

Key Needs

* “While certainly not needing comprehensive skills, students should be conversant with assistive technology experience as it relates to their vision needs. this includes basic end user computer skills. Oral and written communication skills are an important element for continued growth in interpersonal and social skills as they relate to the world of work, whether peer-to-peer co-worker relationships and customer relations.”

How are your students' strengths and weaknesses currently assessed in the area of work-basedlearning?

Most Common Responses:

* Observation by professionals
* LEAP and DBVI programs provide this information.
* Unclear.

Key Needs:

* “Strengths and areas of need are assessed through skills based inventories and anecdotal evidence provided by educational and pre-vocational service providers and support staff. Observations made by TVI visits also augment these assessments.”

What would help your students learn more about post-secondary options? Is there anything DBVI could do in order to help?

Most Common Responses:

* Provide more exposure and education around the various options.
* Resources with lists of different careers, tech programs, colleges, etc.
* Tours of local colleges, assistance with applications, and workplace visits
* More action around hand on experience with job shadows, interviewing, work-based learning.

Key Needs:

* “Escorting transition-aged clients to career and college fairs to facilitate access to such community events. Providing guidance on DBVI client ideas and impressions, plus providing reflective feedback to help clients crystallize and prioritize short term objectives and long-term goals could be of critical support.”

What skills do your students need to be prepared for post-secondary education?

Most Common Responses:

* Self-advocacy skills
* Technology skills
* Organization and time management skills
* Confidence building opportunities
* Work together with support team

Key Needs:

* “Similar to work-based needs, Awareness of and use of assistive technology solutions, solid communication skills, time and personal management skills, interpersonal and social skills. Certainly if attending centers of post-secondary education away from home and natural supports then Orientation & Mobility skills, transportation access skills and self-care & personal hygiene skills will be paramount.”

What do your students need to get ready for employment?

Most Common Responses:

* Socialization
* Hands on experiences
* Explore more job opportunities and work based learning experiences in multiple areas of work.
* Time management
* Technology skills
* Support employment options and exploration.

What job readiness skills do you think your students need to succeed in the workplace?

Most Common Responses:

* Supported employment and customized employment options
* Understanding of daily living skills in order to become employed.
* Time management skills
* Organization skills
* Technology skills
* Self-motivation
* Social skills

Key needs:

* “Job readiness would be closely related work readiness prerequisite skills. In addition to those being prepared and open to job training would be constructive. Being a team player and goal orientated are real difference makers. A conscientious and punctual manner go a long way towards encouraging employers to invest in and retain their hires.”

Is there anything you would like to see DBVI do with self-advocacy services?

Most Common Responses:

* Develop skills for finding student’s interests and jobs that are relatable
* Create a system that supports students with multiple impairments to have meaningful work experience
* This is a challenge for most students
* Connect with outside resources such as Green Mountain Self-Advocates

Key Needs:

* Yes, the need to review, understand and demonstrate the 12 self-advocacy skills for adults found at this link [https://theabilitytoolbox.com/self-advocacy- skills-disability-chronic-illness/](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hEMYx12kK7O_h-QvJWmG4-7Mbw0Nk53j/view)

What services have been successful for your students? Why?

Most Common Responses:

* Technology at home
* Group living and employment model
* LEAP
* Job exploration that provides an opportunity to explore various types of employment
* Work-based learning experiences with ReSOURCE and Overlook Café.

Key Needs:

* “Arranged job shadowing and work experiences make a positive impact on transition-aged clients. Active facilitation in connecting VABVI/DBVI clients with prospective employers or providers of post-secondary education can help bridge challenges like a digital divide, an absence of structured family supports and having access to a counselor outside of the educational system and specifically versed in visual impairments and disabilities in general are valuable supports. Having access to funding streams and programs orientated towards individuals who are blind or visually impaired are vital for leveling the employment and training landscape.”

Where are there gaps in services?

Most Common Responses:

* More exposure to workplace visits
* Big gap in services for students with complex needs
* Transportation throughout the state of Vermont
* Student’s schedule does not allow for more time to explore jobs
* Low expectations from school and family
* Not mandating the parents to have DBVI involved in their child’s life
* Students are not prepared for after they graduate high school.

Key Needs:

* “More emphasis on access to affordable and reliable personal transportation seems to be a widespread challenge at times in spite of one’s socio-economic status. Additional recreational & leisure opportunities are always welcome. Having standing “check-ins” with one’s DBVI counselor might afford better assessment of how the milestones of transition-aged student’s journey are being met as they progress from their early teenage years to adulthood in post-secondary life.”

**Pre- Employment Transition- Survey Results from Students- December, 2023**

Youth Ages: 14-24

What are you most successful at school (high school or college) for you? Select up to 3

* 61% selected- Navigating the building and/or campus
* 61% selected- Academics (communicating w/ teachers, learning about new ideas, completing assignments and projects, attending class, etc.)
* 56% selected- Socializing with peers
* 44% selected- Advocating for use of accommodations
* 33% selected- Using assistive technology

What is the most difficult part of school (high school or college) for you? Select up to 3.

* 22% selected- Navigating the building and/or campus
* 11% selected- Academics (communicating w/ teachers, learning about new ideas, completing assignments and projects, attending class, etc.)
* 33% selected- Socializing with peers
* 33% selected- Advocating for use of accommodations
* 33% selected- Using assistive technology

Why is the above selection the most difficult part of school for you?

* Struggles to understand content
* I don't use a lot of assistive technology - I haven't found a lot of need for it. Typically when I'm in science class (chemistry) and doing labs I sometimes need to identify colors which is challenging as I'm color blind. I sometimes use a digital magnifier
* I would say in order to receive your accommodation you need to advocate for yourself. If not you will not get what you need.
* I don’t really start conversations with my peers on my own. I usually wait for someone else to start the conversation or ask me something.
* It was the most difficult for me because my aid left me behind half of the time and u would have to make my way there my self through the crowd
* Working on school work and work itself makes me focused enough to get my work done and not really socialize.
* My school building has over 2500 students and everywhere is congested during passing times so it can be kind of hazardous for me to get around with all those people. As for social things I’m not the best at socializing because I usually have trouble thinking of what to say to people, especially when I can’t see them or find them in my crowded school.
* I have trouble talking with people.
* I have social anxiety and generalized anxiety, so doing stuff like that just causes a lot of it for me.
* Depends on the amount of work received, time management with completing assignments
* I'm not exactly sure why this is, but I am generally lacking in navigation skills, especially in unfamiliar or not-very-familiar places.
* The other stuff listed above include my strengths because they are more impactful to doing well in school but it is harder to practice skills consistently that you won’t be using right away all of the time. It is hard to prioritize between different things to work on, and then I may regress in one area if I take a break from one thing to work on another.
* Because sometimes it is hard to ask for help
* I don't have the confidence to do advocate for accommodations completely on my own and learning new ideas is difficult because I do not understand the new content until we get further into it.
* I sometimes don't have anyone to teach me how to use these technologies.
* None of these things are of a difficulty to me at school.
* Rely on teacher to advocate for him
* I would say these things are difficult for me because if I was in a college setting I would probably get lost and get very lost especially in a bigger setting. I would ask for help but, I have hard time advocating for myself. I would try and use my cane if needed or have a friend help me to classes and anywhere I need to go. When I was in high school it was a small school so I knew how to get around pretty good. I am very shy so I have a hard time interacting with other peers. They would probably have to start the conversation.

How would you rate your social confidence? (5 being very confident, 1 being not confident at all)

* 0% selected- Not confident at all -- you do not seek out meeting new people, you do not express interest in others, you have difficulty speaking clearly and at an appropriate volume and pace, you do not seek out social situations: 0%
* 11% selected- 2
* 50% selected- 3
* 28% selected- 4
* 11% selected- 5 Very confident -- you seek out meeting new people, you express interest in others, you speak clearly and at an appropriate volume and pace, you seek out social situations.

Please select as many post-secondary education options as you are interested in.

* 67% selected- College (associates degree, undergraduate degree)
* 5% selected- Technical school
* 11% selected- Apprenticeships
* 17% selected- Graduate school (after undergrad)
* 28% selected- None of the above

If you are interested in attending college, what kind of experience would you be most interested in having?

* 11% selected- Commuting to campus
* 66% selected- Living on campus
* 17% selected- Attending online classes
* 17% selected- N/A -- Not interested in college

What would help you achieve the above college experience? Please select as many as apply.

* 56% selected- Mobility
* 28% selected- Assistive Technology Instruction
* 61% selected- Independent Living Skills Instruction (time management, etc.)
* 50% selected- College Readiness Workshops (connecting with accommodations office, disclosing your disability, etc.)
* 28% selected- N/A -- Not interested in College

What is the most important thing to you at this moment of your life? Select up to 3.

* 44% selected- Health: Being active, cooking healthy meals, trying new activities
* 61% selected- Social Life: spending time with family and friends, participating in extracurricular activities, meeting new people
* 50% selected- Employment: Making money, gaining work experience, building a resume, job exploration, etc.
* 78% selected- School: Getting good grades, attending classes, searching and applying for post-secondary education options
* 50% selected- Independence: Making decisions, traveling independently, time management

Why is the above the most important thing to you at this moment in life?

* Getting through high school and graduating is most important
* I want to go to college where there is good public transportation, so independence is a priority for me. School is important to me because I like learning and I want to go to college. I go to a school where the teachers a very chill so I like school.
* All of them are very important for me. Having a disability has its ups and downs but I will challenge myself to be independent and successful in life.
* I want to increase my level of health, socialization and independence so I can grow and be proud of my accomplishments.
* I would like to make some friends and earn some money
* These choices are important to me because I would like to have control over what I do to have a better future.
* Right now I’m doing very well in school and making money from some jobs which gives me a lot more independence to do things for myself.
* School because i want good grades and graduation.
* I am almost a legal adult, so I would like to get a job to support myself. I need to do well in school to get that job. I also want to be fairly independent, not always relying on others.
* Has been able to overcome challenges and attends college. Has great people to support her, and loves her family and friends.
* School is my #1 priority right now. It's perhaps the most important thing I can do well right now to ensure a positive future for myself. Staying in good health is extremely important in that respect too. Also, I'm getting close to becoming an adult and so I need to start figuring out how to do things on my own, so independence is key as well.
* They are all important, but getting good grades while remaining well rounded will show colleges that I should be accepted for my high school achievements. Having these hard skills outlined will show that I must have good soft skills as well to obtain the opportunities I have.
* They are life goals and like to try new things
* I want to make sure that I am getting good grades in order to graduate and that I am staying active. I met new friends at the Carroll Center for the Blind this past summer and at the recent BESB weekend retreat. I spend lots of time with my family on the weekends. I am a part of the Interact club at Bristol Central and I also manage the girls basketball and volleyball team there.
* I want to have a good balance in life and be able to excel in multiple areas of life.
* Because I believe that the main priority is to graduate high school to open new job opportunities.
* Enjoys sports and wants to finish up high school and move on
* I chose these things because at the beginning of this year I was told I have type two diabetes.. So I want to try and do more for myself and feel and be more healthy. I want to be able to control it one day and not take any more shots and not worry about it. I also want to spend as much time with my family and friends, do new things together, go on new adventures together. I also want to be more independent and travel new places as I go on with my life.

What do you enjoy most about your life at this moment? Be specific.

* English class, reading an interesting book in class.
* Currently, my school life is going really well. I'm about to go to London to travel, and I have good grades right now.
* Being and spending time with my family. Study so I can have a future career. I am focus on my studies because it is important for me and my future family. Travel the world is something I would love for my future. Discovering new places, culture and tradition is something I would love to experience.
* I enjoy the fact that I have people that care about me and want what’s best for me.
* I love my family and love being with them
* I enjoy the liberty I have and the different choices I could make.
* Right now I most enjoy having more free time to do things that are important to me. Last year I did a lot of things during the week outside of school and was always busy but this year has been more calm and I have been able to do other things with my time.
* My family because i love spending time with my family
* My GF. She is the most wonderful person I have ever met.
* Being able to navigate and live in the city. Experiencing independence.
* I very much enjoy taking taekwondo classes, and I also love working at the local library in my town and planning for the future.
* I enjoy how my life is well rounded and I’m in control of it more. I enjoy taking classes that I am enjoying more this year and applying to colleges which is a fun but crazy journey. On the weekends, I enjoy spending time with my friends and family while taking advantage of work or other social opportunities.
* Working for LEAP
* I enjoy hanging out with my friends at school during lunch and hanging out with my family.
* I enjoy being able to make meaningful connections with people through work, school and life.
* I enjoy socializing with new people and making new friends.
* Sports- playing and watching sports
* I enjoy having my own apartment and making it my own space. I enjoy getting to work with my TVI and O&M people. I enjoy working with my best friend and doing services done with her, being able to have someone take me places I need to go. I enjoy spending time with my family, friends, doggies, and my cat. I love going new adventures. These are some of the things I enjoy in my life tiht now.

Share about the best work experience you have ever had. Why was it the best?

* Getting to meet new people at ReSOURCE through LEAP
* The Overlook Cafe because it was an accessible workplace. Not every cafe I might work at will have those sets of accommodations for a blind person.
* Working as a camp counselor with kids that are age 6 and 7. This was my first ever job and I loved it. Taking the leadership role is extremely important to lead the little ones and teach them.
* I think the best work experience I had was LEAP and how it helped me connect me with other visually impaired students.
* I loved working for leap it was fun earning money and making a new friend
* The best work experience I've had, other than volunteering at church, is working with my peers at LEAP. Virtually, the work environment feels unique. It's can be a low energy day and still you'll feel good about learning, working, and socializing with others.
* The best work experience I have had was when I tutored a younger girl in Algebra because I helped her get better grades and made a very high hourly rate for my work.
* In person work because i like meeting new people.
* Working at resource, in the tech area. I really enjoy tinkering and testing it.
* Working at the Overlook Cafe because she enjoys cooking and is able to develop her communication and cooking skills.
* I would have to say working at the library. The work is interesting without being stressful, and the rest of the library staff is really supportive and quick to answer any questions.
* It has to be the LEAP program this summer. This was great to explore three workplaces in one including the cafe, thrift store and gardens while just being supported enough but not too much. Also, we got a sense of what it was like to live in college with dorms and doing leisure activities on the weekends.
* I really like all the work experiences because I learn new things
* I worked at the Bristol Boys and Girls Club at Cambridge park as a Youth Development Professional through the United Way Walsh Summer Work Experience Program. It was the best because I got to meet the kids, do story time and games with them, and join their activities!
* I really like the marketing summer program. It was the best because it helped me to be able to gain skills about marketing while also getting to use my creative side. The pace of the program was also great.
* Pro rally going on a trip across the country in an Rv with my family because it really gave me a time to spend with family.

Share about the best LEAP/DBVI Program you have participated in. Why was it the best?

* Spring retreat 2023, liked the escape room, fun to do something new and exciting
* I liked working at the Overlook because I enjoyed cooking. Learning how to make a burrito has come in really handy during E-Week at my school, where we go away for a week and do something totally different.
* I have not attended any because I live in Connecticut.
* I think I’ve liked all of what LEAP had to offer for me.
* It was the best because I made a new friend
* The best LEAP program I've attended would have to be their Content Creation session. I've learned about slogans, calls to action, and different marketing tactics also.
* My favorite LEAP program was the fall program because it was more in my skill set than the summer program and I liked making money by learning even while school was going on.
* The Fall retreat because it was nice seeing people i know.
* My 3-week work experience when I stayed at the college. It was fun living with people like me.
* Winter ski retreat because she "gets to show off her sweet snowboarding skills". helps her practice for the special Olympics.
* The AT program! Partly because it's the only one I've been in, but mostly because I learned so much and was blessed with awesome coworkers and very supportive supervisors.
* I partially answered this in the above question but I will elaborate. There is nothing like being in person for 3 weeks this summer which was just long enough to be meaningful but not take too much of my summer up by preventing me from other exploration. I also enjoyed starting a network for myself of students who have similar lived experiences that I do. I enjoyed the virtual program this fall but we were not able to do as much as the summer in the same amount of time due to uncontrollable time restrictions in addition to the fact that we were on Zoom for most programming.
* In all of them, I always learn something new
* The LEAP Work-Based Learning experience was the best. I got to learn about assistive technology and how to create a campaign!
* The regular work program was great. I think it was the best because it helped me build leadership skills while also helping me to collaborate with people more efficiently.
* All of them were the best because they taught me new things.
* LEAP robotics retreat
* I would say the best LEAP program was when I attended in the summertime. It was great getting to meet new people, do fun things like go saili, biking, going to a baseball game, going to the beach, working at a work site, and living independent, things like that.

What is the most difficult for you to accomplish at this moment in your life? Select up to 3.

* 33% selected- Health: Being active, cooking healthy meals, trying new activities
* 22% selected- Social Life: spending time with family and friends, participating in extracurricular activities, meeting new people
* 50% selected- Employment: Making money, gaining work experience, building a resume, job exploration, etc.
* 11% selected- School: Getting good grades, attending classes, searching, and applying for post-secondary education options
* 33% selected- Independence: Making decisions, traveling independently, time management

Why is the above the most difficult for you to accomplish at this moment in your life?

* Not great at working out
* Employment because my school and homework schedule doesn't really allow for me to have a job after school and on weekends - I don't have time.
* With being a full time student at college it affects my work lifestyle. Due to me not having a license or a car.
* I don’t currently have a job. But I hope to work sometime in the future. I also hope to have the skills I need to be as independent as possible
* Independence. Il like to be able to get out and go places by my self.
* It's not overly difficult but definitely needs slight tuning so I could be more productive.
* I am not the best socially as I said above. I am trying to improve my health by exercising but I do have rather poor eating habits sometimes.
* I'm not good with independence.
* Anxiety, as I said above, and struggling with motivation.
* She is currently doing a work experience, but wants to explore possible careers for the future.
* I have little to no experience navigating and living independently. Making decisions for myself is rather difficult for me as well.
* It’s a domino effect. By not having transportation, this makes my parents and others who are sighted more part of the process then I want them to be because this enables unwanted involvement not only getting to the locations but then the experiences that are more stationary.
* Sometimes it is hard to get motivated
* I have not been successfully able to search for a job on my own yet. I am not completely independent with traveling. I sometimes take longer than I should to get ready for the day.
* School takes up a lot of time so sometimes those things go on the back burner.
* There is nothing I can’t accomplish in life.
* Finishing work on time, time management, trying to navigate Jaws
* I would say the reason some of these are difficult for me is because it’s hard being a type two diabetic, it’s hard to loose weight and make sure your eating and controlling your sugar levels. It’s also hard finding a job where I live in such a small community. It’s also hard not knowing what I want to do for a job and a future career.

What are you most excited about for your future? Please select as many as apply.

* 50% selected- Going to college
* 0% selected- Going to trade/technical school
* 61% selected- Having a job
* 44% selected- Living on your own or with roommates
* 44% selected- Traveling
* 11% selected- Getting a guide dog

Which programs would you be most excited to participate in? Choose up to 4

* 67% selected- In-person work experience
* 78% selected- Virtual work experience
* 67% selected- Career/interest assessments
* 61% selected- Job Readiness training workshops (Skill Shops)
* 28% selected- Orientation & Mobility Instruction
* 50% selected- Assistive Technology Instruction

Gaps and Needs—Students

* The student survey shows the continues need for the LEAP program. The goals of LEAP help students with all of the areas identified in their self-assessment. They have identified a need to build confidence in order to prepare and compete for future employment. They identified the need for pre-employment skills training and work experiences. They express a desire to live independently and to have employment, recreation, and a social life. There are many quotes from students that share how LEAP has helped prepare them for all of these goals.

**Consumer-Driven Event (Great Expectations—April 2023)**

DBVI hosted a statewide Technology Fair and educational sessions in Montpelier on April 14, 2023. Participants attended from all areas of the state and included people who are blind or low vision of all ages. The theme was “Reconnecting to the World of Work and Each Other.”

The day began with a [keynote address](http://www.dbvi.vermont.gov/) from an ultra-marathon runner from Boston named, Kyle Robidoux. He is currently employed in the Boston Mayor’s office as the Assistant Director of Housing Stability. He has successfully completed five 100 mile ultra-marathons and nine Boston Marathons. His talk was very inspiring and included details about how he uses sighted guides as he competes as a runner who is blind. He also explained how goal setting and perseverance are skills he uses for marathon running and in his role as an employee for the city of Boston.

The keynote was followed by two educational sessions and time for hands-on demonstrations of assistive technology at the Tech Fair exhibit. The first educational session included a discussion from panelists who are blind talking about their employment experiences and sharing information about how they adapt to blindness in the workplace. The second session included roundtable discussions  about “Connecting with the Ever-evolving Virtual World.” This issue is critical for people who are blind and has created some great opportunities for virtually connecting with family and co-workers and minimizing the need for extensive travel. The discussion also included the importance of connecting in-person to limit isolation which is a concern for many blind Vermonters.

The Tech Fair was open between the sessions and included many of the leading assistive technology providers in the New England area. Participants had the opportunity to experience product demos and hands-on tryout of the technology. The [OrCam](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1s8hWGBelE4zCk2hUIefTlYAxt1cB1GBl/view?cq_src=google_ads&cq_cmp=316600907&cq_term=orcam&cq_plac=&cq_net=o&cq_plt=gp&hsa_acc=5047145566&hsa_cam=9717579994&hsa_grp=1358996779065114&hsa_ad=&hsa_src=o&hsa_tgt=kwd-84938064505860:loc-190&hsa_kw=orcam&hsa_mt=e&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&msclkid=7bc69971b2321281ca50fd4cecd12dab&utm_source=bing&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=Read_Bing_US_Branded&utm_term=orcam&utm_content=Read) is exciting new assistive technology that got a lot of attention. The product uses Artificial Intelligence to read documents and identify objects to assist people who are blind.

The blind high school students stayed the rest of the weekend in the Montpelier area to learn job readiness skills. They also took a tour of the statehouse and visited local businesses. These students are part of DBVI’s [Learn, Earn, and Prosper](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221120265) (LEAP) program which is a Pre-employment Transition program.

**Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD)**

Currently there are a low number of participants who are blind or visually impaired enrolled in apprenticeship programs at a national level. There are many reasons and DBVI is committed to finding opportunities and a pathway forward.

On September 28-29, DBVI staff participated in a Learning Collaborative to promote apprenticeship opportunities for youth who are blind or visually impaired. The Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development Project (RYAD) hosted its first in-person partnership meeting. The project promotes the development and advancement of apprenticeship programs for youth with disabilities in underserved rural communities. The five participating state disability agencies and partners shared updates and implementation strategies. They also shared ideas about how to identify and engage key partners and support employers and youth through the apprenticeship process. The DBVI Team meets monthly with RYAD staff from UMass Boston for technical assistance and guidance for implementing our strategic plan for youth apprenticeship opportunities. Each month a list of action items is developed to move the initiatives forward. Apprenticeship opportunities has been identified by DBVI staff and the SRC as a need and priority.

**Recent Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness Literature Review 2021 to 2023 indicates the following employment, transition, post-secondary education and transportation needs of individuals who are blind and visually impaired:**

**Employment**

Crudden, A., & McKnight, Z. S. (2022). Skills Associated With Job Retention Among Persons With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 116(5), 668-677. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221131822](https://theabilitytoolbox.com/self-advocacy-%20skills-disability-chronic-illness/)

* Crudden & McKnight (2022) explore the association between job-related skills and the employment status of individuals with visual impairments who have a competitive employment history, focusing on data from a national survey. Findings indicate that individuals with professional licensure or certificates are more than twice as likely to be employed compared to those without these qualifications. Employed participants were also less likely to require job-related training. The study suggests the importance of encouraging individuals with visual impairments to pursue job skills training and professional licensure or certification aligned with their career goals. The implications for practitioners include the recognition that even those with work experience may benefit from additional job skills training, and support may be needed for individuals with visual impairments to obtain professional credentials. Careful career planning is emphasized for positive employment outcomes, involving research into the credentials associated with specific employment goals.

McDonnall, M. C., Cmar, J. L., & McKnight, Z. S. (2022). Beyond Employment Rates: Self-Employment and Other Categories of Work Among People With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 116(5), 729-735. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221128831>

* This study utilized data from the American Community Survey (ACS) to examine the class of worker among employed individuals with visual impairments, with a particular focus on the self-employed category. The U.S. government classifies workers into nine categories based on the type of ownership of the employing organization, encompassing private for-profit, private not-for-profit, government, and self-employed individuals. The study revealed that people with visual impairments were more likely to be self-employed than those without visual impairments, with approximately 9.7% of individuals with visual impairments falling into the self-employed category. Self-employed individuals with visual impairments differed in characteristics such as gender, race, education, and receipt of Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) compared to those in other class of worker categories. The study also examined earnings, finding that self-employed men with visual impairments had higher mean earnings than men in other employment categories, but both self-employed men and women had lower median earnings than their counterparts in other classes of worker. The findings suggest the importance of further research to explore the experiences, challenges, and opportunities for self-employed individuals with visual impairments.

 McDonnall, M. C., Cmar, J. L., & McKnight, Z. S. (2022). Beyond Employment Rates: Earnings of People With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 116(4), 526-532. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221121830](https://youtu.be/ewCiqb7O1Yw)

* This study investigates the earnings of employed individuals with visual impairments, comparing them by gender, visual impairment, and education. Using data from the 2019 American Community Survey, the study finds that women with visual impairments earn 77.9% of what men with visual impairments earn in terms of annual earnings, with an 85.6% hourly gender pay gap. Both men and women with visual impairments have lower earnings than their counterparts without visual impairments, with the gap being larger for men. Higher education is associated with higher earnings for all groups, and women with visual impairments benefit more from educational advancement than women without visual impairments. The study suggests that, although education improves employment likelihood and earnings, it doesn't entirely close the earnings gap between people with and without visual impairments. Limitations include self-reported earnings data and a lack of information on the type or level of visual impairment. Further research on occupational fields and additional factors is recommended.

 Steverson, A., & Crudden, A. (2023). Predictors of Job Satisfaction for People With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 117(2), 148-161. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X231168889](https://quorumlanguage.com/Project.quorum)

* Steverson & Crudden examine the job satisfaction of individuals with visual impairments, a topic underexplored in existing research. Using standardized measures, the study analyzes data from 195 employed participants, focusing on relationships with colleagues and supervisors, advancement opportunities, and employee demographics as predictors of job satisfaction. Findings reveal that high job satisfaction is associated with positive perceptions of treatment by colleagues, supervisor support, and certain demographic factors. Underemployment is linked to lower job satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of achieving vocational potential. The study suggests promoting social interactions at work, training colleagues and supervisors on working with individuals with visual impairments, and ensuring vocational programs align with participants' interests and abilities to enhance job satisfaction.

 Makkawy, A., & Long, S. (2021). Visual Impairment in the Virtual Workplace: Exploration, Experience, and Interpretation. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 115(4), 299-309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X211028396>

* This study employs interpretive phenomenology to explore the experiences of individuals with visual impairments in the virtual workplace, addressing the growing relevance of virtual work in employment. Through an online questionnaire and Applied Thematic Data Analysis, three primary themes emerged: being visually impaired can define a person in the workplace, technology can make things unequal, and being creative is important for success. Theoretical and applied implications emphasize the social aspects surrounding workplace navigation, including communication about access, advocacy for accessibility, and the role of assistive technology within cultural and societal employment norms. Accessibility is viewed as both a technical and social challenge, crucial for current and future workplaces heavily reliant on technology.

McDonnall, M. C., & Antonelli, K. (2022). Changing Employers’ Implicit Attitudes About the Competence of People Who Are Blind. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 116(3), 361-372. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221105512](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221131822)

* This experimental study investigated the impact of a one-hour meeting between vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals and hiring managers on implicit attitudes towards the competence of blind individuals in the workforce. The study involved 57 hiring managers from a financial services company in the southern United States and utilized a 4 (group) × 3 (time) experimental design. Results showed a significant decrease in Implicit Association Test-Blind & Visually Impaired (IAT-BVI) scores following the meeting, indicating that brief interactions with VR professionals can mitigate employers' implicit bias about the competence of blind individuals. While the vision status of the VR professional did not significantly influence this change, further analysis revealed a notable decrease in IAT-BVI scores among hiring managers who interacted with the blind VR professional, emphasizing the potential impact of exposure to competent blind individuals on implicit attitudes. The study suggests that extensive communication by VR professionals about the capabilities of blind individuals can enhance employers' implicit attitudes.

McDonnall, M. C., & Tatch, A. (2021). Educational Attainment and Employment for Individuals with Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 115(2), 152-159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X211000963>

* McDonnall & Tatch (2021) investigate the relationship between educational attainment and employment rates for individuals with visual impairments using national labor market data from the American Community Survey over a 10-year period (2008-2017). While higher education is generally associated with better employment outcomes, the study reveals substantial disparities in employment rates based on educational levels for individuals with visual impairments compared to those without disabilities. The employment gap narrows as educational attainment increases, emphasizing the importance of higher education for individuals with visual impairments. The study also highlights a significant disparity in college degree attainment between individuals with visual impairments and those without disabilities, urging professionals and vocational rehabilitation agencies to encourage postsecondary education for better employment opportunities among the visually impaired. Despite a positive association between education and employment, a persistent employment gap exists for college-educated individuals with visual impairments compared to their counterparts without disabilities, suggesting the need for further research into the reasons behind this disparity.

**Transition**

Cmar, J. L., & Steverson, A. (2021). Job-Search Activities, Job-Seeking Barriers, and Work Experiences of Transition-Age Youths With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 115(6), 479-492. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X211059182](https://explore.orcam.com/en/read/orcam-read-for-people-with-reading-difficulties/)

* Cmar & Steverson aimed to depict the job-seeking and work experiences of transition-age youths with visual impairments by analyzing follow-up data from a quasi-experimental job-search intervention conducted from 2016 to 2019. The 88 participants, divided into intervention and comparison groups, reported engaging in various job-search activities such as resume preparation and job applications, but these were performed infrequently. Many faced barriers during their job search, and few found paid employment. Participants had moderate levels of preparation for overcoming job-seeking barriers and received parental support. Both intervention and comparison groups showed similar results on most measures, emphasizing the challenges faced by youths actively seeking employment. The study suggests that feedback on job-seeking approaches, application materials, and interview skills, along with ongoing support, could benefit youths with visual impairments in their job search. Explicit discussions about different types of work activities may help them understand the distinctions between short-term work experiences and paid jobs.

Tuttle, M., & Carter, E. W. (2022). Examining High-Tech Assistive Technology Use of Students With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 116(4), 473-484. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221120265](https://www.youtube.com/watch)

* This study investigates the use of "high-tech" assistive technology (AT) by students with visual impairments, aiming to understand how it is employed in their educational experiences. The survey, involving 51 students, explores personal and device characteristics, device usage, AT assessment, and instruction. Results reveal that students predominantly use commercially available AT to access printed materials, with some variations observed between elementary and secondary students. The alignment between device instruction and usage is highlighted. The discussion emphasizes the versatility of high-tech AT in meeting diverse needs, underscoring the importance of individualized AT selection and services. The implications for practitioners suggest educators should consider AT for various student needs, encourage device use at home, reflect on their instruction methods, and pursue professional development in this area.

Cmar, J. L., & Steverson, A. (2021). Job-Search Activities, Job-Seeking Barriers, and Work Experiences of Transition-Age Youths With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 115(6), 479-492. https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X211059182

* This study investigates the job-seeking and work experiences of youths with visual impairments, using follow-up data from a longitudinal research project. The findings emphasize the importance of early work experiences in predicting future employment for individuals with visual impairments. Notably, school-sponsored work was not found to be related to future employment outcomes, while finding jobs independently predicted better results. Job-seeking is described as an intentional and dynamic process, and various barriers for individuals with visual impairments are identified, including discrimination, transportation issues, and inaccessibility. Job-search facilitators include goal setting, personal networks, constructive feedback, and job-search training. The study explores participants' job-search activities, barriers, outcomes, volunteer and work experiences, and parental support. The study underscores the need for tailored interventions addressing the unique challenges faced by youths with visual impairments in their pursuit of employment.

Barnhill, B. (2021). Raising Expectations and Improving Transition Outcomes for Students Who Are Deafblind. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 115(6), 585-589. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X211061201>

* Barnhill (2021) explores the transition outcomes of individuals who are deafblind, drawing parallels to the experiences of Laura Bridgman, the first deafblind student at Perkins School for the Blind in the 19th century. Despite the advancements in special education since Bridgman's time, post-school outcomes for deafblind individuals remain challenging. The research identifies predictors of success, such as paid work experiences in high school, parental expectations, and vocational rehabilitation services. The study emphasizes the need for improved transition planning and heightened expectations for individuals who are deafblind. It introduces a three-part plan developed by the Utah Deaf-Blind Project to enhance post-school outcomes, focusing on increased collaboration among stakeholders, deeper understanding of the student's needs, and greater access to quality transition services. The article concludes by providing resources for professionals working with deafblind students to ensure meaningful transitions to adult life.

**Transportation**

Zebehazy, K. T., Rosenblum, L. P., & Thompson, K. M. (2022). The Impact of COVID-19 on Transportation of Adults With Visual Impairments. Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness, 116(6), 794-805. [https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221143143](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221121830)

* The study, conducted with approval from the American Foundation for the Blind Institutional Review Board, aimed to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on transportation concerns among adults aged 18 and older in the United States who self-reported being blind or having low vision. The researchers disseminated an accessible online survey through collaborating organizations, receiving responses from 1,921 participants. The survey included Likert-scale concern statements and open-ended questions regarding transportation, health care, and other related aspects. The constant comparison method was employed to analyze responses, identifying 10 main themes and subthemes. These included concerns about support networks, financial considerations, medical needs, safety, social-emotional impact, personal transport changes, technology, inaccessible solutions, COVID impact on lifestyle, and systemic social issues. Respondents expressed worries about disruptions in transportation services, financial constraints, safety in public spaces, and the impact of the pandemic on their overall well-being. The study emphasized the need for inclusive transportation planning, accessibility in technology, and policy changes to address the specific challenges faced by individuals with visual impairments, both during crises like the pandemic and in normal circumstances. The limitations of the study included a lack of diversity in the sample and potential biases in survey questions. The findings underscored the importance of considering the unique needs of the visually impaired in transportation and disaster planning efforts.

Nearly all DBVI consumers are considered to have a most significant disability. The CSNA included many of these individuals in focus groups, interviews, and customer satisfaction surveys to determine their employment needs. The findings from all of these assessment methods plus a review of the JVIB research show some major categories of need. They include needs for training and work experiences that lead to good jobs, adaptive skills training, and assistive technology computer training. There is also a significant need to educate employers about the abilities of people who are blind, and to provide mentoring opportunities to youth and adult populations. Of concern to the Statewide Rehabilitation Council and constituency groups is the need improve access and create new pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship opportunities for youth who are blind and visually impaired.

DBVI has strong partnerships with Developmental Services and Mental Health providers for individuals who need supported employment. Eligible consumers can access programs through Developmental Services agencies and Vermont JOBS programs through Mental Health. DBVI consumers who are not found eligible for these programs, can access natural supports as long term supports provided by employers with guidance from DBVI rehabilitation staff. DBVI strives to have all individuals participate in trial work experiences using supported employment when appropriate.

j. 1. B. Who are minorities;

The CSNA assessment data show the Vermont demographics. It shows that people are spread throughout our rural state and are not necessarily living in certain communities. The exception is Burlington which has the most diverse population in Vermont. These data guide our outreach efforts and indicate a need for DBVI to outreach to all communities. The most challenging region for outreach is the Northeast Kingdom which is very rural. The CSNA indicated a need to do more public outreach on the radio using a Public Service Announcement across the state.

The DBVI Director is also a member of the Agency of Humans Services Committee to make sure the agency is accessible to all individuals. Several initiatives of the group include sharing resources about translation services and connections with community agencies that assist diverse groups. Some specific needs and strategies include:

* Interpretation and translation service available to all AHS staff.
* Tools for working with Limited English Proficient clients.
* Specialized training for communicating across cultures and communicating effectively through an interpreter.
* The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion group has been meeting across state government, and DBVI is an integrated partner within the work of this group.
* DBVI State Rehabilitation Council has formed a policy revision group and will update DBVI policies to better reflect the needs of diverse backgrounds in 2022.

DBVI staff are dedicated to ongoing professional development that includes training for cultural competency and non-bias service delivery in vocational rehabilitation programs. Specific needs of individuals include the opportunities for career pathways and services to support these goals. Opportunities for credential attainment and educational and vocational trained are encouraged and supported.

DBVI staff are actively involved in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion workgroup for the agency. This group will continue to identify best practices for the agency service delivery. DBVI staff have also joined a recently formed committee called Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI). This department wide committee will form strategies for diverse populations.

j. 1. C. Who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program;

The CSNA data shows 3 categories of individuals who are unserved or underserved.

**Aging population**

Vermont is the 2nd oldest average age population in the country. Vermont DBVI is located within the Department of Disabilities, Aging and Independent Living (DAIL). The mission of the department is to make Vermont the best state in which to grow old or live with a disability – with dignity, respect and independence. Many of these older individuals desire to stay in the workforce to meet their financial needs. Losing vision can be part of the aging process and this becomes a major adjustment and often causes feelings of loss and denial. DBVI is available to help these individuals stay in the workforce as they learn new skills to adapt to their vision loss.

**Deaf-blind population**

The data also shows that individuals who are deaf-blind have unique and specific needs due to their dual sensory impairment. Services like Support Service Providers are helpful to access the community and lesson isolation. There are very few professionals in the country who can teach adaptive blindness skills like Orientation and Mobility who can also communicate using tactile sign. There is a need to build more of that capacity in Vermont. The ICANNECT program is beginning to grow in New England and Perkins is providing important technology through that program. There is a need to build strong partnerships with the Helen Keller National Center who can provide specialized training for staff and services for deaf-blind individuals.

DBVI did receive a 2-year grant from the Administration for Community Living to start an SSP program. FFY 24 will be the second year of the project and DBVI will be seeking future funding. There is strong support and a high level of satisfaction from people who are accessing the service.

**Rural youth apprenticeship**

Vermont is a rural state and youth who are blind and visually impaired are underserved in the areas of pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship statewide. DBVI encourages youth throughout the state to participate in the LEAP summer residential work experience program and the residential school year retreats so they can participate in job readiness training and work experiences in an area where there are more work opportunities. There is a need to build strong partnerships with partners, to develop new apprenticeship models throughout the state and expand the successful LEAP model to reach rural areas of the state. One example of an underserved population is the Northeast Kingdom of the state. This area is very rural and has very few jobs.

j. 1. D. Who have been served through other components of the statewide workforce development system; and

WIOA has been a great way to bring together all of the partners of the American Job Centers. Workgroups including all of the partners have met to determine the priorities and best ways to make the workforce programs available.

The workgroup has identified the following needs.

* Goal 1: Ensure that people in Vermont have easy access to education, training, and services that support attainment of their career and financial goals.
* Goal 2: Ensure that everyone – including women, Veterans, minorities, people with disabilities, and other underrepresented groups - can contribute and thrive in high demand careers that will directly impact Vermont's success over the next decade - housing, broadband access, climate resiliency, transportation infrastructure, childcare, education, and healthcare.
* Goal 3: Increase assistance to Vermonters to encourage high school completion, earn additional qualifications like industry-recognized certificates, participate in registered apprenticeships, or pursue post-secondary degree program.
* Goal 4: Integrate continuous improvement practices into the operations of the workforce development system, its core partners and education and training providers, so the system can effectively serve as many individuals and businesses as possible.
* Goal 5: Meet the needs of Vermont’s employers by proactively engaging education institutions, youth, young adults, and college students at key transition points, to increase their awareness of the many career entry and advancement opportunities around the state.
* Goal 6: Ensure employers have the tools they need to navigate labor shortages by linking them to on-the-job training programs, technical assistance, information on best practices in job design, hiring, compensation, and emerging expectations that workers have of their workplace.
* Goal 7: Adapt the public workforce system’s access points to ensure hyper local and virtual components are available to meet the needs of jobseekers of every generation and background.
* Goal 8: Align data collections across the workforce system so that data can be more effectively and efficiently used to inform decisions, to identify gaps in service delivery, to uncover gaps in training and credentialing, and to foster equity and accessibility within the public workforce system and among the core partner programs.

The needs of individuals served by other components of the workforce system include small numbers in a small state. Most individuals who are blind receive their primary vocationally related services from DBVI. Recent partnerships and opportunities are increasing and DBVI is providing expertise about blindness to help these programs become more accessible. The intent of WIO is working and these program parnerships are making it possible for blind participants to access these opportunities.

###  j. 1. E. Who are youth with disabilities and students with disabilities, including, as appropriate, their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services.

The research and feedback from students and families identify work experiences, work readiness, and assistive technology skills as most helpful for future employment success. When students have the opportunity for several work experiences during high school they learn what types of jobs they like and don’t like. They also learn transferable skills they can use for future jobs. The challenge for Vermont students is that they have very limited opportunities for these work experiences in their small rural town. Sixteen years ago, DBVI created a strategy to meet that need. It was necessary to create a summer residential experience for students from across the state to live in a larger community where there is a wide variety of work experience jobs available. The program has expanded and now includes weekend retreats during the school year. These retreats focus on self-advocacy and job readiness training. Most recently all LEAP activities are including some aspect of assistive technology that is built into the curriculum. Proficiency with technology is also a predictor of future employment success. DBVI counselors have identified the need for students to have better technology skills for the workplace. For that reason, DBVI developed and assessment tool to evaluate technology skills. This information can then be used by schools and DBVI staff to create opportunities to improve these skills before college, vocational training, or employment.

Students also learn important self-advocacy skills and independent living skills at the LEAP work experiences and job readiness retreats which are also strong predictors and essential for future employment success.

For students who do not choose to participate in summer LEAP or school year retreats, DBVI staff work with several partners to establish work experiences in a students’ local community. In some situations, a DBVI Counselor can make connections with the school-based employment specialist to assist a student or connect them with employment related workshops and other school-based activities. It is the intent of DBVI to make sure all visually impaired students have the opportunity for multiple work experiences before the exit high school.

The combination of these strategies and DBVI Counselor involvement makes it possible for Vermont students to access the 5-core Pre-ETS as identified in WIOA.

The five required activities are:

* Job exploration counseling
* Work-based learning experiences
* Counseling on opportunities for enrollment in comprehensive transition or postsecondary educational programs at institutions of higher education
* Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and independent living
* Instruction in self-advocacy, including peer mentoring

DBVI considers a student with a disability to be:

* Between the ages of 14 and 21;
* Is in an educational program; and
* Is eligible for and receiving special education or related services under IDEA or is an individual with a disability for purposes of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

DBV Pre-ETS Budget Forecasting

Pre-employment transition services are comprised of the five required activities and nine authorized activities. There must be enough funds available to be able to offer the five required activities to students with disabilities. If there is any money remaining, that money is used towards the nine authorized activities.

FFY 2023--As of September 30, 2023:

* $267,000 (15% reserve requirement + carry over/re-allotment
* $57,700 was spent on staff time and associated expenses
* $90,000 for Coordination In contracts (LEAP contract)
* $120,000 was spent on the 5 required Pre-ETS Transition Service Areas.
* $4,444 Average Cost Per Student for the 5 required Pre-ETS Services (based on 27 students).

Calculation: Agency 15% Reserve Requirement= $267,000; Number of students served=27; Total Pre-ETS Required Activities= $120,000 divided by 27 students equals an Average Cost Per Student= $4,444; Total Pre-ETS Coordination Activities= $147,000; Total Pre-ETS Expenditures= $267,000; Amount Available for Authorized Activities= $0

Projections for FFY 2024 and 2025:

* $267,000 (15% reserve requirement + carry over/re-allotment
* $57,700 was spent on staff time and associated expenses
* $90,000 for Coordination In contracts (LEAP contract)
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A statewide estimate of students exiting/graduating high school at the end of SY 2024 is 18 students. This number fluctuates significantly from year to year in our small state. In SY 2023 only 5 students graduated. Currently there are 13 students in 9th grade, 8 students in 10th grade, and 11 students in 11th grade.

j. 2. Identify the need to establish, develop, or improve community rehabilitation programs within the State; and

DBVI partners help us achieve the results our consumers expect. One finding of the statewide survey and focus groups identifies adaptive skills training as one of the top two services that help them achieve their goals. People who lose vision need to learn new adaptive skills to remain independent at home and work. DBVI contracts with the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired to provide Certified Orientation and Mobility Instructors, Rehabilitation and Low Vision Therapists. These instructors teach the skills and DBVI consumer report being more independent because of their new skills. This need for adaptive skills training is ranked very high in all sections of the CSNA and survey results show a high level of satisfaction with their skill gain results.

The other major DBVI community partner is the Vermont Industry for Business, Industry and Rehabilitation. DBVI contracts with VABIR to provide job development and employment consultant services. VABIR creates relationships with Vermont business and helps match DBVI consumers with business needs. In many instances this begins with a work experience and leads to employment. The CSNA does identify more job training as a need. VABIR provides those opportunities through progressive employment and satisfaction for these services ranks high.

Surveys with TVI’s and State partners indicate that improved relationships with technical education centers and the development of apprenticeship models may further DBVI’s ability to achieve the results our consumers expect.

j. 3. 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 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Ac

DBVI coordinates with several partners to meet the pre-employment and transition service needs of students. The DBVI Director and Counselors meet monthly with the Management Team of the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. VABVI has a statewide contract from the Vermont Agency of Education to provide a statewide network of the Teachers of the Visually Impaired. The TVI’s provide academic support and direct instruction to all blind and visually impaired students in Vermont. The intent of these monthly meeting is to coordinate the efforts of both agencies to support student transition needs. DBVI Counselors and TVIs in their region also meet regularly to discuss students’ transition and pre-employment needs. This helps the counselor to connect students with the 5-core Pre-ETS activities by making arrangements for local work experiences, school-based employment activities, Summer LEAP, or school year LEAP job readiness retreats. There is also a monthly meeting of DBVI partner organizations called the Connections Team. The intent of this group is to discuss student needs and develop strategies that provide work experiences or job readiness opportunities in local communities or at the state level.

The DBVI Assistant Director also meets quarterly at the Agency of Education with the AOE Special Education State Director, the AOE High School Special Education Consultant, the AOE Adult Basic Education Consultant, the Director of General VR, the Director of Developmental Services, and the Director of the Assistive Technology Program. The intent of this group is to stay connected with overlap needs of WIOA and IDEA. The most current topic is discussions about the new personal learning plans and how transition serviced can be incorporated.

Other important initiatives include DBVI cosponsoring with General VR a statewide conference of all local Core Transition Teams. All regions of the state have monthly meetings of school personnel and local human service providers to discuss local transition resources for students. Several workshops and guest speakers provided information about best practice for student transition. There was also time for local teams to meet and discuss strategies for their region.

The ultimate need is to work together with AOE and local schools to help students to use their IEP and Personal Learning Plans to create a great transition to employment training or work. DBVI has created transition action plan forms that are used for each student for entering the workforce directly, attending vocational training, or attending college. The needs for each of these future goals are specified on each form. The forms help guide the Local Education Agency IEP and 504 teams as they plan for the unique transition service needs of students who are blind or visually impaired.

In 2021, Vermont DBVI was selected as a partner with the Institute for Community Inclusion UMASS Boston, Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development Grant. DBVI’s overall goal is to address the challenge of access to apprenticeships for Vermont youth who are blind and visually impaired through key partnerships with the Agency of Education, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, Department of Labor and other partners.

* DBVI goals: Expand opportunities for students to have work-based learning in their home communities as part of an expanded menu of LEAP options.
* Expand Virtual opportunities for students to learn and connect.
* Expand school year retreats to build skills for work readiness training.
* Expand the Learn, Earn and Prosper (LEAP) pre-apprenticeship model as an opportunity for youth to gain skills in employment, independent living and pre-apprenticeship.

The specific needs for students outlined in the CSNA include more opportunities for apprenticeship, career mentoring, proficiency with assistive technology, building industry credentials, and building the pre-ETS core skills.

Other important initiatives related to the assessment of student needs: From May 19- July 7, 2023 DBVI led the effort to convene the Pathways to Partnership Grant Initiative Planning Committee and application teams. DBVI submitted the successful Federal grant application to the Rehabilitation Services Administration by July 7, 2023. Critical needs identified by HireAbility and DBVI and lead partners include:

* *Lack of customized employment.* The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) places increased responsibility on to collaborate with schools in creating competitive integrated employment and customized employment opportunities. Under WIOA, students ages 14-24 must explore community employment through DBVI/DVR services.
* *Lack of self-advocacy skills and leadership goals for youth with disabilities in transition plans.* According to the OSERS’s *Transition Guide* (2020) students with strong self-advocacy skills who understand and fully participate in the development of their IEP and Summary of Performance have better transition outcomes.
* *Lack of consistent school-based employment models.* Vermont schools fund school-based employment initiatives (funded by IDEA, general education work-based learning and proficiency-based graduation requirements) but lack consistent models to facilitate access and have been hit hard by the critical shortage area in special education personnel.
* *Workforce development needed for underserved, rural, diverse, and other hard to reach communities*. Rural communities are underserved needing more flexible and mobile offerings to establish strong connections with employers and innovative programming.
* *Connections with employers.* Only a few Vermont LEAs contract with community service providers to support competitive integrated employment. School-based youth employment specialists funded by HireAbility/DVR are available to only four out of 52 districts.
* *Financial Literacy.* Vermont’s ability to develop the knowledge, skills, and values of financial literacy for youth with disabilities is inconsistent.
* *Peer mentorship.* While Vermont boasts both a vibrant Center for Independent Living and one of the leading statewide self-advocacy organizations in the country, limited peer mentor opportunities are available to youth with disabilities.
* *Interagency coordination.* Vermont’s experience holds that successful transitions for youth with disabilities happen at an interagency level and with the support of partners. VT-P2P partners will improve the IDEA transition outcomes of indicators 13, 14 and the summary of performance for all students with disabilities.

### k. 1. The number of individuals in the State who are eligible for services

**Summary Outline of CSNA Methods, Results, Gaps, and Implications for State Plan**

The Rehabilitation Act, as amended in 1998, requires each state to conduct a statewide needs assessment every three years. The current triennial needs assessment is statewide and jointly conducted by The Division for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI) and the State Rehabilitation Council (SRC). The activities for the comprehensive statewide needs assessment (CSNA) were completed during calendar year 2021, 2022, 2023. The following summary of the CSNA is being used to develop many of our goals and strategies for PY 2024 and PY 2025.

**Introduction**

The goals of this needs assessment are to determine the vocational rehabilitation needs of individuals in Vermont who are blind or visually impaired.

**Methodology**

* Information gathering included the use of:
* Existing disability population statistics including the Cornell Study;
* Disability population estimates from available data including the American Foundation for the Blind;
* Population projections and economic forecasts from federal and state data; Department of Labor projections by state;
* Existing DBVI data, studies and experience; 911 data, type of service, cost, whether people currently served by DBVI are representative of the racial and ethnic minority distribution of people with disabilities within the state; data provided by CRPs; and Counselor input;
* State level statistics from other federal programs; WIOA, IEP, 504, Social Security,
* State and local data and reports;
* Stakeholder input: Surveys, focus groups, SRC meetings, interviews, Vermont Employer Awareness Summit, Customer—Centered Culture Focus Groups, and public hearings.
* Meetings and surveys with the statewide network of Teachers of the Visually Impaired.
* Statewide Customer Satisfaction and Needs Assessment Survey conducted by Market Decisions— The current survey began in December 2021 and the final report will be complete at the end of March 2022. The full results and report will be included in the CSNA for CY 2021-2023.
* Review of Journal of Visual Impairment articles by DBVI staff, 2011 to 2023
* Participants included DBVI Staff, State Rehabilitation Council, Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) Staff, and individuals who are blind or visually impaired from around the state. Dissemination plans included group meetings and individual interviews.
* Research and critical needs identified by Pathways to Partnership Grant lead partners including DBVI, the Center on Disability and Community Inclusion, University of Vermont, Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council, VCIL, Vermont Family Network, HireAbility and Agency of Education, Federal grant awarded by the Rehabilitation Services Administration October 2023.

**Results**

**Current Population Survey**

**Prevalence Rate**(Disability at the Vermont Population Level): In 2020, the percentage of a man and a woman, aged 18-64 who report a disability in Vermont is 13.7 percent.

**Labor Market Activity Rate:**The percentage of a man and a woman, aged 18-64 with a work limitation in Vermont who worked more than 52 hours in the prior calendar year was 53% in 1981 and 24% in 2014. No current data is available.

**Employment Rate:**  In 2021, the percentage of non-institutionalized Vermonters ages 18-64 years with who were employed full-time/full-year in the previous year was 38.1%.

* Erickson, W., Lee, C., VonSchrader, S (2021). Disability Statistics from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Yang-Tan Institute (YTI). Cornell University Disability Statistics website: www.disabilitystatistics.org (Links to an external site.)

**2021 Disability Status Report--Vermont**

**Summary of Overall United States and Vermont Data**

**Age--**In 2021, the prevalence of disability in the United States was:

* 13.0 percent for persons of all ages
* 5.8 percent for persons ages 5 to 15
* 7.6 percent for persons ages 16 to 20
* 10.9 percent for persons ages 21 to 64
* 23.9 percent for persons ages 65 to 74
* 46.1 percent for persons ages 75+

**Age--**In 2021, the prevalence of disability in the Vermont was:

* 13.4 percent for persons of all ages
* 4.4 percent for persons ages 5 to 15
* 12.7 percent for persons ages 16 to 20
* 11.0 percent for persons ages 21 to 64
* 19.5 percent for persons ages 65 to 74
* 43.6 percent for persons ages 75+

**Disability Type--**In 2021, the prevalence of the six disability types among persons of all ages in the United States was:

* 2.5% reported a Visual Disability
* 3.6% reported a Hearing Disability
* 6.6% reported an Ambulatory Disability
* 5.4% reported a Cognitive Disability
* 2.4% reported a Self-Care Disability
* 5.7% reported an Independent Living Disability

**Disability Type--**In 2021, the prevalence of the six disability types among persons of all ages in Vermont was:

* 2.1% reported a Visual Disability
* 4.4% reported a Hearing Disability
* 5.8 % reported an Ambulatory Disability
* 5.6% reported a Cognitive Disability
* 2.2% reported a Self-Care Disability
* 5.7% reported an Independent Living Disability

**Gender -**In 2021, 12.6 percent of females of all ages and 14.3 percent of males of all ages in Vermont reported a disability.

**Hispanic/Latino -** In 2021, the prevalence of disability among persons of all ages of Hispanic or Latino origin in the United States was 10% and the prevalence of disability among persons of all ages of Hispanic or Latino origin in Vermont was 4.7 percent.

**Race -**In 2021, in the United States, the prevalence of disability for working-age people (ages 21 to 64) was:

* 11.1 percent among Whites
* 13.8 percent among Black / African Americans
* 5.0 percent Asian
* 10.3 percent among persons of some other race(s)

**Race--**In 2021, in Vermont, the prevalence of disability for working-age people (ages 21 to 64) was:

* 11.0 percent among Whites
* 9.5 percent among Black /African Americans (Note in 2018 5.6 percent among Black / African Americans )
* 3.6 percent Asian (Note in 2018, 0.8 percent Asian)
* 13.9 percent among persons of some other race(s)

**Populations in Households in Vermont**

Vermont’s population of 643,077 people grew 2.8% over a decade from 2010 to 2020. Content provided by the US Census bureau for 2020.

Census Population Demographics for Vermont. [https://www.census.gov](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X231168889)

* Ages 15 to 19 = 42,255
* Ages 20 to 24 = 45,692
* Ages 25 to 29 = 37,764
* Ages 30 to 34 = 36,441
* Ages 35 to 39 = 36,243
* Ages 40 to 44 = 34,595
* Ages 45 to 49 = 37,960
* Ages 50 to 54 = 42,625
* Ases 55 to 59 = 47,190
* Ages 60 to 64 = 48,408
* Ages 65 to 69 = 41,633
* Ages 70 to 74 = 31,766

**Number of Individuals who are minorities**

* Total population of Vermont =643,077
* White- 584,360
* Two or More Races=17,135
* Hispanic or Latino=9,208
* Asian=10,126
* Black or African=7.964
* American Indian=1,873
* Another Race=2,677
* Two or More Races= 17,135
* Native Hawaiian=98

**Summary of Visual Disability Data in Vermont**

This CSNA references estimates for working age adults by the US Census bureau as well as data from the American Community Survey which provides us with specific data for visual disability.

**Working Age Adults**

Based on 2021 ACS data, DBVI estimates that there are approximately 4,960 Vermonters of working age (18-74) who are blind or severely visually impaired. DBVI estimates a conservative estimate of total numbers due to preliminary MMIS data review. DBVI provides RSA defined services to approximately 5.6% of these individuals annually (283 in SFY23).

**Visual Disability Total= 13,504. This represents** 2.1% of 643,077 Vermont population

**Ages 18-75 = 4,960**- Vermonters of working age who are blind or visually impaired.

American Community Survey 2021.

**Employment Rate**

* In 2021, data from the American Community Survey references the following
* employment rates of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 18 to 64) with disabilities in Vermont.
* In 2021, the employment rate of working-age people with disabilities in VT was 38.1 percent.
* In 2021, the employment rate of working-age people without disabilities in VT was 79.4 percent.
* The gap between the employment rates of working-age people with and without disabilities was 41.3 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs--**Employment Rate--Visual Disability

* In 2021, the employment rates of working-age Vermonters with a visual disability, ages 21 to 64, was 26.2%.
* In 2021 the employment rate of working-age Vermonters without disabilities, ages 21 to 64 was 60.6%.
* This illustrates a gap between the employment rates of working age Vermonters with and without a visual disability of 34.4 percentage points.
* In 2021 over half or working-age Vermonters with a visual disability, ages 18 – 64  were not employed in Vermont.
* There is also a specific need to connect individuals with multiple disabilities to the Developmental Disability Agencies to determine eligibility while students are still in high school. Vermont rules require that students meet the disability eligibility requirement and have a job before leaving high school to qualify for the waiver. DBVI staff work closely with IEP teams to make sure students with multiple disabilities are assessed for Developments Services eligibility while in high school. DBVI has recently underspent funds for student supported employment because of the efforts to connect high school students directly with the Designated agencies. This is an effective strategy to meet the supported employment needs of eligible students on the DBVI caseload.

**Not Working but Actively Looking for Work**

* The percentage of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities in Vermont who are not working but actively looking for work.
* In 2021 in Vermont, the percentage of working-age people with disabilities who were not working but actively looking for work was 8.2 percent.
* In 2021 in Vermont, the percentage of working-age people without disabilities who were not working but actively looking for work was 16.8 percent.
* The difference in the percentage of not working but actively looking for work between working-age people with and without disabilities was 8.6 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs--**Not Working but Actively Looking for Work--Visual Disability

* In 2021, the percentage of working-age Vermonters with a visual disability who were not working but actively looking for work was 1.0 percent.
* The percentage of working-age Vermonters without disabilities who were not working but actively looking for work was 14.8 percent in the same year.
* The difference in the percentage of not working but actively looking for work between working-age Vermonters with a visual disability and without disabilities was 13.8 percentage points.

**Caution:** Estimate based on small sample size (less than 40 individuals).

**Working Full-Time/Full-Year**

* This section presents the percentage of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities working full-time/full-year in Vermont.
* In 2021, the percentage of working-age people with disabilities working full-time/full-year in Vermont was 18.8 percent.
* In 2021, the percentage of working-age people without disabilities working full-time/full-year in Vermont was 60.6 percent.
* The difference in the percentage working full-time/full-year between working-age people with and without disabilities was 41.8 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs: Working Full-Time/Full-Year: -Visual Disability**

* In 2021, the percentage of working-age people with a visual disability working full-time/full-year in Vermont was 26.2 percent, and the percentage working full-time/full-year without disabilities was 60.6%.
* This marks a difference in the percentage working full-time/full-year between working-age Vermonters with a visual disability and without disabilities of 34.4 percentage points.

**Annual Earnings**

* The median annual earnings of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities who work full-time/full-year in Vermont.
* In 2021, the median earnings of working-age people with disabilities who worked full-time/full-year in VT was $46,300.
* In 2021, the median earnings of working-age people without disabilities who worked full-time/full-year in VT was $53,600.
* The difference in the median earnings between working-age Vermonters with and without disabilities who worked full-time/full-year was $7,300 annually.

**Gap and Needs--**Annual Earning--Visual Disability

* The difference in the median earnings between working-age people with a visual disability earned $40,500 and people without a disability earned $53,600 showing that people with a visual disability earned $7,100 less annually than people without a disability.
* \*Caution: Estimates for visual disability is based on a very small sample size (less than 40 individuals).

**Poverty**

* The poverty rates of non-institutionalized working-age people (ages 21 to 64) with disabilities in Vermont.
* In 2021, the poverty rate of working-age people with disabilities in VT was 32.4 percent.
* In 2021, the poverty rate of working-age people without disabilities in VT was 8.4 percent.
* In 2021, the difference in the poverty rate between working-age people with and without disabilities was 24 percentage points.

**Gap and Needs—**Poverty—Visual Disability

* In 2021, the difference in the poverty rate between working-age people with a visual disability (10.6%) and without disabilities (8.4%) was 2.2 percentage points
* In 2021, approximately 1,934 out of 4,960 people with a visual disability who are working age live in poverty in Vermont.
* In 2021, the percentage of non-institutionalized persons ages 21-64 years with visual disability, in the Vermont who were living below the poverty line in 2021 was 39 percent.

**Education Level**

* In 2021, in Vermont, age 21 to 64 years with a visual disability have an educational attainment of less than high school education = 656 (19.2% of 3,365)
* In 2021, in Vermont, age 21 to 64 years with a visual disability with a high school diploma or equivalent = 972 (28.9% of 3,365)
* In 2021 in Vermont age 21 to 64 with a visual disability with some college/associates degree = 892 (26.5% of 3,365)
* College Bachelor Degree or higher = 854 (25.4% of 3,365)

**Gap and Needs—**Education Level--Visual Disability

* The majority of individuals with a visual disability do not get a college degree.

Number of Youth who are Deaf-Blind

https://docs.google.com/document/d/189sATr89VCj650qtBeU29jtRGWS9yN-6JJxrEVw9YGs/edit?usp=sharing

* Ages 12 to 17=11
* Ages 18 to 21=3
* FFY 2023 Projection= 15 overall

**DBVI Projections for PY 2023**

In the evolving landscape of our initiatives, DBVI saw the number new applications during the PY 2022 amounted to a total of 72, indicating a steady influx of individuals seeking our services. Looking ahead this is a projected to increase to 80 as DBVI continues to implement outreach strategies and new initiatives.

A critical component of our commitment to supporting individuals on their employment journeys involves the development of Individualized Employment Plans. In the program year 2022, 71 such plans were developed by DBVI VR Counselors. This commitment, aligning with an increase in the number of applications, is projected at the development of 80 employment plans in PY 2023.

The ultimate measure of success lies in the achievement of employment outcomes. In the PY 2022, 22 individuals successfully attained employment through our programs. Building on this success, our proactive strategies aim to increase this number, with a projection of 30 individuals achieving employment outcomes in the program year 2023.

Concurrently, we recognize the importance of understanding and addressing cases that conclude without resulting in employment. In PY 2022, 36 such cases were closed after services were initiated. However, our strategic initiatives and refined approaches are expected to contribute to a reduction, with a projected total of 25 cases in the program year 2023.

These statistics collectively underscore our ongoing commitment to facilitating the journey toward employment, refining our processes, and adapting to the evolving needs of DBVI consumers.

The overall projections for PY 2023 are based on data from the American Community Survey, Burrough of Labor Statistics, RSA Data Dashboards, and current caseload data. Current data for the ACS and BLS are lagging and referenced above. They do, however, provide a good base to make projections. The projections for PY 2023 are based on historical data and current caseload data.

### k. 2. A. The VR Program;

DBVI estimates the following number of individuals will receive services for FFY 2023:

* Individuals who are not students (including all ages) who receive services in the DBVI VR program = 283 served.
* Individuals who are deaf-blind (Using the HKNC definition) =4 each year.
* Students who receive Pre-ETS services as a Pre-Application student = 16.
* Students in high school and open in the DBVI VR program = 30 each year.
* Students in college =10.
* The case services budget for providing services in FFY 2025 is estimated at $550,000.
* The pre-ETS budget for students is estimated at $270,000.

DBVI considers a student with a disability to be:

* Between the ages of 14 and 21;
* Is in an educational program; and
* Is eligible for and receiving special education or related services under IDEA or is an individual with a disability for purposes of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act

**Pre-ETS Budget Forecasting**

Pre-employment transition services are comprised of the five required activities and nine authorized activities. There must be enough funds available to be able to offer the five required activities to students with disabilities. If there is any money remaining, that money is used towards the nine authorized activities.

**FFY 2023--As of September 30, 2023:**

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* $4,444 Average Cost Per Student for the 5 required Pre-ETS Services (based on 27 students).

Calculation: Agency 15% Reserve Requirement= $267,000; Number of students served=27; Total Pre-ETS Required Activities= $120,000 divided by 27 students equals an Average Cost Per Student= $4,444; Total Pre-ETS Coordination Activities= $147,000; Total Pre-ETS Expenditures= $267,000; Amount Available for Authorized Activities= $0

**Projections for FFY 2024 and 2025:**

* $267,000 (15% reserve requirement + carry over/re-allotment
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A statewide estimate of students exiting/graduating high school at the end of SY 2024 is 18 students. This number fluctuates significantly from year to year in our small state. In SY 2023 only 5 students graduated. Currently there are 13 students in 9th grade, 8 students in 10th grade, and 11 students in 11th grade.

### k. 2. B. The Supported Employment Program; and

**DBVI has consistently increased or maintained the number of individuals served.**

* FFY 2020=5
* FFY 2021=3
* FFY 2022=5
* FFY 2023=5
* FFY 2024= DBVI projects serving 8 individuals. Monthly meetings have been established between DBVI and the Developmental Services division to implement effective strategies to create strong transition for students from high school to Developmental Service Supported Employment Programs.

### k. 2. C. Each priority category, if under an order of selection.

NA.

### k. 3. The number of individuals who are eligible for VR services, but are not receiving such services due to an order of selection; and

NA.

### k. 4. The cost of services for the number of individuals estimated to be eligible for services. If under an order of selection, identify the cost of services for each priority category.

Expense estimates for FFY 2025 are as follows:

The case services budget for providing services in FFY 2025 is estimated at $550,000.

The pre-ETS budget for students is estimated at $270,000.

Title VI funds for supported employment will be $6,000.

l. 1. Identify if the goals and priorities were jointly developed and agreed to by the State VR agency and the State Rehabilitation Council, if the State has a Council, and jointly agreed to any revisions

Based on the DBVI/SRC Tri-Annual Comprehensive Needs Assessment completed in CY 2021, CY 2022, and CY 2023, DBVI and the SRC have established goals, strategies targets in response to the new mandates and requirements included in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA). DBVI and the SRC established goals and priorities related to the implementation of the WIOA Common Performance Measures. All DBVI goals and priorities are established within the Division’s long-established strategic themes for all participants of the DBVI program that include:

* Economic Independence.
* Blindness Related Adaptive Skill Building (Assistive Technology; Low Vision; O+M; Blindness Rehabilitation Evaluation and Teaching).
* Delivering DBVI services well and assisting individuals to become better off.
* Expanding program growth and partnerships.

PY 2022 Goals and Priorities

**Goal 1. DBVI will align services to support consumers in achieving the WIOA Common Performance Outcome Measures.**

Measures:

* Employment retention six months post closure.
* Employment retention twelve months post closure.
* Median earnings six months post closure.
* Credential attainment rate.
* Measurable skills gains.
* Employer engagement.

PY 2022 WIOA Performance Measures In Vermont (for DVR and DBVI)

* Measurable Skills Gains were 56.7% and the national average was 48.7%.
* Employment Rate Second Quarter after Exit was 56.8% and the national average was 37.6%.
* Median Earnings Second Quarter after Exit was $6,153 and the national average was $5,130.
* Employment Rate Fourth Quarter after Exit was 55.4% and the national average was 52.8%.
* Credential Attainment Rate was 53.2% and the national average was 37.6%.

DBVI is a strong supporter of the WIOA Common Performance Measures. The new measures support consumers in their career goals and promote higher wages and more sustainable employment. The WIOA measures are extremely lagging, meaning most of the desired outcomes occur well after services end. For example, the measure of median earnings occurs two full quarters after case closure. As a result, the measures are not very useful in guiding the work of DBVI staff on a day-to-day basis. DBVI decided to establish the following leading measures:

* Leading Measure One: The use of career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options.
* Leading Measure Two: The use of blindness adaptive skill evaluation and training.
* Leading Measure Three: The use of blindness assistive technology evaluation and training.

PY 2021 and PY 2022 Update:

* The percentage of case closures that had career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options was 18% in PY 2021 and 5% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of case closures that had blindness adaptive skills training from the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired was 67% in PY 2021 and 58% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of case closures that received Assistive Technology Evaluation and Training was 67% in PY 2021 and 58% in PY 2022

Targets for the Lead Indicators:

* 25% of cases will include use of career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options.
* 60% of cases will include blindness adaptive skill evaluation and training.
* 60% of cases will include blindness assistive technology evaluation and training.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI is dedicated to assembling a highly skilled team that revolves around participants and their specific vocational goals. This comprehensive support encompasses various professionals, including Vision Rehab Therapists (VRTs), Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists (COMS), an Assistive Technology Evaluator, and an Assistive Technology Trainer. This collaborative approach consistently contributes to elevated success rates in these leading measures.
* DBVI continues to involve most consumers in services to build adaptive blindness skills and assistive technology skills. Having these skills helps consumers obtain and to keep employment.
* DBVI continues to use progressive employment opportunities to help consumers learn about the types of employment they like and don’t like This can also be a way to demonstrate skills that lead to employment.
* DBVI continues to help consumers on a career path by advancing in their current jobs of starting new employment with new credentials, education, or special training.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* DBVI attributes the decline in assessment rates between PY 2021 and PY 2022 to the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the inherent accessibility barriers of traditional career assessments, DBVI remains committed to seeking alternative approaches. To more effectively evaluate the transferable skills and interests of participants, DBVI will explore hands-on assessments through work experiences and progressive employment opportunities. Additionally, collaborative efforts with schools for the blind will be undertaken to gain insights into the accessibility of existing assessment tools.
* Transportation continues to be a major barrier for career advancement and high paying jobs. The highest paying careers are in Chittenden County and DBVI consumers cannot get there and do not want to relocate.
* DBVI is actively seeking virtual job opportunities as a strategy to have work from home opportunities.

**Goal 2.  DBVI will increase the percentage of consumers earning more than minimum wage at closure.**

Measures:

* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings less than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 150% of minimum wage at employment closure.

Targets:

* DBVI consumers earning less than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure will be 20% or lower.
* DBVI consumers earning 110% or greater of minimum wage at closure will be 50% or higher.
* DBVI consumers earning 150% or greater of minimum wage at closure will be 50% or higher.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings less than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure was 17% in PY 2021 and 23% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure was 83% in PY 2021 and 77% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 150% of minimum wage at employment closure was 67% in PY 2021 and 50% in PY 2022.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI supports consumers in higher wage goals through a strong, collaborative relationship with Workforce Development Partners such as Vermont Association for Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation (VABIR) and ReSource.
* DBVI supports a dual-customer design to serve both the needs of the DBVI consumer and the employer.
* DBVI consumers who continue their post-secondary education have higher wage employment.
* Consumers who participate in progressive employment, vocational training, and industry credentials have higher wage employment.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Vermont currently has limited apprenticeship opportunities that are accessible to blind and visually impaired individuals. DBVI will continue to explore apprenticeship opportunities through participation in the Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD) Learning Collaborative.
* Many Vermont companies have limited opportunity to advance in a specific role. In some cases, advancement requires that a person switch to a bigger company.

**Goal 3. DBVI will increase consumer opportunities to participate in post-secondary education and training and gain industry recognized credentials.**

Measure:

* Number of individuals achieving PSE credential attainment.

Targets:

* Number of individuals achieving PSE credential attainment will be 10.
* The number of individuals engaged in PSE credential training will be 30.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The number of individuals achieving PSE credential was 5 in PY 2021 and 6 in PY 2022.
* The number of individuals engaged in PSE credential training was 18 in PY 2021 and 19 in PY 2022.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI empowers individuals to pursue post-secondary education by collaborating with Teachers for the Visually Impaired (TVI). This strategic partnership facilitates early enrollment of students in high school, allowing DBVI counselors and team members to actively guide and support them in exploring a diverse range of post-secondary education opportunities.
* DBVI involves partners that can support consumers with adjustment and timing to pursue their post-secondary education goals.
* Involving students in the Learn, Earn, and Prosper program has helped students learn pre-employment skills and become motivated to pursue careers and additional education and vocational training.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Building industry recognized credentials continues to be a challenge. Many of the opportunities are not accessible for people who are blind. This goal requires creative solutions and finding partners who can provide accessible training opportunities. DBVI is actively looking for accessible credential building opportunities that are available virtually.
* Accessible opportunities available in the state tend to lack an industry-recognized credential upon completion of the training program.

**Goal 4. In partnership with VDOL and Community Partners, DBVI will create more opportunities for DBVI consumers to participate in training programs.**

DOL programs can offer DBVI consumers the opportunity to earn money while receiving necessary training to achieve a credential and higher wage employment.

Measure:

* DBVI consumers will enroll in DOL and other training programs.

Targets:

* The number of DBVI consumers enrolled in a DOL programs will be 4.
* The number of DBVI consumers enrolled in other training programs will be 40.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The number of individuals with DOL involvement was 6 in PY 2021 and 6 in PY 2022.
* The percentage of case closures that had services from the Vermont Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation was 31% in PY 2021 and 25% in PY 2022

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* VABIR Employment Consultants create progressive employment opportunities that support DBVI consumers in finding competitive integrated employment.
* DBVI continues establish relationship with DOL initiatives.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Typically partner programs are not fully accessible to individuals who are blind.
* DBVI believes the new partnerships through WIOA will lead to DBVI customers participating in the many partner programs of the Job Centers.

**Goal 5. DBVI will continue to implement highly effective Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students statewide.**

Measures:

* DBVI will expand services overall to youth. The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services will increase.
* DBVI will increase the number of students participating in pre-ETS services.

Targets:

* The percentage of population served under age 22 at entry into DBVI services will be 25% or higher.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has grown from 17% of people served in SFY 2014 to 27% of people served in SFY 2020 and remains substantial at 22% in SFY 2023.
* LEAP FFY 2023 Total Training Hours: 2,310
	+ Work-Based Learning Training hours (both in-person & virtual): 1,914
	+ Work Readiness Training & Self-Advocacy, Social and Leadership Instruction (both in-person & virtual): 315
	+ Orientation and Mobility with a COMS (both in-person & virtual): 72
	+ Independent Living Skills with a CVRT (both in-person & virtual): 58

The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has dipped slightly from its recent average of 25% of people served. In SFY2023, 22% of people served had entered DBVI services before the age of 22.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* The Learn, Earn, and Prosper Program continues to expand. In addition to the summer residential program, LEAP now includes job readiness skills training throughout the school year and year-round virtual pre-ETS training.
* DBVI staff participate in the pre-ETS community of practice to learn best practices and collaborate with other states.
* DBVI staff meet regularly with the Teachers of the Visually Impaired in their region to learn about the pre-ETS needs of students on their mutual caseloads and to discuss referral of new students.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* In FFY2023, overall training hours decreased by 209 hours. This decrease was mainly due to the fact that the residential program did not host an Intern in summer of 2023. Interns engage in programming close to eight weeks, full time and with a focus on their career interest. We did not have a student this past summer of that age or skill to engage in that level of programming. We hope to welcome Interns back next summer.
* The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has dipped slightly from its recent average of 25% of people served. In SFY2023, 22% of people served had entered DBVI services before the age of 22. Vermont DBVI serves a small state with a low incidence disability. Due to this, DBVI anticipates that the number of students will fluctuate year to year.
* Some families are reluctant to have their student participate. The Teachers of the visually impaired are very helpful to encourage participation. Once students take the first step and try and event, they continue to be involved.

**Goal 6. DBVI will continue to expand efforts to effectively serve employers through Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS).**

The Business Account Managers (BAMS) are the primary employer engagement staff for DVR/DBVI. DVR/DBVI measures employer engagement through the following metrics:

* New Employer Contacts: These are defined as new contacts with employers who have never engaged with DVR/DBVI.
* Employer Activities: These are defined as engagement activities with employers who have an ongoing relationship with DVR/DBVI.
* Employer Opportunities: These are defined as specific participant opportunities such as a job opening, training opportunity, work-based learning opportunity, company tour or informational interview.
* Caseload Driven Outreach: Caseload driven outreach is defined as labor market outreach directly related to participants on counselors’ current caseloads. Business Account Managers are tasked with directing two-thirds of their activities to caseload needs.

PY 2022 Update:

* New Employer Contacts: 1,573
* Employer Activities: 3,587
* Employer Opportunities: 2,194
* Caseload Driven Outreach: 776

Targets:

* New Employer Contacts:1,600
* Employer Activities: 3,700 distinct engagement activities
* Employer Opportunities: 2,400 distinct participant opportunities
* Caseload Driven Outreach: 900 distinct participant opportunities

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* The Business Account Managers are the main contact with businesses. They build the relationship and help match the employers needs with the skills of our DBVI consumers. This single point of contact has worked very well, and businesses appreciate that they are not being contacts by many different agencies.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Some businesses need very specific highly skilled employees that are not always on our caseloads. It works best when the employer has positions and are willing to provide on-the-job training or apprenticeships.

**Goal 7. DBVI will continue to seek opportunities to expand and/or improve services for underserved populations including individuals who need supported employment.**

DBVI recognizes that there continues to be populations of Vermonters with disabilities that are unserved or underserved in the state. These include, but are not limited to:

* Individuals with developmental disabilities who do not meet the developmental services system eligibility criteria or system of care priorities.
* Individuals with other severe disabilities, including individuals who are deaf-blind who need supported employment.

DBVI will partner with DVR to explore opportunities to expand or improve services to address the unmet needs of these groups. This includes exploring new partnerships or expanding existing partnerships with other agencies, funding sources and stakeholders.

Measures:

* Number of individuals served who identified as minorities.
* Number of individuals served who received supported employment services.
* Number of individuals served with a disability impairment of "Deaf-blindness."

Targets:

* Number of individuals served who identified as minorities will be 10%.
* Number of individuals served who received supported employment services will be 5.
* Number of individuals served with a disability impairment of "Deaf-blindness” will be 3.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* There was 1 individual served in PY 2021 and no individuals served in PY 2022 who received supported employment services.
* There were 3 individuals served in PY 2021 and 2 individuals served in PY 2022 with a disability impairment of “Deaf-blindness.”
* There were 11% (30 individuals) of the caseload who identified as minorities in PY 2021 and 12% (34 individuals) in PY 2022.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* Key strategies involve effective outreach. Each region creates an inclusive regional outreach plan. Each region creates a strategy to reach out to their communities.
* It is very important to get high school students connected with SE programs before they graduate.
* DBVI provides a key role in the partnership with Developmental Services Agencies by bringing expertise in low vision and adaptive blindness skills.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* DBVI recognizes the need to expand relationship with local Designated Services Agencies and focus on training and capacity building to deliver high quality supported employment services.
* The greatest challenge is getting a response from individuals who do not recognize the value of these services that can help them adapt to vision loss and find meaningful employment.
* The numbers for this population can vary greatly from year to year due to the low incidence of blindness. The key is for DBVI to stay closely connected with all visually impaired students in the state and act quickly with supported employment needs are anticipated.

**Goal 8. Consumer satisfaction with DBVI services will be maintained or increase.**

Measure:

* The survey instrument includes many questions to determine overall satisfaction with DBVI services and many subcategories of reporting that are used for program improvement.

Target:

* In the next Consumer Satisfaction Survey, at least 95% of respondents will report that they are satisfied with the DBVI vocational rehabilitation program.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

The most recent customer satisfaction preliminary results of the 3-year statewide random survey of all participants in the DBVI Vocational Vision Rehabilitation program. The current survey began in December 2021 and the final report was made available in March 2022.

* 97% of VT DBVI consumers report overall satisfaction; the highest rate on record (up from 92% in 2017).
* 97% felt that staff treated them with dignity and respect (up from a low of 95% in 2017).
* 93% report that services met their expectations (continuing a slight upward trend seen in prior years).
* 96% said that staff were helped to achieve their DBVI goals (up from 94% in 2017).
* 91% felt that the services they received helped them become more independent (up from 88% in 2017).

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI staff consistently delivers services well and help consumers to meet their goals and become better off.
* Staff are trained to use Customer-Centered Culture to obtain the Voice of the Customer as we develop strategies to accomplish desired results.
* Staff also use many of the practices in the “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen R. Covey to create goals, organize priorities, and effectively work with consumers by understanding their needs and developing a plan of services to accomplish their goals.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* The most common challenge for complete consumer satisfaction is effective communication. Consumers who exit the program without employment often site difficulties with communication. In many cases this is related to expectations that are outside of the DBVI program.

l. 2. Identify the goals and priorities in carrying out the VR and Supported Employment programs

See Goal 7.

l. 3. A. The most recent comprehensive statewide assessment, including any updates;

The goals were developed as part of DBVI’s comprehensive needs assessment which included surveys, focus groups, journal research, consumer-driven events, student surveys, and staff/SRC input. DBVI staff met several times to review the needs of all results with the SRC to determine the goals. These are outlined in the input from the SRC and the statewide assessment sections.

l. 3. B. The State’s performance under the performance accountability measures of section 116 of WIOA; and

Vermont’s DVR and DBVI programs also received data for the first time on all five WIOA Common Performance Measures and how we compared to national averages. This data shows that:

* Vermont VR consumers are achieving all outcomes at a higher rate than the national average on all five performance measures.
* The employment rate two quarters post exit improved continues to improve, moving from 49% in SFY 2019 to 51.1% in SFY 2020 to 53.5% in SFY 2021.
* The median earnings two quarters post exit increased jumped from being below the national average in SFY 2020 to being above it in SFY 2021, with an increase from $3,901 in SFY 2020 to $4,630 in SFY 2021.
* See Goal #1above for Performance Measures that are specific to the DBVI program.

Based on the data gathered and discussions with the State Rehabilitation Council and DBVI, the following are the key findings of the CY 2017-2020 DBVI Comprehensive Needs Assessment.

* DBVI needs to create apprenticeship opportunities.
* DBVI needs to identify and implement strategies to increase consumer hourly wages at closure.
* DBVI consumers need opportunities to gain industry recognized credentials in skilled professions.
* DBVI must develop strategies to meet and exceed the outcome targets under the Common Performance Measures.

The WIOA Common Performance Measures significantly change the way DBVI is measured. The emphasis on career development, credential attainment, and measurable skills gains, will require DBVI to consider changing current practice. As previously noted, DBVI will be looking at strategies to increase wages and assist consumers in obtaining industry recognized credentials. In addition, DBVI will continue to help consumers develop a career path.

l. 3. C. Other available information on the operation and effectiveness of the VR program, including any reports received from the State Rehabilitation Council and findings and recommendations from monitoring activities conducted under section 107.

DBVI reviewed data provided by RSA from the Chris Pope presentation to the NCSAB membership that included the performance measures for all blind agencies. These data and progress to goals and priorities from the last state plan, and results of the CSNA were evaluated by DBVI and the SRC and used to shape this new state plan.

n. 1. Specify the State's goals and priorities for funds received under section 603 of the Rehabilitation Act for the provision of supported employment services

DBVI realizes that it serves customers with the most significant disabilities who at times require vocational support beyond the scope of DBVI’s standard services. It is for this reason that DBVI maintains a “Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) with the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR). This MOU describes how funds will be utilized and services provided in the area of supported employment. Thus consumers who may require intensive services, beyond vision impairment issues, to acquire or maintain employment can be provided with the needed support. This MOU provides $30,000 of Title VI, Part B funds to DVR’s Supported Employment Program. In exchange DBVI is able to have consumers avail themselves of a comprehensive and established program providing statewide coverage and the expertise of supported employment providers. These funds are incorporated directly from the DVR grant from RSA and DBVI no longer receives them.This change occurred more than 15 years ago. Because of the multiple barriers that some DBVI consumers face, the DVR Supported Employment Coordinator helps to determine the most appropriate agency for those with multiple disabilities. DVR may be the more appropriate agency for DBVI consumers in cases where multiple disabilities are present. This coordination, with extensive knowledge of statewide resources, particularly in areas of psychiatric and developmental disability services, can provide technical assistance and the ability to provide to DBVI staff and consumers the best combination of resources. DBVI has does receive a grant award of $6,000 from RSA of Title VI, Part B funds to provide supported employment services to qualified consumers.  This allows the provision for a contract with a support person, job coach on the job site, or enrollment in a specific program to obtain job skills.

n. 2. A. The provision of extended services for a period not to exceed 4 years; an

DBVI has an agreement with a designated agency that specializes in employment for youth who need supported employment. This is in addition to the collaboration with DVR, and is intended to meet the needs of youth. This agreement is used to provide supported employment services for up to 24 months for youth that have obtained employment.

n. 2. B. How the State will leverage other public and private funds to increase resources for extended services and expanded supported employment opportunities for youth with the most significant disabilities.

See N.1. above.

o. 1. The methods to be used to expand and improve services to individuals with disabilities

[View corresponding narrative from PYs 2020-2023](https://resourcevt.org/training-programs/leap/)

In Section (l) of the State Plan, DBVI outlined its goals and priorities for Program Year 2022. The goals and strategies established by DBVI and the SRC are as follows:

Goals:

1. DBVI will align services to support consumers in achieving the WIOA Common Performance Outcome Measures.
2. DBVI will increase the percentage of consumers earning more than minimum wage at closure.
3. DBVI will increase consumer opportunities to participate in post-secondary education and training and gain industry recognized credentials.
4. In partnership with VDOL and Community Partners, DBVI will create more opportunities for DBVI consumers to participate in DOL programs.
5. DBVI will improve the outcomes for students and youth.
6. DBVI will continue to expand efforts to effectively serve employers through Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS).
7. DBVI will continue to seek opportunities to expand and/or improve services for underserved populations including individuals who neeIn order to maximize DBVI outcomes under the WIOA Common Performance Measures, DBVI will implement the following:
8. DBVI will continue to track consumer satisfaction with the program’s services through the Tri-annual consumer satisfaction survey.

Strategy 1: DBVI will implement a series of initiatives to align staff practices, services and assignment of resources to meet the WIOA Common Performance Measures. Goals 1, 2, 3, and 4.

In order to maximize DBVI outcomes under the WIOA Common Performance Measures, DBVI will implement or continue to implement the following:

* DBVI will track the three leading indicators which are:
* Leading Measure One: The use of career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options.
* Leading Measure Two: The involvement of master’s level certified blindness instructors to strengthen consumer adaptive skills in completing their employment goal.
* Leading Measure Three: Assistive technology evaluation or training to assist consumer with their employment goal.
* All DBVI staff will be trained to do vocational assessments and use assessments as a career planning tool.
* All staff will be familiar with education and training providers in their communities, as well as what career pathways and stackable credentials are offered. Counselors will be able to speak to consumers about possible career paths, based on assessments.
* Business Account Managers (BAMs) will understand the career paths in the businesses they serve.

New Ideas from the SRC:

* RTACs and other schools for the blind to learn about vocational and other practical assessments. Ie. Mississippi TAC, Hadley School for the Blind, etc.
* Job Accommodation Network for assistive technology.
* Griffin-Hammis learn more about customized employment/career assessments.

Strategy 2: Coordinate efforts with the Vermont Department of Labor (VDOL) and the Agency of Education (AOE) to ensure that blind and visually impaired individuals have access to employment training and other components of the workforce system. Goals 2 and 4.

As noted in the Unified Section of the plan, DBVI will be working closely with DVR, VDOL and AOE to ensure DBVI consumers have access to all the workforce development opportunities available in their communities. DBVI will be implementing strategies to make this happen including the following:

* DBVI will meet regularly with VDOL to facilitate coordination of services.
* DBVI, DVR, AOE and VDOL will implement systems to track and manage co-enrollment in each other’s programs.
* DBVI will explore virtual access to DOL programs.
* DBVI, with the support of DVR, AOE, and the RYAD learning collaborative will develop stronger partnerships with the local Technical Educational Centers, Adult Basic Education programs, AmeriCorps, and Community College of Vermont.
* DBVI will implement a plan for staying connected with all DOL partners of the AJC.
* DBVI will work closely with DOL to create and implement the Unified Plan with a common mission and vision to include all Vermonters in the workforce.
* DBVI will work with CWS local teams, Business Account Managers, and DOL to obtain employment needs of companies and then match DBVI customers with specific training.
* DBVI will invite DOL and AOE to a staff meeting to discuss collaboration ideas.

New Ideas from the SRC:

* DOL trainings on dual enrollment with DBVI.
* Continue to explore apprenticeships with HireAbility and DOL. Connect with BAMs and explore businesses interested in that.

Strategy 3: Expand employer outreach and engagement efforts through Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS) to effectively meet the needs of employers.  Goals 1 and 6.

As described in Section (g) of the State Plan, CWS is the primary employer outreach and engagement infrastructure for DVR and DBVI. CWS, and in particular the Business Account Managers, have been a very effective approach to engaging employers and developing employment opportunities for DBVI consumers. DBVI will expand these efforts through the following strategies:

* Seek opportunities to coordinate employer engagement with the Vermont Department of Labor.
* Build on and expand employer events such as job fairs, employer breakfasts and business recognition events designed to engage employers.

New Ideas from the SRC:

* Reach out to Vermont State Employee Credit Union and share with Nat Piper, short staffed and hired outside company to answer phones. Reach out strategy-Gorilla Marketing

Strategy 4: Explore strategies to assist DBVI consumers to retain or advance in employment. Goals 1, 2, 3 and 4.

DBVI will develop and implement a systematic approach to follow up with consumers after job placement. The intent will be to re-engage the consumer at key points to determine:

* If they need or want more support to retain their employment?
* If they want assistance with career development and training in their current employment?
* If they want to pursue further career development with a different employer or in a different field?

New Ideas from the SRC:

* Intellectual Point: IT training and certifications, [https://intellectualpoint.com/](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221105512)

The follow up will occur at key points after initial job placement. The first contact will be immediately after initial job placement through a congratulations letter and follow up call from the VR counselor.

The second contact will occur at 60 days post placement. The final contact will occur at three months post-employment closure.

The hope is that this systematic follow up will both help consumers retain employment and identify opportunities for career advancement.

Strategy 5. Continue to explore strategies to develop and expand services for underserved populations including individuals who require supported employment through partnerships, grant and funding opportunities. Goals 2 and 7.

* DBVI will create an inclusive outreach plan that includes consumers and providers.
* Develop a set of outreach materials to be used at events across the state including outreach to minorities and underserved populations.
* Support efforts to establish Deaf-Blind SSP services in Vermont.
* Educate providers about the importance of timely referrals.
* Outreach to developmental disabilities services and mental health agencies that typically do not refer to DBVI.
* Each DBVI region will create an outreach plan for the year that includes outreach to minorities and other underserved or underrepresented individuals in each region.
* Coordinate with DVR Transition Counselors, and the Teachers of the Visually Impaired to increase and expand services for transition students. Create some documents that explain what DBVI can offer.
* Create a statewide system to track all visually impaired students as they graduate high school.

New Ideas from the SRC:

* Pathways to Partnership Grant, over the next 5 years
* Specialize Support Program through VANCRO.
* ABLE Newsletter to add information.

Strategy 6: Improve Outcomes for Students and Youth. Goal 5.

* Each DBVI Counselor will meet at the beginning of the school year with the Teachers of the Visually Impaired in their region to create a plan for identifying potentially eligible students and opening eligible students in the DBVI VR program.
* Each DBVI Counselor will meet with the General DVR Transition Counselor in their region.
* A DBVI Action Plan Transition form will be completed and updated annually for all eligible students.
* Participate in statewide Core Transition Teams.
* Continue to expand pre-employment transitional services offered in the Learn, Earn and Prosper (LEAP) Program to meet the needs of students and families and therefore increase enrollment participation.
* Continue to develop LEAP virtual pre-employment transitional programming as well as in person community day programming.
* Each IL Rehabilitation Associate will reach out to partners including VRTs, Orientation and Mobility Instructors and Teachers of the Visually Impaired in their region to identify potentially eligible students in the DBVI IL program.

New Ideas from the SRC:

* Add language around the OSEP Grant
* VT Pathways to Partnership Grant
* Explore apprenticeships, RYAD collaborative

Strategy 7: DBVI will promote employment by educating employers and providing opportunities for increased exposure to people who are blind or visually impaired. This will address “Societies reaction to blindness.” Goals 1 and 6.

* Create products to bring and teach employers to understand the assistive equipment
* Create a network of ambassadors who demonstrate their assistive technology or white canes and demonstrate to the employers about how they use technology to complete work tasks and travel independently.
* Create a video of people working at their job.
* Find opportunities to show the film “Going Blind” to employer groups at Chambers, Rotary’s, and public libraries.
* Find opportunities to teach employer groups about assistive technology.
* Encourage employers to visit the DBVI website.
* Explore the idea of connecting employers through discussion group.
* Work closely with GCEPD to promote employment of people with disabilities.
* Create educational activities for White Cane Day and Disability Awareness Month in October.
* Create a PSA involving an employed individual and company.
* Offer Simulations to demonstrate “what is it like to be blind?”

New Ideas from the SRC:

* Card table with Legislatures and partner with VABVI/HireAbility
* Pathways to Partnership grant: Vermont Family Network- development of videos/short clips

Strategy 8. DBVI will create Consumer Driven Events to assist individuals as they prepare for employment.  Goals 1 and 2.

* Continue Great Expectations consumer driven events each year.
* Create workshops to develop interpersonal and employment skills
* Create employment support groups.
* Create networking events.
* Opportunities to practice interview and job readiness skills.
* Create peer mentoring opportunities for adjustment to blindness and technology.

New Ideas from the SRC:

* Create a calendar for consumers and DBVI staff that has all of these events in one location. Add it to the P2P Website.
* Create a quarterly work employment group to meet virtually.

Strategy 9: DBVI will create opportunities for access to information.

Goals: 4 and 8.

* Create opportunities for Peer-to-Peer Technology Instruction
* DBVI will continue to expand the information on the website and will work with the SRC for ideas.
* Use Customer-Centered Culture to determine “what types of information customers really want?”
* Find ways to improve the process for the accessibility of online job applications.

New Ideas from the SRC: TBD

Strategy 10: DBVI will address transportation challenges. Goals: 7 and 8.

* DBVI will work with VTRANS to learn more about their “Go Vermont” website that helps people connect with all the available transportation options in their area.
* Coordinate with the Vermont Transportation Department on their new initiate and technology application that helps travelers find all the available transportation options in an area.
* Consider policy to pay for mileage and time of VABVI drivers in order to have a network of drivers available to meet transportation needs.
* Participate in system level planning.
* Assist VABVI to increase the number of volunteer drivers.
* Promote the option for DBVI to pay for the first 60 days of a ride to the job.

Strategy 11: DBVI will improve communication with customers regarding expectations for DBVI services. Goals: 8.

* DBVI will develop a consistent statewide orientation to DBVI services which will be implemented in all four regional offices.
* DBVI will work within the principles of Customer-Centered Culture to make sure we are answering the question: “What does the consumer really want?”
* DBVI will continually evaluate timeliness, accuracy, and ease of obtaining services. DBVI will establish an ongoing closure survey. Results will be shared and evaluated with the SRC on an ongoing basis.
* Ask customers to evaluate DBVI products using the Customer-Centered Culture model.
* Implement a closure survey that can be sent to all closed cases.
* DBVI will examine and develop language for successful closure that celebrates successful status for consumers in the VR and IL programs.
* DBVI will examine feasibility to pilot post closure status for the Independent Living program in collaboration with state partners such as VABVI.

New Ideas from the SRC: TBD

Strategy 12: DBVI will provide technology training for people who need to prepare for a job or succeed at a current job. Goals: 1 and 2.

* DBVI will create a consumer listserv that will be used to share technology solutions for access and work and in the community.
* Create a menu of training options ranging from expert training to independent study
* Create Peer to Peer Technology Instruction
* DBVI will problem solve to make job sites accessible through technology training.
* Use a team approach for a given situation including customer, job developer, counselor, job site technology evaluation, and training.
* DBVI will assist customers to continuously improve work related technology skills like using the internet, Microsoft Office, and Adobe documents so they can do their job in the most efficient way.

New Ideas from the SRC: TBD

Strategy 13: DBVI will implement strategies designed to enable DBVI customers to access higher wage employment through short-term training. Goals: 1, 2, 3, and 4.

* DBVI will work closely with vocational technical education centers in Vermont to help high school students and adults prepare for the workforce.
* Establish relationships with vocational centers to get consumers trained for positions in the area
* Attend State Technical Education Director’s Meeting
* Evaluate the impact of progressive employment on outcomes.
* Track education and training opportunities that lead to degrees or credentials.
* Establish working relationships with Vocational Tech Centers and track participation.
* DBVI will work to meet goals outlined in Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development grant and participate in RYAD learning collaborative.

New Ideas from the SRC: TBD

o. 2. How a broad range of assistive technology services and devices will be provided to individuals with disabilities at each stage of the rehabilitation process and on a statewide basis

DBVI has a strong and effective process for determining assistive technology needs and delivering necessary training. The DBVI technology evaluator has been providing this service to DBVI consumers for more than 20-years. This service is consistently ranked in all surveys as the most helpful for meeting employment goals. Technology is the key for opening doors for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Our goal is to stay current and to find solutions for accessing the essential functions of a job. Technology is often the answer for creating access to job tasks. Once the technology is identified, it is installed and followed-up with on-site training.

The most common solutions involve screen magnification, screen readers, and electronic magnification. The I-Technology has created opportunities for DBVI consumers to use mobile technology for work tasks. People can now use voiceover on the iPhone to access their email, contacts, and calendars on-the-go. There are also several new apps that can take a picture of text documents and have it read using voiceover. Access to information is essential to many job tasks and DBVI makes this a priority.

o. 3. The outreach procedures that will be used to identify and serve individuals with disabilities who are minorities, including those with the most significant disabilities, as well as those who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program

Data from the CSNA shows that DBVI needs to continue outreach efforts in all areas. The main strategy is for each region to implement an annual outreach plan. This plan will include general outreach and specific outreach to minority groups and underserved and underrepresented groups. These plans will vary due to the nature of each region. For example, the Northeast Kingdom is very rural and the city of Burlington is very populated. Each plan will specifically include outreach to minority groups, people who are older and want to work, students, and individuals who are deaf-blind.

One major outreach strategy is to eye doctors. Materials and brochures are delivered to the administrative staff at the eye doctor. The staff are given an orientation to our service and instructions for letting there patients know how to reach DBVI. Another initiative includes ads in the local community online forums. Each region will seek opportunities to speak to local community groups to describe our services. The procedures for identifying outreach efforts to people who are minorities or are unserved or underserved are included in the outreach to eye doctors, online community forums and community groups. Each DBVI region will use these procedures to address the unique needs in their region. For example, there are different community groups depending on the specific area of the state. Also, some regions are very rural and require procedures that involve other service providers to help spread the word about DBVI services to people who are minorities, and unserved and underserved populations.

o. 4. The methods to be used to 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-employment transition services)

DBVI uses several strategies to address the needs and transition. It begins with outreach to all students who are blind or visually impaired. Before school begins each year, DBVI Counselors meet with the Teachers of the Visually Impaired for all high schools in their region. They review the student list and determine which are potentially eligible as Pre-Application students and which are ready to be open the DBVI VR as an “Open” case. All of these students have the opportunity to participate in the 5-core Pre-ETS services. Outreach is also made directly to students and families with an explanation about the ways DBVI can assist with Transition Planning and the availability of the 5-core Pre-ETS services.

Several strategies are used to deliver the 5-core Pre-ETS services. Some students may decide to begin as a Pre-Application student and participate in work experiences in their local communities. They may also be connected with special job readiness training opportunities in their local high schools. Other students may choose to participate in short-term residential work-based learning or job readiness training. This strategy is necessary in Vermont because of the rural nature. Many small communities do not have any work experiences available. This approach makes it possible for students to choose from a variety of work experiences and internships in Burlington where there are many employers. During the school year there are several job readiness workshops during school vacations and weekends so students don’t miss school. This approach takes several partners and has shown great results. There are now many virtual pre-ETS experiences and hybrid opportunities due to the pandemic. Please see section “P” for Progress Updates.

o. 5. If applicable, plans for establishing, developing, or improving community rehabilitation programs within the State

DBVI has had a major commitment to improving our performance under section 116 of WIOA. Strategies above directly relate to improving the state’s performance with respect to the WIOA Common Performance Measures.

DBVI will continue to use the Creative Workforce System to connect DBVI consumers with employers. Progressive Employment continues to be very effective. Many DBVI consumers begin with a work experience and eventually get a job at that company. Other individuals try a couple different work experiences and decide to go for more education or vocational training in an area of their interest. These experiences are always positive steps toward determining future careers and help people learn what they like and don’t like. It is also a great way to educate employers about the abilities of people doing these jobs.

DBVI also supports college or vocational training which ultimately lead to good jobs. DBVI consistently ranks above the national blind agency average for wages and number of hours worked. This result is directly connected to college and vocational training.

* PY 2020 WIOA Performance Measures.  In Vermont (includes DVR and DBVI)
* Measurable Skills Gains were 45.3% and the national average was 52.1%.
* Employment Rate Second Quarter after Exit was 56.8% and the national average was 37.6%.
* Median Earnings Second Quarter after Exit was $7,326 and the national average was $7,117.
* Employment Rate Fourth Quarter after Exit was 47.9% and the national average was 30.6%.
* Credential Attainment Rate was 88.9% and the national average was 30.4%.

The strategies to improve these measures include a commitment to a career pathway. DBVI reinforces with each consumer that our services can help them build a career. They can work with us to obtain industry credentials and advance in their current careers. They are also encouraged to seek post-secondary education or vocational training while working with DBVI. Some consumers start with progressive employment and try different jobs of interest through a work experience. This helps them learn about jobs they like or don’t like and helps them make decisions about future education and training. Each of these strategies leads to job retention, higher wage jobs, new skills, nd industry credentials.

o. 6. Strategies to improve the performance of the State with respect to the performance accountability measures under section 116 of WIOA

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o. 7. Strategies for assisting other components of the statewide workforce development system in assisting individuals with disabilities

DBVI will work with DOL and AOE to maximize integration of individuals who are blind or visually impaired into the available trainings and programs. This will involve a commitment from all partners for universal design. DBVI has been a voice for this approach and provides expertise in this area. WIOA is a great opportunity for DBVI consumers to access these programs that have typically been underutilized by this population. Access to these programs has proven to be challenging in the past and these new partnerships using universal design will certainly open doors. DBVI is also encouraged to learn that DOL will be offering many of their programs virtually. This will provide more access for DBVI consumers.

o. 8. A. Achieve goals and priorities by the State, consistent with the comprehensive needs assessment;

See Above (O.1).

o. 8. B. Support innovation and expansion activities; and

Innovation and Expansion funds have been used to support initiatives in employment related initiatives in the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL) submitted by the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC). The DBVI Director actively participates in SILC activities and helps to coordinates employment related initiatives in the SPIL and DBVI Goals and Priorities.

One area of overlap is related to people who are deaf and blind. The SILC and DBVI have both identified this as an underserved group. Both entities are working together to develop strategies to meet these needs. Another area of mutual interest is transportation. This is essential for employment and requires collaboration and creativity in a rural state.

o. 8. C. Overcome identified barriers relating to equitable access to and participation of individuals with disabilities in the State VR Services Program and the State Supported Employment Services Program.

DBVI has a long and successful history of collaboration with the larger General DVR Agency in Vermont to connect consumers with the most severe disabilities with the Developmental Service Agencies in Vermont. This collaboration makes it possible for students to be identified early in high school and making a determination about meeting a funding priority before graduation.

In cases when students do not meet the criteria for a waiver, DBVI has established a partnership directly with a Developmental Service Agency to provide specialized job development services.

p. 1. A. Identify the strategies that contributed to the achievement of the goals

DBVI Measures, Targets, Goals and Priorities; and PY2021 and PY2022 updates as outlined in the previous State Plan:

**Goal 1. DBVI will align services to support consumers in achieving the WIOA Common Performance Outcome Measures.**

Measures

* Employment retention six months post closure.
* Employment retention twelve months post closure.
* Median earnings six months post closure.
* Credential attainment rate.
* Measurable skills gains.
* Employer engagement.

PY 2022 WIOA Performance Measures In Vermont (for DVR and DBVI)

* Measurable Skills Gains were 56.7% and the national average was 48.7%.
* Employment Rate Second Quarter after Exit was 56.8% and the national average was 37.6%.
* Median Earnings Second Quarter after Exit was $6,153 and the national average was $5,130.
* Employment Rate Fourth Quarter after Exit was 55.4% and the national average was 52.8%.
* Credential Attainment Rate was 53.2% and the national average was 37.6%.

DBVI is a strong supporter of the WIOA Common Performance Measures. The new measures support consumers in their career goals and promote higher wages and more sustainable employment. The WIOA measures are extremely lagging, meaning most of the desired outcomes occur well after services end. For example, the measure of median earnings occurs two full quarters after case closure. As a result, the measures are not very useful in guiding the work of DBVI staff on a day-to-day basis. DBVI decided to establish the following leading measures:

* Leading Measure One: The use of career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options.
* Leading Measure Two: The use of blindness adaptive skill evaluation and training.
* Leading Measure Three: The use of blindness assistive technology evaluation and training.

PY 2021 and PY 2022 Update:

* The percentage of case closures that had career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options was 18% in PY 2021 and 5% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of case closures that had blindness adaptive skills training from the Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired was 67% in PY 2021 and 58% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of case closures that received Assistive Technology Evaluation and Training was 67% in PY 2021 and 58% in PY 2022

Targets for the Lead Indicators:

* 25% of cases will include use of career assessment tools to support exploration of higher wage and higher skill options.
* 60% of cases will include blindness adaptive skill evaluation and training.
* 60% of cases will include blindness assistive technology evaluation and training.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI is dedicated to assembling a highly skilled team that revolves around participants and their specific vocational goals. This comprehensive support encompasses various professionals, including Vision Rehab Therapists (VRTs), Certified Orientation & Mobility Specialists (COMS), an Assistive Technology Evaluator, and an Assistive Technology Trainer. This collaborative approach consistently contributes to elevated success rates in these leading measures.
* DBVI continues to involve most consumers in services to build adaptive blindness skills and assistive technology skills. Having these skills helps consumers obtain and to keep employment.
* DBVI continues to use progressive employment opportunities to help consumers learn about the types of employment they like and don’t like This can also be a way to demonstrate skills that lead to employment.
* DBVI continues to help consumers on a career path by advancing in their current jobs of starting new employment with new credentials, education, or special training.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* DBVI attributes the decline in assessment rates between PY 2021 and PY 2022 to the far-reaching effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Acknowledging the inherent accessibility barriers of traditional career assessments, DBVI remains committed to seeking alternative approaches. To more effectively evaluate the transferable skills and interests of participants, DBVI will explore hands-on assessments through work experiences and progressive employment opportunities. Additionally, collaborative efforts with schools for the blind will be undertaken to gain insights into the accessibility of existing assessment tools.
* Transportation continues to be a major barrier for career advancement and high paying jobs. The highest paying careers are in Chittenden County and DBVI consumers cannot get there and do not want to relocate.
* DBVI is actively seeking virtual job opportunities as a strategy to have work from home opportunities.

**Goal 2.  DBVI will increase the percentage of consumers earning more than minimum wage at closure.**

Measures:

* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings less than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 150% of minimum wage at employment closure.

Targets:

* DBVI consumers earning less than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure will be 20% or lower.
* DBVI consumers earning 110% or greater of minimum wage at closure will be 50% or higher.
* DBVI consumers earning 150% or greater of minimum wage at closure will be 50% or higher.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings less than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure was 17% in PY 2021 and 23% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 110% of minimum wage at employment closure was 83% in PY 2021 and 77% in PY 2022.
* The percentage of DBVI consumers with earnings greater than 150% of minimum wage at employment closure was 67% in PY 2021 and 50% in PY 2022.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI supports consumers in higher wage goals through a strong, collaborative relationship with Workforce Development Partners such as Vermont Association for Business, Industry, and Rehabilitation (VABIR) and ReSource.
* DBVI supports a dual-customer design to serve both the needs of the DBVI consumer and the employer.
* DBVI consumers who continue their post-secondary education have higher wage employment.
* Consumers who participate in progressive employment, vocational training, and industry credentials have higher wage employment.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Vermont currently has limited apprenticeship opportunities that are accessible to blind and visually impaired individuals. DBVI will continue to explore apprenticeship opportunities through participation in the Rural Youth Apprenticeship Development (RYAD) Learning Collaborative.
* Many Vermont companies have limited opportunity to advance in a specific role. In some cases, advancement requires that a person switch to a bigger company.

**Goal 3. DBVI will increase consumer opportunities to participate in post-secondary education and training and gain industry recognized credentials.**

Measure:

* Number of individuals achieving PSE credential attainment.

Targets:

* Number of individuals achieving PSE credential attainment will be 10.
* The number of individuals engaged in PSE credential training will be 30.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The number of individuals achieving PSE credential was 5 in PY 2021 and 6 in PY 2022.
* The number of individuals engaged in PSE credential training was 18 in PY 2021 and 19 in PY 2022.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI empowers individuals to pursue post-secondary education by collaborating with Teachers for the Visually Impaired (TVI). This strategic partnership facilitates early enrollment of students in high school, allowing DBVI counselors and team members to actively guide and support them in exploring a diverse range of post-secondary education opportunities.
* DBVI involves partners that can support consumers with adjustment and timing to pursue their post-secondary education goals.
* Involving students in the Learn, Earn, and Prosper program has helped students learn pre-employment skills and become motivated to pursue careers and additional education and vocational training.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Building industry recognized credentials continues to be a challenge. Many of the opportunities are not accessible for people who are blind. This goal requires creative solutions and finding partners who can provide accessible training opportunities. DBVI is actively looking for accessible credential building opportunities that are available virtually.
* Accessible opportunities available in the state tend to lack an industry-recognized credential upon completion of the training program.

**Goal 4. In partnership with VDOL and Community Partners, DBVI will create more opportunities for DBVI consumers to participate in training programs.**

DOL programs can offer DBVI consumers the opportunity to earn money while receiving necessary training to achieve a credential and higher wage employment.

Measure:

* DBVI consumers will enroll in DOL and other training programs.

Targets:

* The number of DBVI consumers enrolled in a DOL programs will be 4.
* The number of DBVI consumers enrolled in other training programs will be 40.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The number of individuals with DOL involvement was 6 in PY 2021 and 6 in PY 2022.
* The percentage of case closures that had services from the Vermont Association of Business, Industry and Rehabilitation was 31% in PY 2021 and 25% in PY 2022

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* VABIR Employment Consultants create progressive employment opportunities that support DBVI consumers in finding competitive integrated employment.
* DBVI continues establish relationship with DOL initiatives.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Typically partner programs are not fully accessible to individuals who are blind.
* DBVI believes the new partnerships through WIOA will lead to DBVI customers participating in the many partner programs of the Job Centers.

**Goal 5. DBVI will continue to implement highly effective Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) for students statewide.**

Measures:

* DBVI will expand services overall to youth. The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services will increase.
* DBVI will increase the number of students participating in pre-ETS services.

Targets:

* The percentage of population served under age 22 at entry into DBVI services will be 25% or higher.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has grown from 17% of people served in SFY 2014 to 27% of people served in SFY 2020 and remains substantial at 22% in SFY 2023.
* LEAP FFY 2023 Total Training Hours: 2,310
	+ Work-Based Learning Training hours (both in-person & virtual): 1,914
	+ Work Readiness Training & Self-Advocacy, Social and Leadership Instruction (both in-person & virtual): 315
	+ Orientation and Mobility with a COMS (both in-person & virtual): 72
	+ Independent Living Skills with a CVRT (both in-person & virtual): 58

The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has dipped slightly from its recent average of 25% of people served. In SFY2023, 22% of people served had entered DBVI services before the age of 22.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* The Learn, Earn, and Prosper Program continues to expand. In addition to the summer residential program, LEAP now includes job readiness skills training throughout the school year and year-round virtual pre-ETS training.
* DBVI staff participate in the pre-ETS community of practice to learn best practices and collaborate with other states.
* DBVI staff meet regularly with the Teachers of the Visually Impaired in their region to learn about the pre-ETS needs of students on their mutual caseloads and to discuss referral of new students.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* In FFY2023, overall training hours decreased by 209 hours. This decrease was mainly due to the fact that the residential program did not host an Intern in summer of 2023. Interns engage in programming close to eight weeks, full time and with a focus on their career interest. We did not have a student this past summer of that age or skill to engage in that level of programming. We hope to welcome Interns back next summer.
* The percentage of population served who were under age 22 at entry into DBVI services has dipped slightly from its recent average of 25% of people served. In SFY2023, 22% of people served had entered DBVI services before the age of 22. Vermont DBVI serves a small state with a low incidence disability. Due to this, DBVI anticipates that the number of students will fluctuate year to year.
* Some families are reluctant to have their student participate. The Teachers of the visually impaired are very helpful to encourage participation. Once students take the first step and try and event, they continue to be involved.

**Goal 6. DBVI will continue to expand efforts to effectively serve employers through Creative Workforce Solutions (CWS).**

The Business Account Managers (BAMS) are the primary employer engagement staff for DVR/DBVI. DVR/DBVI measures employer engagement through the following metrics:

* New Employer Contacts: These are defined as new contacts with employers who have never engaged with DVR/DBVI.
* Employer Activities: These are defined as engagement activities with employers who have an ongoing relationship with DVR/DBVI.
* Employer Opportunities: These are defined as specific participant opportunities such as a job opening, training opportunity, work-based learning opportunity, company tour or informational interview.
* Caseload Driven Outreach: Caseload driven outreach is defined as labor market outreach directly related to participants on counselors’ current caseloads. Business Account Managers are tasked with directing two-thirds of their activities to caseload needs.

PY 2022 Update:

* New Employer Contacts: 1,573
* Employer Activities: 3,587
* Employer Opportunities: 2,194
* Caseload Driven Outreach: 776

Targets:

* New Employer Contacts:1,600
* Employer Activities: 3,700 distinct engagement activities
* Employer Opportunities: 2,400 distinct participant opportunities
* Caseload Driven Outreach: 900 distinct participant opportunities

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* The Business Account Managers are the main contact with businesses. They build the relationship and help match the employers needs with the skills of our DBVI consumers. This single point of contact has worked very well, and businesses appreciate that they are not being contacts by many different agencies.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* Some businesses need very specific highly skilled employees that are not always on our caseloads. It works best when the employer has positions and are willing to provide on-the-job training or apprenticeships.

**Goal 7. DBVI will continue to seek opportunities to expand and/or improve services for underserved populations including individuals who need supported employment.**

DBVI recognizes that there continues to be populations of Vermonters with disabilities that are unserved or underserved in the state. These include, but are not limited to:

* Individuals with developmental disabilities who do not meet the developmental services system eligibility criteria or system of care priorities.
* Individuals with other severe disabilities, including individuals who are deaf-blind who need supported employment.

DBVI will partner with DVR to explore opportunities to expand or improve services to address the unmet needs of these groups. This includes exploring new partnerships or expanding existing partnerships with other agencies, funding sources and stakeholders.

Measures:

* Number of individuals served who identified as minorities.
* Number of individuals served who received supported employment services.
* Number of individuals served with a disability impairment of "Deaf-blindness."

Targets:

* Number of individuals served who identified as minorities will be 10%.
* Number of individuals served who received supported employment services will be 5.
* Number of individuals served with a disability impairment of "Deaf-blindness” will be 3.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

* There was 1 individual served in PY 2021 and no individuals served in PY 2022 who received supported employment services.
* There were 3 individuals served in PY 2021 and 2 individuals served in PY 2022 with a disability impairment of “Deaf-blindness.”
* There were 11% (30 individuals) of the caseload who identified as minorities in PY 2021 and 12% (34 individuals) in PY 2022.

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* Key strategies involve effective outreach. Each region creates an inclusive regional outreach plan. Each region creates a strategy to reach out to their communities.
* It is very important to get high school students connected with SE programs before they graduate.
* DBVI provides a key role in the partnership with Developmental Services Agencies by bringing expertise in low vision and adaptive blindness skills.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* DBVI recognizes the need to expand relationship with local Designated Services Agencies and focus on training and capacity building to deliver high quality supported employment services.
* The greatest challenge is getting a response from individuals who do not recognize the value of these services that can help them adapt to vision loss and find meaningful employment.
* The numbers for this population can vary greatly from year to year due to the low incidence of blindness. The key is for DBVI to stay closely connected with all visually impaired students in the state and act quickly with supported employment needs are anticipated.

**Goal 8. Consumer satisfaction with DBVI services will be maintained or increase.**

Measure:

* The survey instrument includes many questions to determine overall satisfaction with DBVI services and many subcategories of reporting that are used for program improvement.

Target:

* In the next Consumer Satisfaction Survey, at least 95% of respondents will report that they are satisfied with the DBVI vocational rehabilitation program.

PY 2021 and 2022 Update:

The most recent customer satisfaction preliminary results of the 3-year statewide random survey of all participants in the DBVI Vocational Vision Rehabilitation program. The current survey began in December 2021 and the final report was made available in March 2022.

* 97% of VT DBVI consumers report overall satisfaction; the highest rate on record (up from 92% in 2017).
* 97% felt that staff treated them with dignity and respect (up from a low of 95% in 2017).
* 93% report that services met their expectations (continuing a slight upward trend seen in prior years).
* 96% said that staff were helped to achieve their DBVI goals (up from 94% in 2017).
* 91% felt that the services they received helped them become more independent (up from 88% in 2017).

Strategies that contributed to the achievement of this goal included:

* DBVI staff consistently delivers services well and help consumers to meet their goals and become better off.
* Staff are trained to use Customer-Centered Culture to obtain the Voice of the Customer as we develop strategies to accomplish desired results.
* Staff also use many of the practices in the “7 Habits of Highly Effective People” by Stephen R. Covey to create goals, organize priorities, and effectively work with consumers by understanding their needs and developing a plan of services to accomplish their goals.

Factors that continue to impede implementation include:

* The most common challenge for complete consumer satisfaction is effective communication. Consumers who exit the program without employment often site difficulties with communication. In many cases this is related to expectations that are outside of the DBVI program.

**Overall Program Results and Highlights**

This year DBVI held several White Cane events in each of the DBVI regions. The intent was to educate the public about White Cane Safety Awareness. The white cane is a symbol of strength and independence, used by people who are blind as they travel independently. Many members of the public and community leaders usually attend and participate in a simulated walk in the community facilitated by an Orientation and Mobility instructor to increase the awareness of what it is like to travel with the white cane.

The DBVI events were held this year in Barre, Burlington, Rutland, and Springfield. Each event included an experiential walk through each town and guest speakers who discussed specialized technology used by people who are blind. Participants included many individuals who are blind or visually impaired and several town officials who wanted to learn ways to promote safe travel for people who are blind in their town.

The Vermont Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (VABVI) was granted permanent additional funding of $100,000 from the State to assist in reducing the social isolation of older Vermonters by providing additional instruction in through training Speech, Magnification, Access, Technology, Reading and Telecommunications (SMART). Historically, through the previous two rounds of temporary COVID Relief Funding (CRF), about 90% of all clients who completed these services, reported feeling less socially isolated and better off for having received SMART Services. Of those who did not report a change in their feelings of social isolation, the causes were due to extenuating circumstances not related to their vision or receipt of the training. Clients who received benefit were able to accomplish at least one or more tasks, such as video conferencing with their doctor, video/teleconferencing with the Peer Assisted Learning Session (PALS) Groups, communicating with family and friends through various modes of technology, having groceries delivered, and more.

DBVI also partnered and assisted with the DVR HireAbility Vermont Transition Core Teams Virtual Conference. This statewide event brought together Transition Core Teams from schools and employment service providers to share ideas about how to assist students with disabilities with their employment goals.

DBVI staff work towards continuous improvement by listening to the voice of customers and using that information and data to improve performance. An updated DBVI State Plan with new goals and strategies was completed and approved by the State Rehabilitation Council in February 2022 and can be found at [https://dbvi.vermont.gov/resources/publications](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X221143143). The next state plan is due in March 2024. Please also visit the success story link on DBVI’s website at [www.dbvi.vermont.gov](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145482X211059182) to see examples of people reaching their goals.

The federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires DBVI to use 15% of its federal grant award to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) creating an opportunity for DBVI to expand Pre-ETS services in the core areas:

* Job exploration counseling.
* Work-based learning opportunities.
* Counseling on post-secondary educational opportunities.
* Workplace readiness training.
* Instruction in self-advocacy.

DBVI has been successful in expanding Pre-ETS services for students who are blind or visually impaired by providing work-experiences, internships, and job readiness training to build skills necessary for career development. Learn, Earn, and Prosper (LEAP) is a program developed by DBVI to achieve these goals. Students participate in a slate of different options year-round to learn job readiness and self-advocacy skills, and to engage in work-based learning experiences. LEAP’s in-person and residential programming returned in 2022 after Vermont lifted COVID restrictions. LEAP also continued its year-round virtual programs. Virtual programs have become a significant access point for participants and families who are not yet ready for a residential experience. **Check out** [**DBVI’s new LEAP video**](https://wioaplans.ed.gov/dashboard/320081?v=J_NJurYyU8U&t=88s)**.**

 DBVI Future Directions:

DBVI believes the best path forward for people with visual impairments includes a solid foundation in technology. DBVI staff stay current to help customers achieve their employment and independence goals. For example, several new apps are including artificial intelligence This allows blind users to use the camera in the smart phones to identify objects, read text, identify colors, and provide information about products in the store.

DBVI continued with the third year of a Rural Youth Apprenticeship learning collaborative with a focus on creating apprenticeship opportunities in a rural state. This was a competitive process and other states include Arkansas and Wyoming. The learning opportunities are facilitated by the team from University of Massachusetts - Boston in their Rural Apprenticeship Development program. It is a 5-year grant with the goal of creating apprenticeship opportunities for people who are blind in Vermont.

Program Overview for Students

The LEAP Program provides blind or visually impaired students and young adults, ages 14-24, the opportunity to gain skills to be independent, confident, and productive. As a workforce development program delivering Pre-Employment Transition Services, LEAP provides work-based learning experiences, internships, and workshops with the outcome of increased employability.

LEAP offerings focus on work-based learning experiences, job readiness skills and self-advocacy instruction, including effective written and verbal communication, partner and teamwork, cooperation, independent problem-solving, professionalism, supporting others, disability understanding and disclosure, goal setting, use of accommodations, leadership, assertiveness, and mobility.

In 2023, LEAP partnered with Vermont Center for Independent Living (VCIL), Big Heavy World, ReSOURCE’s Administration Department, Vermont Digger, Vermont Story Lab, Amanda Rodda (TVI and math/computer science educator based in Washington), Burlington Media Factory, the Overlook Cafe, ReSOURCE, and Vermont Garden Network to provide internships and work-based learning experiences.

LEAP connected students with experts and professionals in their fields from across the country. Students engaged in a diverse array of virtual trainings and professional speaker retreats. Many of these speakers were blind or visually impaired themselves and shared their successes in their careers.

**Recent Developments and Accomplishments**

OSEP Grant Funding

In August 2023 LEAP was awarded a 5-year grant from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). This grant’s intention is to provide assistive technology and college and career readiness training for secondary students with sensory disabilities. It is intended to increase collaboration between students and transition networks, and increase vocational, college, and technology skills in transition aged students - starting as young as sixth grade.

LEAP is utilizing funding from OSEP to develop “LEAP Connect.” This endeavor will integrate Assistive Technology training curriculum into all of our existing programming and develop brand new programs to offer additional opportunities to a wider range of students. New activities will include a mentoring program, work readiness training programs for 6th-9th grades, Assistive Technology training, and more. See “Future Directions” for further details.

**LEAP Programs in 2023**

Year-round Virtual Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Students completed work-based learning projects during each season to develop independence, professionalism, and leadership skills. Programs were four to eight weeks, and students received hourly wages.

Experienced LEAP Supervisors supported participants through daily supervision and weekly team meetings. Weekly meetings offered participants a chance to celebrate success, share updates, demonstrate learning, access resources, and receive feedback.

* Narrative Writer & Content Creator - Fall 2022: Narrative Writer project participants met for weekly work sessions led by Becky Holt, executive director of the Vermont Story Lab, where they discussed elements of developing a strong personal narrative and writing techniques for telling their unique stories of advocacy and disability disclosure. Participants completed weekly tasks to develop their skills and create an end product of a story to be posted on LEAP’s social media accounts. Several students elected to participate in two additional weeks of video content creation led by Gin Ferrara and Ross Ransom of the Burlington Media Factory. Students used tools such as microphones, cameras, and editing apps, to create a video telling their story in a 1–2-minute video.
* VT Digger Internship - Winter 2022: One student worked with VT Digger’s Underground Workshop, a collaborative network of high school and college age journalists, to develop, write, and publish an article. The student interviewed multiple Vermont residents who are blind and visually impaired to learn about their experiences with public transportation in the state. The student worked closely with the Underground Workshop’s staff and peer editors to to develop and review their article. Check out the article here: [https://vtdigger.org/2023/04/09/blind-vermonters-share-their-challenges-with-public-transit-and-the-struggle-for-independence/](https://intellectualpoint.com/)
* Interview Guide Creator - Spring 2023: Participants met for weekly work sessions led by Becky Holt, and worked collaboratively to develop a job interview guide, full of tips and best practices. The guide was used in LEAP's Summer Residential Program to help students gain confidence and prepare for mock interviews. Participants received instruction and discussed key pieces of interviewing for a job, such as identifying hard and soft skills, researching the position prior to the interview, and arriving on time. Participants also had the opportunity to complete weekly bonus assignments, where they shared insight on their experiences with visual impairment, self-advocacy, and more. These were posted on LEAP’s social media.
* Marketing Content Developer – Summer 2023: Participants met for twice weekly work sessions led by Becky Holt, Gin Ferrara and Ross Ransom. Participants worked collaboratively to develop a LEAP marketing campaign that focused on sharing students’ LEAP experiences and promoting the variety of opportunities LEAP offers. Participants received instruction and discussed components of creating a marketing campaign, such as developing a slogan, defining the message, and drafting thoughtful interview questions. Check out the videos are students made! An [interview with K](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lr5Yi_-QajvKJuT3sk1C5UKbP-7_HU0o/view?usp=sharing), an [interview with R](https://dbvi.vermont.gov/resources/publications), and an [interview with A](https://www.census.gov).
* App Developer: Amanda Rodda, a TVI, computer science, and math educator based in Washington, led twice weekly work sessions for App/Game Design and Development. Participants learned coding skills, including the coding language Quorum, and the elements of designing an engaging and educational game. Participants worked in small groups to plan their game and write their code. Each group conducted a client needs survey with LEAP Program Staff to understand what they wanted the final product to accomplish. Based on this feedback, the participants designed a game to teach new students how to complete their hiring paperwork and track their hours worked. [Play one of the games here!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?user=roddaa&file=EmploymentPaperwork) (Use Control+R to start the game).
* Virtual SkillShops - Fall 2022, Spring 2023, Summer 2023: Three to six workshops, offered weekly, accompanied each season of work-based learning programs. Workshops included (and continue to include):
	+ Mobility lessons with a Certified Mobility Instructional Specialist (COMs);
	+ Independent living skills with a Certified Vision Rehabilitation Therapist (CVRT).
	+ Culinary Camp: Students learn to make simple recipes at home with a CVRT.
	+ Speaker Retreats: Students connected with professionals from around the country who are blind or visually impaired.
	+ Virtual social gatherings that mirrored aspects of residential programming such as Coffeehouse Talent Night; Friday Round Up, where students shared weekly successes; and weekly Dine-Ins, where students socialized via Zoom.
	+ Welcome to the Working World: workshops focused on professional skills including email writing, job interviews, disability disclosure, and resume writing.
	+ Disability Disclosure: Students learn about the values and challenges of disability disclosure in school and professional settings. Students heard from professionals about their experiences disclosing their visual impairment and drafted disclosure statements.
	+ Self-Advocacy workshops: Workshops focused on developing self-advocacy skills by hearing from peers and professionals, participating in self-determination activities, and developing an understanding the importance of self-advocacy in school, work, and recreation.
	+ ABLE Library/National Library Service: Representatives from the ABLE library shared about the services available through the National Library Service.

In February 2023, LEAP students had the opportunity through Inclusive Arts Vermont to attend a virtual tour of several pieces of art created by blind and visually impaired artists. Students also received a package of tactile items representing each art piece. The virtual tour included audio descriptions of each art piece, guided discussion and interpretation of each piece, and the chance to network with peers and Vermont artists.

In-Person Programming

Weekend Retreats – Fall 2022, Winter 2023, Spring 2023: In Fall 2022, LEAP participants celebrated White Cane Awareness Day and learned about disability disclosure by participating in workshops and networking with community members. Participants joined community members to participate in a White Cane Walk on Church Street in downtown Burlington, followed by a discussion about their experiences being visually impaired.

A Vermont student, shared: “Waking up every day and trying is a choice. We all have the option to choose if we use our accommodations to navigate the world.”

Participants’ family members joined for a panel about disability disclosure where professionals who are blind and visually impaired shared about their experiences with disclosure.

In Winter 2023, LEAP returned to the USABA’s annual Ski & Snowboard Festival at Pico Mountain following a two-year hiatus. Freezing temperatures didn’t stop participants from enjoying a weekend with Vermont Adaptive Ski & Sports (VASS) guides and other event participants. Participants challenged themselves to rock climb, ski, and snowboard – some of them for the first time ever! Two participants skied from the summit of Pico Mountain!

When they weren’t hitting the slopes, participants engaged in networking challenges to make new connections and develop their relationships.

In Spring 2023, LEAP headed to Montpelier for a team-building themed weekend. Participants joined DBVI and VABVI’s Great Expectations and Tech Fair event, where they were able to network with a wide variety of professionals who are blind and visually impaired, as well as service providers. Throughout the weekend, the group explored downtown Montpelier, visiting the State House and local businesses. The group worked together as a team to break out of a board game themed escape room at the Greatest Caper. They also designed and created a collaborative mural with Burlington-based art teacher, Beth Starger.

Year-Round Community Internships

In partnership with the Overlook Café and ReSOURCE Burlington, LEAP supported three participants who engaged in year-round work experiences.

With support from LEAP and work-site staff, the participants learned about food preparation, kitchen cleaning, and maintenance at the Overlook, and customer service, processing donations, cash register skills, and more at ReSOURCE. All participants developed soft skills, including effective and professional communication, time management, uniform standards, and teamwork.

One student’s family shared that his work at ReSOURCE contributed to his self-confidence and independence as he learned to navigate his schedule and transportation needs.

Residential Work Experiences - Summer 2023

Participants in the Residential Work Experience program lived and worked together in Burlington for three weeks this past summer. They worked up to 32 hours/week at either a ReSOURCE store location or the Overlook Café. Participants became essential members of the worksite teams, assisting with daily operations, customer service, and meaningful projects.

At the ReSOURCE stores, participants worked across all departments to process and price donations, repair items, shelve items, maintain department organization, and provide assistance to customers. At the Overlook Café, participants prepared meals for customers, maintained kitchen cleanliness in line with Department of Health standards, and rang up customers using the adaptive talking register.

One day a week, participants engaged in personal-professional development workshops, including résumé writing, job interviewing, mock interviews, an information session with UVM’s accommodations office, and a tour of the UVM campus.

Participants also built a community and gained independent living skills, sharing space in a St. Michael’s College residence hall. Throughout the program, participants attended multiple workshops with a COMs and VRT, including group and individual mobility lessons, cooking workshops, and independent living skills workshops where they learned how to do dishes and use the laundry machines. Participants maintained their living space, prepared shared meals together, and completed individual and group chores. They developed mobility skills by commuting to work and activities via the bus, rideshares, and on foot. Participants also engaged in recreational activities including biking, kayaking, rock climbing, bowling, and shopping.

# Adam\* attended the residential program this summer after working in the ReSOURCE store as a trainee and attending weekend retreats over the past two years. Despite some initial homesickness, Adam pushed himself to stick with it. For the first time, he managed his schedule independently, packed lunches for himself, cooked dinner, and shared responsibility with his peers to maintain their living spaces.

Adam’s mom shared, “What Adam’s dad and I found is that LEAP improved his independence, time-management, and daily living skills such as meal prep and laundry. Before, we didn’t think he could do things like that independently, but now we know he can because he did it at LEAP.”

Residential Internships - Summer 2023

Residential interns completed internships at an organization that aligned with their career and personal interests. Interns were placed at ReSOURCE’s Administration office, Big Heavy World, and the Vermont Center for Independent Living.

Residential interns were responsible for managing their own schedules and projects and commuting to work independently. With support from LEAP, they engaged in meaningful and relevant work at their partner organizations, as well as enjoying the recreational opportunities LEAP offered. The interns lived at St. Michael’s College and acted as excellent role models for the younger students.

Carter\* returned for his second summer as a Residential Intern. He leveraged the connections he made with the Burlington music scene the previous year to schedule shows throughout the summer, including the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival. Carter also shared about his internship, “I appreciated being able to work at VCIL both summers. I like the idea of sticking with the same organization and supervisor in order to showcase myself in different capacities. The work I did at VSO the first summer informed my work at Big Heavy World – I was more familiar with the Burlington music community, so I could walk into a room with more knowledge and create more music connections.”

# **Future Directions**

OSEP Grant Activities

With Grant funding from the Office of Special Education (OSEP), LEAP will introduce a variety of new activities for Vermont students. All programs will incorporate training in Assistive Technology. LEAP will introduce a mentoring program, Individualized Technology Plans, LEAP Start (for students in 6th to 9th grade), specific AT curriculum for SkillShops and retreats, and AT on Demand.

To implement these new activities, LEAP is developing partnerships with a range of exciting collaborators including iSight Rehab, the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), and the University of Massachusetts, Boston. LEAP will begin to pilot these programs next year and is excited to share more details about these new activities as they are developed.

The Return of Intro to LEAP

Prior to the COVID pandemic, LEAP welcomed students not yet ready for the full residential program to stay in a college dorm for 3-5 days and engage with community projects and volunteer opportunities around Burlington. In the summer of 2024, LEAP will once agin offer Intro to LEAP.

Intro to LEAP gives students a first look at what a work experience through LEAP could look like and introduces them to the skills associated with living independently in a college dormitory.

Intro to LEAP is an excellent first step for students who may be unsure about engaging with LEAP’s longer residential program and gives them the chance to meet our staff, engage with the community, live independently, and have fun!

# **Results**

2023 Hours

## Total Training Hours, LEAP 2023: 2,359.39

Work-Based Learning Training hours: 1,914.39

Work Readiness Training & Self-Advocacy Instruction: 315.00

Orientation and Mobility with a COMS: 72.00

Independent Living Skills with a CVRT: 58.00

In FFY2023, overall training hours decreased by 209 hours. This decrease was mainly due to the fact that the residential program did not host an Intern in summer of 2023.

Intern's engage in programming close to eight weeks, full time and with a focus on their career interest. We did not have a student this past summer of that age or skill to engage in that level of programming. We hope to welcome Interns back next summer.

# Success Stories

Watch Our New Videos!

LEAP partnered with Burlington Media Factory and Vermont Story Lab to create new videos to showcase our virtual programming and the BEP Program’s Overlook Cafe.

[LEAP Virtual Programs](https://vtdigger.org/2023/04/09/blind-vermonters-share-their-challenges-with-public-transit-and-the-struggle-for-independence/?v=kPe6KkgBliQ)

[Overlook Cafe](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV-c9k4u524)

Lena\* completed her first paid work experience at the Overlook Café shortly after turning 14. For two weeks, she supported café operations by cleaning the dining space, operating the cash register, and preparing recipes for daily specials. Her goal was to learn how to operate the cash register. She also gained confidence and worked toward independently completing transactions. Lena’s mom shared this insight with LEAP staff: “WOW, what a great experience this has been for Lena so far. She’s elated every day with all the skills she’s learning. It’s clear that even in this short period of time, she’s feeling a big sense of capability and independence.”

Lucas\* used his Community Internship as an opportunity to develop his mobility skills. With training from a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist, Lucas learned bus and walking routes from his mom’s work to the Overlook Café and ReSOURCE Burlington, as well as to the Saint Michael’s College dorm where Residential Program participants were staying. One day, Lucas got off the bus one stop early, and he didn’t recognize the area of campus he was on. He shared with LEAP staff that while he was initially anxious, he took a deep breath and remembered back to his O&M training. He identified campus landmarks, successfully problem-solved, and independently located the dorm.

Anna\* graduated high school in the spring of 2023 and joined LEAP for her second Residential Program over the summer. She was eager to return to the Overlook Café and continue developing skills she learned last summer. Anna took responsibility for the cafe’s coffee bar and learned to brew coffee independently. She took initiative to ensure the area was well-stocked and tidy, and was proud of her role in supporting the cafe’s daily operations. This fall, Anna has continued working at the café two days a week. She is challenging herself to provide high-quality customer service by learning to use the cash register independently and preparing orders efficiently.

Mia\* started with LEAP when she was 14 years old, and quickly honed her customer service and time-management skills. Throughout high school, she worked at a local Price Chopper, and joined LEAP for weekend retreats in which she took on leadership opportunities to support her peers. Mia graduated high school in the spring of 2023 and started culinary school in the fall.

# Quotes from 2023 LEAP Students:

Virtual work-based learning students discussed LEAP's "personality" in a breakout session during the summer 2023 program. Below are some of the thoughts they shared:

1. LEAP is "welcoming," a place "to conquer your first-job fears."
2. LEAP is "community where you feel safe and accepted," and a "friendly work environment."
3. LEAP is where you "Learn independence and have fun."
4. LEAP is where you "Make connections. Make friends."
5. "Do it! It teaches you new skills, you work with people who are blind and visually impaired and earn money."

p. 1. B. Describe the factors that impeded the achievement of the goals and priorities

The narrative in Section “P” describes the goals that were not achieved and the barriers at the end of each goal in a section called “Factors that continue to impede implementation.”

p. 2. A. Identify the strategies that contributed to the achievement of the goals

See Above (P.1.A.).

p. 2. B. Describe the factors that impeded the achievement of the goals and priorities

See Above (P.1.A.).

p. 3. The VR program’s performance on the performance accountability indicators under section 116 of WIOA

Vermont’s DVR and DBVI programs also received data for the first time on all five WIOA Common Performance Measures and how we compared to national averages. This data shows that:

* Vermont VR consumers are achieving all outcomes at a higher rate than the national average on four of the five performance measures.
* The employment rate two quarters post exit continues to improve steadily, moving from 49% in SFY 2019 to 56.0% in SFY 2023.
* The median earnings two quarters post exit jumped from being below the national average in SFY 2020 to being above it in SFY 2023, with an increase from $3,901 in SFY 2020 to $6,153 in SFY 2023.

p. 4. How the funds reserved for innovation and expansion (I&E) activities were utilized

Innovation and Expansion funds have been used to support employment related initiatives as outlined in the State Plan for Independent Living (SPIL) submitted by the Statewide Independent Living Council (SILC). The DBVI Director actively participates in SILC activities and helps to coordinates employment related initiatives in the SPIL and DBVI Goals and Priorities.

One area of overlap is related to people who are deaf and blind. The SILC and DBVI have both identified this as an underserved group. Both entities are working together to develop strategies to meet these needs. Now implementing the Support Service Program which are helping individuals who are deaf and blind to access the community and employment settings. Another area of mutual interest is transportation. This is essential for employment and requires collaboration and creativity in a rural state.

q. 1. 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

DBVI works closely with DVR and the Designated Agencies to assess individuals on the DBVI caseload who are eligible for supported employment services. Each DBVI Counselor has the necessary information to contact the assessment coordinator at the Designated Agencies in their region. DBVI Counselors also participate as part of IEP teams that consider eligibility for supported employment services through the Designated Agencies. These collaborative efforts make it possible for DBVI staff to coordinate evaluations for eligibility and timely referrals as part of the IEP process with the Local Education Agencies. DBVI Counselors make sure that staff from the appropriate DA is involved in the IEP meetings if they have not already been included by the LEA.

In some cases DBVI and DVR will have a duel case open and provide different services depending on the primary disability. This is also discussed at IEP and other team meetings. The key for DBVI staff is to create strong connections with the LEA, DVR, and DA(s) in their region and to discuss the needs and eligibility of individuals who will benefit from supported employment services. The DBVI Director also has direct access to the supported employment coordinator for the larger umbrella Department and often meets with her for updates in the Developmental Disabilities system and to receive guidance about individual situations.

For these collaborations, DBVI uses Title I funds for pre-placement assessment and training activities; and Title VI for post placement supported employment services. Extended services for youth with the most significant disabilities for up to four years until age 25 are provided when appropriate. Individual Medicaid waiver funds are used to provide the ongoing support.

q. 2. The timing of transition to extended services

The timing of Extended Services follows the allowable guidelines and for DBVI consumers who are eligible for a waiver, services are then case managed by the appropriate Designated Agency.