



## May 2026 Partner Awards

The State Rehabilitation Council (SRC) recognized two outstanding businesses on May 6, 2026, for their exceptional partnership with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR).

Through the SRC's Partner Awards, the council recognizes employers who open doors for people with disabilities — not only by hiring and supporting people with disabilities, but also by creating meaningful work experiences that help students explore careers and build confidence.

This quarter's award recipients have invested years into creating safe, supportive summer programs where students with disabilities work alongside their peers, develop practical skills and gain the confidence that will carry them into adulthood. These partnerships benefit communities too, as more young people enter the workforce prepared and ready to contribute.

### Award winners

#### Elkton Community Education Center

The [Elkton Community Education Center](#) (ECEC) has partnered with VR to provide paid work experiences for students with disabilities for about a decade. Each summer the community center hires 10–20 local students — including students with disabilities — to work throughout the 43-acre property, home to a butterfly pavilion, gardens, gift shop and replica Hudson's Bay Company trading post.

The variety of work areas — from gardening and animal care to customer service and historic interpretation — gives students a chance to discover their strengths in a real working environment.

ECEC didn't always include students with disabilities in its youth employment program, said program director Deb Gritton. Thanks to Elkton High School Youth Employment Specialist Duane Madison, that philosophy evolved to fully embrace inclusive youth employment as essential, not optional.

"Supporting students with disabilities is part of our heart. Pouring into our youth means pouring into *all* our youth," Gritton said.

One of those youth is Tanner, who has a reading barrier and a speech impediment. With support from staff, he became a leader in the animal program and a confident tour guide.

"He started out not wanting to give any tours. He worried people wouldn't be able to understand him," Gritton said. "But by the end of the first season he was giving tours. He started walking up to people and saying, 'I have a speech impediment, but would you still be willing to get a tour from me?'"



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ECEC Program Director Deb Gritton and student worker Tanner pose with rabbits. Tanner was a leader in the ECEC's rabbit program.

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Another student found his footing after struggling in a customer-facing role. Because he experienced anxiety around strangers, staff moved him to the garden crew, where he could work with plants.

"He is on his third year," Gritton said. "He really shines. He's still earning his money and feeling proud of himself."

With the confidence he built at ECEC, he later secured a job at a local market during the school year.

Michelle Prudden, youth services coordinator for VR, nominated ECEC in part because of their willingness to adapt to each student's learning style, strengths and interests.

"All have expressed feeling supported and valued daily by Deb and her team," she said. "The work they do changes the lives of youth in our community and builds a stronger world for us all."



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Left to right: ECEC Program Director Deb Gritton, student workers Neveah and Tanner, and Elkton High School Youth Employment Specialist Duane Madison.

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## Coos County Fair and Rodeo

The [Coos County Fair and Rodeo](#) has been partnering with VR and Myrtle Point High School for the last eight years to provide hands-on work experience for students with disabilities. Each summer, students help prepare the fairgrounds, support fair-week activities and assist with cleanup afterward.

Working alongside adult volunteers and students without disabilities, they take on a wide range of tasks: pressure washing fences and buildings, painting, maintaining restrooms, groundskeeping and moving and setting up displays. “They become kind of a jack of all trades down there,” said fair board chair Brad Burnette.

Students learn both hard and soft skills: teamwork, communication, safe equipment use, punctuality and interacting appropriately with the public. They also learn valuable life skills. “They’re learning to work together and communicate... and to put in a hard day’s work,” Burnette said.

The fair board’s openness to giving her students a wide range of real, meaningful work opportunities is what prompted Ally Richards, Myrtle Point High School Youth Employment Specialist, to nominate the fair for the SRC Partner Award.

“They’re always willing to do what they can to help mentor students and teach them job skills,” she said.

Richards shared several success stories, including a student who stepped into a supervisory role last year. The experience gave her valuable leadership skills that she later carried into her post-secondary plans working with children. Another student leveraged skills gained at the fair to secure employment at a local hardware store, where he continues to work. Several students have even been hired directly by the fairgrounds after completing their work experience.

Burnette said the board was honored to receive the award, but emphasized that the recognition truly belongs to the students. “That award’s for them — it’s not for us,” he said. “These kids are the ones who come and do the work.”



## About the State Rehabilitation Council

Oregon's [State Rehabilitation Council](#) (SRC) is an advisory partner to [Vocational Rehabilitation](#) (VR), which is a program under the Oregon Department of Human Services. The council is separate from VR. Its role is to listen to VR participants about their VR experience and advise the VR program on how to improve employment services for people with disabilities. Members are volunteers who are appointed by the Governor.

The full council meets every three months. Committees meet monthly. All meetings are open to everyone. Find information on the SRC website at [orsrc.org](http://orsrc.org).

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