

2023-2024 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Report Executive Summary

Prepared by San Diego State University, Interwork Institute

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Oregon Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) and the Interwork Institute at San Diego District University jointly assessed the vocational rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities residing in Oregon. A triennial needs assessment is required by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as amended by Title IV of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and is intended to help inform the Combined State Plan developed by the core partners in Oregon's Workforce Development System. The data was gathered, analyzed, and grouped into the below sections. A summary of key findings in each section is contained here. The full results are found in the body of the report.

Note: The summary of findings here and throughout the report primarily identifies the rehabilitation needs of individuals with disabilities in Oregon. When a need is identified, it is not intended to imply that it is not being met by VR or other service providers unless explicitly stated.

Section 1: Overall performance of VR

In exploring the overall performance of VR about the needs of individuals with disabilities to obtain and retain competitive integrated employment (CIE), several themes emerged. There are needs related to:

- Improving the overall communication with clients regarding the ongoing services and the necessary steps needed by the client to continue moving toward employment is not always clear. Clients reported needing more frequent and regular communication in a way that meets their needs (i.e., text, email, phone, or meetings).
- Using paper documentation in instances where electronic documentation would streamline services was cited as a barrier to progress for some clients, specifically causing delays in access to services.
- Effectively recruiting and retaining VR staff. Counselor changes, canceled appointments, and caseload sizes resulting from insufficient staffing levels within VR have impacted the ability to meet client needs.
- Accessing needed professional development. The presence of the internal training unit was acknowledged as a strength of VR. There is a need for the orientation of new VR staff to be strengthened to include information relevant to the breadth and depth of services available, the processes involved with the services, and overall disability awareness.
- Using a quality assurance review of the IPEs. Several individuals shared that their IPEs were developed for them and contained information that had yet to be previously discussed or mutually agreed upon or goals not in alignment with their skills and abilities.
- Heightening a focus on career planning versus getting a job.

- Expanding access for clients to receive services virtually while maintaining for others the ability to meet counselors in person for additional rapport building. Concerns were raised about an office-centric service delivery model compared to one focused on community outreach and engagement in the spaces and places where individuals with disabilities reside.
- Broadening geographic access to VR intake and orientation services, particularly in rural areas.
- Providing clear and concise information on the process for eligibility, service delivery options, timelines, and expectations for all parties (i.e., VR, CRPs, clients, and other organizations). Individuals cited needing to familiarize themselves with all the processes and elements involved.
- Training for new VR counselors to better understand the entire job scope to reduce confusion and increase client resources.
- Accessing assistive technology to support individuals' successful transition into employment. In particular, the emphasis on technological tools to support equitable access to employment settings was highlighted.
- Providing access to medical/clinical supports to assist in the initial diagnosis and confirmation of functional limitations to gain eligibility for services.
- Accessing financial support for ongoing mental health support for many individuals to deal with the stressors of sustaining employment.
- Providing disability-specific accommodations like glasses and hearing aids.
- Offering access to clothing (i.e., interview attire, work scrubs, or uniforms).
- Gaining a clear understanding of navigating the process for grievances regarding service delivery and a strong connection with disability rights to mediate these concerns when they arise effectively.

Recommendations for Oregon VR related to overall performance include:

VR should continue to explore options to locate counselors in satellite or co-located offices to reach participant needs in rural areas:

1. VR should continue to explore options to locate CRPs in satellite or co-located offices with VR to reach participant needs in rural areas.
2. VR is encouraged to adopt a hybrid approach for meeting clients where feasible.
3. VR is encouraged to create a training and staff development advisory group to inform the development and subsequent revisions of the New Employee Orientation process to ensure that it is comprehensive and designed to build initial capacity.
4. VR is encouraged to review and revise the communication tool and processes to ensure clients (families) receive timely feedback about service timeframes and their roles/responsibilities.
5. VR is encouraged to review the process for distribution and review of the grievance procedure documents and process to ensure that the content is user-friendly and provided to clients at numerous points in the VR process.
6. VR is recommended to ensure the continued and broadened provision of supports like clothing, transportation, mental health services, and assistive technology.
7. VR is encouraged to develop hands-on professional development training for field staff to understand the broad and complex needs of the population of Oregon further.
8. VR needs to monitor the timeliness of eligibility determinations and identify why individuals continue to exceed the maximum timeframe for determinations of 60 days. It would be helpful for the agency to examine the cases exceeding 60 days

and determine the issues that delayed the decisions. Training can be developed to address these issues.

Section 2: The needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, including their need for supported employment

- In discussions related to the specific needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, there were various emerging themes. There are needs related to:
- Understanding the eligibility and transition processes for individuals with I/DD being dually served by Oregon – I/DD agency and VR are concerns. Specifically, the gaps and wait times during referral to and eligibility determination by VR are challenging and increase frustration when navigating between systems.
- Overcoming the high cost of living in the state. The prices make it difficult for individuals with the most significant disabilities to pursue part-time employment. Factors further introducing economic challenges to individuals with MSD are the fear of losing SSA benefits, Medicaid, and other public benefits (i.e., food assistance and housing).
- Accessing reliable, affordable, and physically accessible transportation for O VR customers, especially in rural areas. There is a need to explore flexible options further to create access to modes of transportation (i.e., mileage reimbursement, bike purchase, etc.)
- Accessing to affordable housing. Homelessness has become an increased need since the pandemic. While these were issues in the past, there is a heightened concern about the impact of homelessness on people with significant disabilities.
- Partnering more with local centers for independent living to broaden outreach and support to people with significant disabilities.

- Increasing the presence of CRP options for delivering supported employment (SE) in some communities. There is a need to expand the number of SE providers for VR clients living in areas with a low density of providers.
- Serving more individuals outside of categories 1 & 2. CRPs reported these groups as the primary individuals being referred for services, which indicates some providers are not serving individuals with the most significant disabilities (category 3) or individuals with MSD are not being served in those communities.
- Identifying pockets of success in providing supported employment, but this narrative of success needed to be more consistently heard in rural areas.

Recommendations for VR related to the needs of individuals with the most significant disabilities, including supported employment, include:

1. VR is encouraged to continue to explore ways to increase and improve transportation options for individuals with disabilities in Oregon. VR can explore the creation of transportation task forces in rural counties/communities or use transportation network companies to identify options available and solutions for developing additional transportation resources.
2. VR may consider identifying opportunities for key state-level and local partners to convene to strategize the expansion of individualized placement and support and fidelity-based customized employment programs within the state.
3. VR is encouraged to investigate the National Supported Employment Community of Practice facilitated by the Center for Innovative Training in VR at George Washington University. Representatives from VR systems nationwide learn together and benefit from shared problem-solving opportunities.
4. VR may consider providing SE training for all staff and CRPs to increase the use of this model where appropriate. This training should include the essential elements noted by nationally recognized groups like APSE and ACRE.

5. VR may consider exploring new SE vendors in rural areas through pilots on unique reimbursement models to start building a network of qualified VR providers for these services.
6. VR can explore options to ensure that all staff have access to and knowledge of affordable housing resources for their clients, including the 211 searchable database, affordable housing lists published by OHCS, supportive housing under section 811 for people with disabilities, and community action agencies. VR should collaborate with other state agencies to develop a cross-agency task force to formulate targeted plans to address these gaps.

Section 3: The needs of individuals with disabilities from different racial and ethnic groups, including the needs of individuals who have been unserved or underserved by the VR program.

Recurring themes around unserved and underserved populations were varied. There are needs related to:

- Understanding across regions the specific of the diverse disability types and how services may look different based on a person-centered process.
- Understanding and respecting cultural variances, including family norms, racial/ethnic values and considerations, socioeconomic factors, and rural, suburban, and urban factors. These practices needed to be more consistently present across state regions.
- Accessing services and available employment opportunities to individuals living in rural (eastern Oregon and coastal regions) compared to those living in the I-5 corridor of Oregon.
- Exploring further the overall vocational needs of individuals from multiple marginalized minority groups. While not statistically vastly different from the majority population, there are potential service delivery gaps based on population

data discrepancies. However, a statistical analysis comparing ACS population statistics to VR enrollment demonstrates VR is serving a higher proportion of Native/American Indian, Black/African American, and Pacific Islander and lower proportions of White, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino populations.

- Broadening the VR staff's proficiency in serving specific disability population groups and adequately serving or supporting referrals to appropriate resources. This was mentioned concerning new VR staff who may not have graduate-level expertise or industry experience.
- Increasing support to the population of individuals with disabilities experiencing homelessness. As noted above, there is also a concern regarding follow-up on or follow-through with this population due to unstable addresses.
- Understanding the needs of the population of aging workers or aging individuals with acquired disabilities (mobility, vision, hearing loss) was mentioned by several participants. Participants cited that this appears to be an increasing need in their communities, but the resources must be more focused on employment-related support. Participants felt that this might be an emerging or underserved population for VR.
- As noted in the general VR performance section, accessing transportation options in rural and suburban communities has created a need for those from unserved and underserved communities.
- Navigating away from using the word "rehabilitation." Despite its connection to federal legislation (i.e., the Rehabilitation Act, as amended by WIOA), this was offered as a barrier by some who wanted to access the services.

Recommendations for VR related to the needs of individuals who have been unserved or underserved include:

VR is encouraged to enhance the environment and culture of inclusion in the offices across the state.

1. VR is encouraged to review the feasibility of creating disability or process-specific VR counselors to focus on outreach and increased services for the unserved and underserved population groups identified in the needs assessment process.
2. VR may want to collaborate with state-level and local services and resources for aging Oregonians and potentially develop a working group to address this unique population.
3. VR may want to expand staff training in Cultural Brokering and Disabilities and Culture to identify gaps and design solutions to develop culturally inclusive and proficient practices within VR based on the state's and region-specific needs.
4. VR may consider the points under recommendation 2.5 related to individuals residing in rural areas as an unserved population and develop a specific working group, including rural residents, rural business leaders, tribal VR representatives, and CRPs, to establish an improvement plan.
5. VR may consider establishing new partnerships and building on current partnerships with community organizations not typically engaged with VR but embedded in communities (i.e., cultural centers, places of worship, foster care agencies, homeless shelters, food banks, and community centers). These efforts could increase awareness of their services and build trust within these underserved communities.
6. VR is encouraged to continue to recruit and hire additional bilingual staff to increase their ability to communicate with minority populations.

7. VR is encouraged to provide training on trauma-informed care for all staff. Motivational interviewing, intersectionality, and cultural responsiveness, and how these elements impact individuals with disabilities.

Section 4: The needs of youth and students with disabilities in transition

Recurring themes in this area were also diverse. Specifically, there are needs related to:

- Implementing a smooth transition between the “youth/student” and the “adult VR” services. This was cited as an area of concern for youth and young adults with disabilities, as well as the CRP network attempting to support individuals in this transition.
- Understanding by some families as to what VR is and how and when to access services. Families should be encouraged and mentored to participate in VR information meetings earlier in the transition process.
- Transforming the Youth Transition Program (YTP) has created confusion in some communities, and delays in accessing needed support were mentioned as a growing concern. In some instances, there is a reluctance to enroll in YTP.
- Underutilizing Pre-Employment Transition Services is apparent. A complete understanding of how students can access these services is only sometimes applied across the state.
- Using the Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP) effectively. It was noted that many students need enhanced coaching and other support to make the SYEP experience successful. In addition, a need was highlighted to ensure the dissemination and exchange of information between schools and the SYEP programs to understand students' progress and alignment of IEP/transition goals.

- Expanding career pathways. While the Individualized Career Advancement Program (ICAP) and STEP programs were highlighted as strengths in the transition process, there is a need to connect youth to STEM, Career Technical Education/Perkins V programs, and other credentialing programs to offer options for career pathways.
- Increasing partnership between VR and school programs. It was suggested to increase invitations to Individualized Education Program (IEP) or pre-IEP/general transition meetings for planning purposes.
- Conducting more consistent outreach to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to better understand what “door” they need to access for transition services and when they need to open that door. There is a need for I/DD Care Coordinators and other system Case Workers to have a broader working knowledge of VR's services, supports, and processes.
- Recognizing the rehabilitation needs of students and youth is consistent with adults served by VR. Transportation, lack of work experience, lack of training, the need to develop soft skills, and assistive technology were commonly cited needs for youth and students with disabilities.
- Ensuring all five required pre-employment transition services are available to support the needs of students with disabilities in Oregon. There is a need to provide these fully available services outside of school hours.

Recommendations for VR related to this section include:

1. VR is encouraged to engage in significant outreach to youth and students with disabilities throughout the State to effectively mitigate the challenges cited related to accessing YTP, SYEP, and the transition to “adult VR” services.
2. VR would benefit from re-establishing and nurturing relationships with the local school districts across the State.

3. VR is encouraged to explore the opportunity to contract with additional vendors to provide pre-employment transition services.
4. VR is encouraged to create marketing tools and make resources accessible to navigate for families.
5. VR is encouraged to formulate an outreach plan to transition staff and families to ensure all students with disabilities have access to information about VR services.
6. VR is encouraged to identify “mentor families” who could provide peer support to new families.
7. In partnership with Education, VR is encouraged to establish Model Transition Program sites where transition and Pre-ETS thrive. These MTPs could serve as a demonstration or mentor school for lower-performing schools. Schools in rural locations should receive technical assistance to demonstrate the same practices adapted to their setting.
8. VR is encouraged to promote postsecondary education training for youth in transition. There is room for growth in the number of individuals supported by the agency in higher education programs, and youth in transition are an important focus in this area. The existence of the Individual Career Advancement Program (ICAP) funded by RSA can be further leveraged to advance this work and expand beyond the state's community college system.
9. VR is encouraged to continue to provide self-advocacy skills instruction for students with disabilities. This area of strength for the agency can be augmented by developing and implementing a peer mentoring program across the State. One possibility is an online peer mentoring program available through [PolicyWorks](#). A vital component of this mentoring program is the development of self-advocacy skills in youth and students with disabilities.

Section 5: The needs of individuals with disabilities served through other components of the statewide Workforce Development System

Recurring themes in this area emerged throughout the process. Specifically, there are needs related to:

- Increasing the understanding of clients and partners about the services available at WorkSource Oregon. Some reported they were told they could not access services at VR and WorkSource.
- Building upon instances where current VR clients report that WorkSource Oregon has provided excellent services and referrals and exploring spaces where the services were lacking from WorkSource Oregon. Some cited the services had no value to them as job seekers with a disability.
- Addressing the concern that WorkSource Oregon may not have the knowledge base to work with job seekers with disabilities. Many clients reported feeling “passed off” to VR.
- Strengthening partnerships between VR and WorkSource staff to advance cross-systems service delivery and increase equitable access to workforce services in response to section 811.
- Improving programmatic accessibility in the WorkSource Oregon. Advancement in access to assistive technology and tools to service a broad range of individuals will eliminate frustration for individuals. The project team could not identify any cases of braided funding between VR and WorkSource Oregon.

Recommendations for VR related to this section include:

VR is encouraged to reach out to the WorkSource Oregon across the state actively and to identify opportunities for training center staff on effectively working with individuals with disabilities.

VR is encouraged to develop a plan for creating and facilitating Disability Awareness training for WorkSource Oregon staff. VR and WorkSource should explore cross-training opportunities where staff in both systems can learn from each other. Mutually attended events will contribute to networking, rapport-building, and resource sharing.

VR is encouraged to explore co-located or designated staff at each WorkSource office (and vice-versa) whenever possible.

VR should seek to broaden the use of effective collaborative practices highlighted by the Center for Advancing Policy on Employment for Youth and other national centers. An essential resource on advancing partnerships with WIOA Title I programs includes [Unlocking the Potential of Title I](#).

VR is encouraged to co-create a resource guide (and training) for SW/VR to collaboratively provide to businesses about hiring, training, accommodating, and retaining employees with disabilities.

In partnership with the WorkSource Oregon, VR should seek to implement Integrated Resource Teams (IRTs) for consumers served by the more extensive Workforce Development system. This team approach has proven to assist with leveraging resources and increasing positive outcomes through shared planning and service delivery. More information can be found on the [Workforce GPS website](#).

Section 6: The need to establish, develop, or improve Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRP) in Oregon

Recurring themes emerged related to CRPs, and the specific needs related to:

- Exploring rate structures. The high cost of living makes it difficult to pay and retain staff based on rates offered by VR. Providers can't pay competitive wages to maintain a qualified workforce.
- Addressing the quality and inconsistency of CRP services. The apparent lack of urgency related to the "need" for a job was consistently raised by clients across the state.

- Enhancing the initial training and ongoing professional development of CRP staff to include topics on effectively serving people from diverse backgrounds, career planning, outreach strategies, and implementing best- and promising practices (i.e., customized employment, individualized placement, and support, supported employment, integrated resource teams, etc.)
- Increasing the development of fidelity-based supported and customized employment providers in rural and less densely populated areas where providers are rich, but quality is diminishing.
- Broadening an understanding of creating and carrying out Person-Centered Plans and Individualized Services by CRPs and VR staff.

Recommendations for VR related to the development and improvement of CRPs include:

- VR is encouraged to partner with Oregon APSE and other CRP Groups to assess gaps and needs in the field and co-develop a strategic plan for attracting professionals to the state's CRP and VR positions.
- VR is encouraged to engage in cross-training opportunities with CRPs using Person-Centered models, motivational interviewing, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive approaches.
- VR may consider expanding the J-DOT training and developing a training series in alignment with APSE, ACRE, or other national standards related to providing high-quality employment services.
- VR is encouraged to develop SE and CE providers for their consumers who need these services in areas with limited access to these services or a selection of CRPs.

Section 7: The needs of businesses

This category captures the needs of businesses in Oregon as it relates to recruiting, hiring, retaining, and accommodating individuals with disabilities. It includes an analysis of how VR serves businesses and tries to meet their needs in each area. Recurring themes in this area include the following:

- Addressing the stigma associated with job seekers with disabilities and the bias that businesses have shown in hiring practices.
- Acknowledging the positive development of the Business Outreach team while increasing business relationships at the corporate level. There is a need for this team to assess employer training needs in topics relevant to hiring, training, accommodating, and retaining employees with disabilities.
- Expanding businesses' knowledge of the ADA and the processes for accommodating employees with disabilities. Additionally, there is a need for businesses to have technical assistance with identifying and supporting assistive technology in the workplace.

Recommendations for VR related to this section include:

1. Educating employers will help increase awareness of VR in the business community. Partnerships with the Titles I and III program and their business services
2. VR should explore conducting employer awareness and sensitivity training to help businesses understand the abilities and capabilities of individuals with blindness and visual impairments throughout the State. This will also help increase awareness of VR and the services they offer to employers.
3. VR is encouraged to partner with assistive technology resources within the state to identify and explore business-specific training/resources available regarding accommodations in the workplace.

4. VR is encouraged to identify an assistive technology or ADA liaison staff member in each office to provide resources and troubleshoot on worksites.
 5. VR should expand its work with the regional ADA center and national centers like EARN to provide more significant resources to businesses in the state.
 6. VR is encouraged to explore other VR systems implementing Business Outreach teams to get technical assistance and mentoring in the best practices and strategies.
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